

Gender matters: women and priesthood

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All our thinking about the Church begins with metaphors -- 'The Church is *the body of Christ*' -- and with similes -- 'The Church is like *a bride loved by her husband*' -- and it never loses touch with the images which ring true to our sense of what is *symbolically fitting*. Consequently, all our thinking about the Church -- ecclesiology -- is rooted in the symbolic patterns by which the imagination thinks of the intimate relationship of Christ and his Church. The more those images suggest a union of Christ and the Church, the truer they are felt to be, because it is a tenet of Christian theology that one can never exaggerate the gift of divine love which becomes a living reality in the Church. The great doxology at the end of the Eucharistic prayer -- '*through him, with him and in him*' -- builds to a climax of acclaim that *through* what Christ has done, we are brought not only to be *with* him, but also to to be *in* him, and in that union we are able to give glory to the Father.

The Church's understanding of itself is constantly nourished by the symbolic patterns of its earliest traditions. Vatican II, for example, renewed the contemporary Church's self-understanding by recovering the symbolic ecclesiology of the Bible and the early centuries. Take a simple example from the Council's Constitution *Lumen Gentium*:

The Church is a cultivated field, the tillage of God. On that land the ancient olive tree grows whose holy roots were the prophets and in which the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles has been brought about and will be brought about again. That land, like a choice vineyard, has been planted by the heavenly cultivator. Yet the true vine is Christ who gives life and fruitfulness to the branches, that is, to us, who through the Church remain in Christ, without whom we can do nothing.

It is a fine, flowing piece of writing which moves effortlessly from the simple image of the the Church as a field cultivated by a patient gardener to the organic union of vine and branches. From Isaiah's parable of the vineyard, (5.1ff), it takes us to Paul's description of the Jewish people as the cultivated olive tree on which Gentile branches have been grafted, touches on Ephesians's theme of the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile in Christ and finishes with John's image of Jesus as the vine who gives life to the branches. It can be presented to both clever and simple people with equal value and it leaves you with the sense of 'something understood' which leads to prayer -- both are the signs of good teaching.

Discipline and doctrine

But the Church also needs to arrange its life in another key, and make rules and laws about the conduct of its affairs, and here too it is important that the core symbolism of the Church's identity flows through its decrees. In the Church's legislation, Christ's relationship to the Church should be the source and the reflective norm which pervades what is decided. Law reflects theology and symbolic ecclesiology is the source and inspiration of juridical ecclesiology since laws derive from the Church's self-understanding, and not vice versa.

If a particular ruling does not proceed from, and confirm, the symbolism at the heart of the Church's self-understanding, it will, in time, be replaced by a better understanding because nothing worthless lasts in the Church. The medieval Papal Bull, *Unam Sanctam*, for example, which declared that subjection to the Papacy was necessary for salvation, carries no weight today; it is regarded as a doctrinal aberration prompted by the medieval Papacy's desire for power and wealth.

One might ask the same question about Pope John Paul's recent letter on women and priesthood: will it eventually meet the same fate and be discarded on the theological scrapheap of history? Future generations will have their own way of answering this question, but I think it will depend, then as now, on whether the judgement is made that the ordination of women is a modification of the Church's *discipline* surrounding ministerial priesthood or whether it is incompatible with the Church's *doctrine* of the character of this priesthood.

If it is the former, then, of course, it may be changed; if it is the latter, then it is binding. This is a key distinction because Pope John Paul judges that *doctrine*, and not *discipline*, is involved -- quite simply because it is the Church's understanding of the Apostolic office willed by Christ includes the maleness of the priesthood as an inseparable feature of its meaning. (I shall look at his argument in more detail later.)

Ministerial priesthood and baptism

The supporters of women's ordination, on the other side, offer four related arguments, which can be presented as two sets. The first set concerns questions of *cultural adaptation and theological change*:

- (1) the present ruling is simply a matter of discipline and can therefore be changed to accommodate valid insights into the equality of men and women;
- (2) the culturally conditioned reasons why Jesus chose men to the office of the Twelve have no binding force for a contemporary Church, any more than might the requirement that those in Apostolic office ought to be Jewish, as were the Twelve.

The second pair of arguments are more specifically *theological* in content:

- (3) because ministerial priesthood is to be understood primarily as an expression of the priesthood of the baptised,
- (4) all the baptised should, in principle, be able to participate in all ministerial offices.

I draw particular attention to these last arguments because they are the most significant. Not surprisingly, commentators often treat the debate as a sociological question about the equality of women. My opinion is that it is really a theological question about the character of ministerial priesthood which goes back to questions raised in the Reformation. Here there is a simple question: is ministerial priesthood to be understood primarily as an expression of the participation of the baptised in the offices of Christ, or is it an office, with its own legitimacy deriving from Christ, which stands in relation to the baptised as an expression of Christ's service of them?

Putting it another way: does it proceed from the community as an expression of its baptismal dignity, as an explication of what is given in baptism, or does it belong in the Church as a distinct focus by which Christ's service of his people continues to be expressed? Crudely, is it ministry 'from below' or ministry 'from above'? One might reasonably say that just as these terms are misleading in Christology, and have produced all kinds of false oppositions, so to use them here about priestly ministry gives the wrong impression. I accept that, and it is true that both dimensions should not be opposed as alternatives, but be seen as complementary accounts of the same reality.

But where you start in the discussion of priesthood shapes the way you construe it: the primary appeal by the supporters of women's ordination is to the engrafted character of the whole community of the baptised. For them, *the ministerial priesthood expresses what the community is*, and therefore should in principle and justice be open to women. The primary appeal by Pope John Paul, by contrast, is to what

Christ did in electing the Twelve to positions of authority and service in relation to the community. For the perspective which he offers, ministerial priesthood is a particular form of participation in the priesthood of Christ, which does not derive its powers solely from the status of the baptised: for him, *ministerial priesthood expresses Christ's service of the baptised*, and because this conforms to the features of the original Twelve, the association of Apostolic office and maleness is part of the character of that ministry which Christ founds.

If ministerial priesthood is primarily *the expression of baptismal dignity*, then all the baptised have the potentiality to serve in this way, and the supporters of women's ordination would carry the day. If it is primarily an expression of *Christ's ministry to the baptised*, involving a commission and an authority grounded in Christ's appointment of the Twelve, then the Pope is right: it subsists as a dimension within the complex identity of the Church by Christ's authority, and it is not to be described simply as an expression of baptismal grace given to all. This distinction, which I have deliberately simplified in spite of all the complexity surrounding it, seems to me to be the hinge on which the whole argument hangs.

The argument of the letter

The argument of the Pope's letter can be simply summarised: it rules out definitively any change in the pattern of ordaining only men to the priesthood, restating the Catholic Church's view that the Church 'does not consider herself authorised to admit women to priestly ordination' since Christ's choice of apostles is a 'divine provision' which pertains 'to the Church's divine constitution itself'. Christ's choice of male Apostles, when his behaviour in other respects towards women was sovereignly free, has a binding quality which inhibits the Church from making any change in this pattern of presbyteral and episcopal ministry. What we have at present conforms with what Christ wanted: his judgement, to say the least, carries more weight than that of a *primus inter pares*.

The letter speaks of a particular election of Apostles within the community who are 'specifically and intimately associated in the mission of the Incarnate Word himself', 'entrusted with the mission of representing Christ the Lord and redeemer'. Priesthood -- 'the office entrusted by Christ to his Apostles of teaching, sanctifying and governing the faithful' -- is not 'only a function which could thereafter be exercised by any member of the Church': in Vatican II's cryptic phrase, there is a difference of 'essence' between the priesthood of the baptised and ministerial priesthood, although both derive from, and participate in, the one priesthood of Christ. The Catechism understands the distinction in this way:

The ministerial or hierarchical priesthood of bishops and priests, and the common priesthood of the faithful participate 'each in its own proper way in the one priesthood of Christ. While being 'ordered to one another', they differ essentially. In what sense? While the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace -- a life of faith, hope and charity, a life according to the Spirit -- the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians. The ministerial priesthood is a *means* by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church. For this reason it is transmitted by its own sacrament, the sacrament of Holy Orders. (1547).

Hence, for the Catechism and the Pope's letter, Apostolic office is to be understood as one of the ways in which *Christ* ministers to his people, which requires its distinct identity (a sacrament) and structure (transmission). It is not one of the ways in which the community, serves itself and organises its own life in the Spirit. In the Catholic tradition which these documents express, it is *a ministry of Christ to the community of the baptised*, regulated by what is taken to be the expressed will of Christ, and is not at the disposition of the community to order as it wills. Apostolic office takes its origin in a specific authorisation by Christ to the Twelve to minister to the community in his name, and this represents one of

the structural features of the Church's life. This dimension is willed by Christ to be a structured communication of his grace within the life of the Church.

It is not a question of the Apostolic order being superior to the status of the baptised: Apostolic order has no dignity other than its character as service. The differentiation within the Church does not mean a distinction between higher and lower forms of involvement: there is equal participation by all in the dignity of Christ. As *Inter Insigniores* says, 'The greatest in the kingdom of heaven are not the ministers but the saints': holiness, not office, is the only high status in the Church. The Pope's letter presumes both that the structure of the Church is a differentiated participation in the offices of Christ, priest, prophet and king, and that the particularity of Apostolic office is a constitutive feature of Christ's presence to the baptised.

Why only men?

But why should the male character of Apostolic office be deemed to be significant? The letter itself - and this is a weakness -- does not provide a sufficient interpretative context within which the ruling might be better understood. Only when the ruling is placed in the context of a symbolic ecclesiology in which maleness and femaleness relate to constitutive dimensions of the Church's identity, can it make sense. The Pope's argument is part of an approach which judges that the anthropological symbolism of maleness and femaleness is a proper model to describe the differentiated structure of the Church. If the Church is differentiated -- and for the Catholic tradition, that is the case -- then that differentiation has a certain symbolic correlation with the differentiation of men and women within humanity.

The ruling, I think, makes sense only within the context of an ecclesiology which makes positive use of the symbolic connotations of maleness and femaleness, and which sees in the equality of male and female within the one continuum of humanness a pattern which is echoed in the eschatological fulfilment of humanity which has begun in the Church. The differentiation of humanity into man and women (Gen 1.27) represents the comprehensiveness of original humanity which finds expression in the eschatological Church's life. The pattern of created life flows into ecclesial life in ways which sustain *equality* and *differentiation* between the sexes. (They may sustain differentiation -- the Catholic Church needs no homework on this point! -- but if they do not sustain equality, something is badly wrong, as many women will justly say.)

The text which is often claimed to indicate that gender-differentiation is of no significance for the Church, Galatians 3.28 -- 'In Christ... there is neither male nor female' -- is not a denial of sexual differentiation, but an abolition of patterns of superiority and inferiority between men and women, analogous to the overcoming of social and religious inequality ('Jews and Greeks, slaves and free'). The marriage image of Ephesians 5.25 is more to the point, where a reality from the order of nature -- the love of husband and wife -- is transformed into a symbol of the love between Christ and the Church. Great mysteries are sometimes illuminated in simple ways: behind the Pope's ruling is a sense that the mutuality of function and service within the Church can be correlated with the way in which the fullness of humanity requires an acknowledgement of maleness and femaleness without dissolving them into an abstract 'personhood'.

Cultural problems

But one of the difficulties in the reception of the letter is that some cultures are apparently unable to find positive meaning in this kind of anthropological symbolism which draws out connotations from maleness and femaleness. If, in our general cultural life, we are unable to see any symbolic value to be attached to the human differentiation of maleness and femaleness -- if 'being a man' and 'being a woman' is simply a neutral feature of personhood -- then these terms can carry no meaning for us when used

within a symbolic theology. Or, again, if there is a widespread uncertainty about what that symbolism might be, then there will be difficulties in relating to an ecclesiology which seeks to use these terms with what seems to be a stable, and therefore culturally invariant, way.

In this uncertainty, it becomes difficult, for example, for some people to say that the maleness of Jesus and the Apostles has positive symbolic significance, and so the easier path is taken and the sexed dimensions of the persons becomes a neutral factor. (As I have pointed out in earlier articles, if maleness means nothing, then neither does femaleness, and no claim can be made for a ministry of women in which their gender is significant.) Here, the chief problem is that the symbolism associated with maleness in our culture is primarily negative: connotations of aggression, violence, power, control, abuse, etc, are hard to root out from our imagination. Consequently, maleness does not signify anything we can use positively in theology.

Equally, because of the fluidity of our understanding of female identity, it becomes difficult to relate to images of women offered in the earlier tradition, without the suspicion that a stereotype of inferiority is being used. If the judgement is made that gender does not 'signify' -- that gender cannot function symbolically -- then, of course, an ecclesiology which uses the symbolism of 'male' and 'female' in relation to the Church's internal differentiation cannot be defended. These dilemmas simply reflect the cultural difficulties which inhibit, for many people, the reception of the sort of theology behind the Pope's letter.

I take him to mean that the differentiation of ministries in the Church correlates, in part, to a differentiation of gender, and that the element of 'gender-signification' is part of the foundational character and meaning of those ministries. The basis of this is not an abstract alignment of 'humanity' and 'Church', but in the historical character of the community which emerges from Christ. The internally differentiated character of the Church has its historical roots in the foundational pattern of a differentiated ministry associated with men and women in the New Testament and in the early Church. The Pope's argument is that the differentiation within the Church derives from the structure of relationships which Christ, in his earthly ministry and in his risen presence to the community, wills to establish with the different dimensions of his community. We cannot reconstruct this pattern differently from what is given in the New Testament, and in what is given, gender matters, whether we think it should or not.

Diversified ministries

Men are chosen to serve in the Apostolic office, but this does not exhaust the diversified ministries within the Church. There is also a significant ministry exercised by women the Syro-Phoenician woman is the first person to teach, even Christ, about the needs of the Gentiles (Mk 8.26ff); the Samaritan woman is the first person during the life of Jesus, through whose witness others are brought to faith in the Saviour (Jn 4.42). This constellation of believing women is represented particularly by the women at the tomb, who generate the Resurrection faith of the Church. And what they do is not derivable from the ministry of the Twelve, but has its own character: this is a ministry of powerful faith and prophecy which is generative of the Church's identity, and is no less important than that bestowed on the Apostles from which it is differentiated. There is an important organic relationship between the Blessed Virgin's role in bringing the Saviour to the world and the role of these women on Easter morning who bring faith in the Risen Saviour to that same world. Their ministry is not identical with the commissioning of the Apostles; neither does it derive from it nor depend on it. It is a distinct principle which, together with the Apostolic office, constitutes the Church.

Indeed, in the person of the Virgin and the women at the tomb, it has claims to be the antecedent condition of the very existence of the Church which is then ordered through the role of the Apostles. This ministry has always been exercised by women, but it has never found a stable expression within the

Church, largely because of the inability of a male-dominated Church to acknowledge the very presence of this dimension. But there is no reason why the Church should not find ways of expressing this ministry in structural terms, but it is not identical with that of the Apostolic circle.

The letter presupposes that the gender of those called to Apostolic office is not a neutral factor in the construal of the meaning of this office.

The argument is not that, because Christ chose male apostles, therefore all their successors must be male, as though if he chose people with brown eyes, then their successors must be similarly tinted. It makes the assumption that there is a connection between what they are and do in their Apostolic office and what are and do as men. The argument can be similarly advanced that there is equally a connection between what the women at the tomb do as the first proclaimers of the Resurrection and their identity as women: as *their* gender matters, and is not a neutral and 'un-signifying' quality. So one should also be able to say that the gender linked to the Apostolic office may be an inherent symbol which elucidates the meaning of that office.

Gender matters

The Pope's argument is that in the exercise of Apostolic office, the gender of those chosen is not a neutral and insignificant feature, but is precisely part of the meaning of the office. Gender matters and gender signifies: this is a fundamental principle within the theological symbolism which inspires the ecclesiology behind the letter. The letter assumes that the maleness of those called to Apostolic office is part of how this office is to be understood: its 'tonal register' -- maleness -- illuminates this ministry. The suggestion is, I think, that there is something about Apostolic office and their maleness which is mutually interpretative: part of what that office represents, the letter implies, is particularly suited to the symbolic significance which 'being a man' offers.

Why? Here we are up against the difficulties I mentioned earlier which, at the present time in the West, surround the use of 'men' and 'women' as connotative symbols: we are uncertain about how to use them positively. But let me suggest a possible approach to the link between maleness and Apostolic office which builds on a major theme of the Gospels. It is not, I suggest, because this reflects a patriarchal pattern in which men are 'natural leaders', with an 'automatic right to obedience', but precisely the reverse. (If that is what it's all about, then by all means get rid of it.) But Apostolic office may be deliberately tied to maleness precisely so that the appropriate symbol of this office should be a deliberate *reversal* of these patterns of male domination.

Reversal

We know that men naturally seek power in society, but in the restored community of the Kingdom which Jesus inaugurates, they will be bound explicitly to patterns of humble service. Their authority in the community will be greater than any given to the rulers of this world -- the authority to cast out devils, 'binding and loosing' and 'sitting on the twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel' -- but it must always be characterised by an explicit dedication to serve, and give their lives, as did their Master.

The symbolic sign, appropriate to the character of Apostolic office, is to be that of men called to enact in their lives the self-emptying of Christ who refused all status (Phil 2.7ff) and to lay down their lives, like their Lord, for the flock (Jn 21.15-19). And so the exercise of authority in the community is not to be like that of Gentile rulers, but must always be accompanied by the symbol of 'men tied to service'. In the Church, the symbol of *selfless male authority* speaks with a startling power which undermines the patterns of domination and control which have characterised every human society.

This is embedded in the texts of the Gospel. We cannot read the Gospels without noticing the harshness with which Jesus treats the Twelve. By contrast, he treats women with respect, but he chastises the Apostle, bullies them, becomes angry with them, gets frustrated with them for their stupidity and lack of insight into the values of the Kingdom where self-renunciation and not ambition is the path. They receive fierce corrections and insults: Peter is told, 'Get thee behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things!' (Mt 16.23) When the disciples cannot cast out a devil as he authorised them (Mt 10.1), he shouts at them, 'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you?' (Mt 16.17) and ends up doing the exorcism himself. But the most stringent teaching he addresses to them is about the abuse of authority because the instinct for domination and positions of honour is fundamentally incompatible with the exercise of their ministry in restored and purified Israel:

(At the last Supper) a dispute arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But Jesus said to them, 'The Kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you: rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves. Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (Lk 22.24-7)

The paradox is that the institution of (male) authority is accompanied by a radical reversal of assumed (male) power: in their office, they are to exemplify the only the pattern of Christ who is sent as a servant. The paradox of Apostolic office in the Church is to be expressed by the symbol of men -- who in every culture are the aggressors, the fighters, the rulers, the holders of physical and social power, -- now being commanded to 'teach, govern and sanctify' by precisely the reverse set of attitudes -- those of humility and service.

This transformation of male identity is to be within the Church a symbol of Christ's service of the people. What his service of the community means is to be symbolised by the paradox of men who are tied to humility and service, of men constrained by their Lord to a pattern of self-renunciation. The washing of dirty feet, not the wearing of silk slippers, is to be their characteristic action! That dialectical tie between authority, service and maleness -- and not some patriarchal *droits de seigneur* -- is, I suggest, why maleness may be part of the meaning of that office within the Church, and may be part of the symbolic self-understanding preserved by the Pope's ruling.

Generating faith

One can approach the ministry of women in the New Testament in a similar way, as a reversal of attitudes which limit them to secondary roles. Christianity alone, out of the three 'Religions of the Book' (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), makes the contribution of women central to its foundational experiences: women generate the resurrection faith of the Church. They are not consigned to the role of being passive recipients of the teaching of others, but are the active begetters of the Church's faith, then as now.

In the Catholic tradition, the Church begins, and reaches its archetypal expression, in the faith of Mary the mother of Jesus who embodies the holiness which he brings to the world. She, and not the Apostolic circle, is the core of the Church's fidelity, and this emphasis powerfully relativises hierarchy by displacing it from the centre of the Church. As the Catechism puts it, 'The "Marian" dimension of the Church precedes the "Petrine"' (773). The ministry of women in the Church can be said to be antecedent to that of men, and the Church all too easily forgets the presence of two *equal and co-foundational principles* at the heart of its identity, differentiated according to gender.

The ruling that Apostolic office should continue to be exercised by men has its theological roots in the perception that *both* of these co-foundational ministries should retain the gender-signification appropriate to them at the historical origin of the Church. It seems to me that it is this insight, and not an unjustified discrimination against women, which prompts the Pope's re-affirmation of the Church's tradition that it is not within the Church's power to alter a pattern 'to be ascribed to the wisdom of the Lord of the universe'.

That the Church should abide by this pattern is, to say the least, defensible; that it should find a more structured way of fostering the distinct ministry of women is also imperative. In an earlier issue of *The Month*, I wrote:

In the early Church, the most important structural expression given to the ministry of women was the development of the ministry of Deaconesses in the middle of the third century in Syria, a development which was significantly ignored in the West. Their ordination closely paralleled that of deacons, with anointing and the laying on of hands, but their ministry remained distinct as their own sphere of activity. It was a significant alignment of women's ministry with that of men, possessing a quasi-equality with that of deacons, the only development in the early centuries which gave some shape to the pattern of equal but differentiated ministries to which the New Testament bears witness.

One wonders if the ministry of deaconesses had been allowed to flourish and find its forms throughout the universal Church, as a distinct, differentiated and equal ministry standing alongside the ministry of men, a truer expression would have been given to the treatment of men and women as co-foundational principles of the Church... I would argue that ordaining women to the priesthood may not be the best way of expressing their position in the Church's ministry. Instead, let the distinct ministry of women, deriving from patterns in the New Testament, be recovered and recreated. (*The Month*, December 1992, p.460)

The definitive character of the Pope's ruling makes these comments even more urgent: if masculine gender matters, as part of the symbolic meaning of the principle of Apostolic office, then feminine gender also matters as part of the meaning of the other co-foundational principle, that of women's ministry. While we have given stable expression to the former, we have failed to give due weight to the latter, and women's ministries, although exercised in the Catholic Church with astonishing richness throughout its history, have failed to find stable organisational forms.

The Catholic Church will not follow the Churches of the Reform in ordaining women -- that is clear, and the Pope's definitive judgement has a binding quality which seems to me to approximate to being an 'irreformable' judgement. But we still have unfinished business, and although the Pope's definitive judgement rules out the ordination of women in the Catholic Church for generations to come, if it addresses this other dimension with creativity, it may be a greater enrichment of the charismatic diversity of the Church. It can do so, and should do so: the Pope's letter is both an end to one line of inquiry and the beginning of a different reflection on the character of both foundational principles in the Church. Let's keep talking.