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"Can Women Become Priests?" A Catholic Feminist Perspective

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CAN women become priests? The answer to this question depends on whom you ask. For many Protestants, the answer is both yes and no. The only priest is Jesus Christ and all Christians share in that priesthood. As Luther wrote, we are all priests to one another, but there is no special ministry of priesthood that makes one person distinct from others.¹ There are pastors, people who are called to preach and lead worship, but they are not priests. Luther, of course, did not consider women able to be pastors, but his followers (at least the non-Wisconsin or non-Missouri Synod ones) have thought otherwise.² But they are not "priests." For an Episcopalian who considers him or herself in union with the American and Anglican communions, the answer is yes, although this issue has been a very divisive one within the denomination. At least three dioceses within the American Episcopal Church do not think this question can be answered affirmatively. Indeed, a number of former Episcopal priests have become Roman Catholic priests, largely because of their opposition to women's ordination.³ But then the Roman Catholic Church does not recognize the priesthood of the Anglican Communion. I will not address here the issue of the Orthodox priesthood, which deserves a separate discussion. These are just a few of the complicating issues

surrounding this question.

The ordination of women is not an issue unique to the present day. Questions regarding women's leadership in the Christian Church have been around since its origins and, in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas and others considered the issue.⁴ But the ordination of women has become much more pressing for Catholics in particular in the last decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first due to the advent of the second wave of feminism and the ordination of women in many Protestant and Jewish traditions. Although the Vatican's 1976 Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood (*Inter Insigniores*) gave a negative answer to the question, and although this answer has been repeatedly reaffirmed by later Vatican documents, particularly *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994), a majority of U.S. Roman Catholics supports the ordination of women. The question remains very much alive in the early years of the twenty-first century. Some historical background is in order to give context to this question.

Historical Background

The question of women's ecclesial leadership (the meaning of the term

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“ordination” was relatively unclear until the later middle ages) was raised as early as the New Testament. The statements of Paul and the Pastoral Epistles, some of which reject outright women’s leadership, seem to indicate by their prohibitions that women exercised some forms of leadership in the early church. What this form of leadership actually was remains somewhat unclear. Some feminist theologians and historians have argued that women did exercise leadership at table (e.g., Karen Jo Torjesen’s *When Women Were Priests* and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s *In Memory of Her*)⁵ while others have been more reluctant to attribute official church leadership roles to women (e.g., Teresa Berger’s *Women’s Ways of Worship*).⁶ Part of the difficulty in assessing women’s roles in the early church is that the meaning of particular terms (“orders,” “deacons”) has changed over time. But there seems to be strong evidence that women held some sort of leadership roles and that some women were designated “widows,” “virgins,” and “deaconesses” in some official capacity. Since the earliest Christian worship was in the home, Teresa Berger has suggested, it is likely that women were included in the church’s worship. Other factors, such as social class and customs regarding the separation of men and women, were likely also part of the picture. By the early fifth century, however, it is likely that women were not included in the class of “leaders” of the church and did not preside at Eucharist.

The medieval historian Gary Macy has explored the question of the ordination of women in the middle ages. Macy argues that there is clear historical evidence that women were “ordained” to various ministries in the medieval church (deaconesses, abbesses, canonesses) and that these ministries had liturgical implications: for example, abbesses heard the confessions of the nuns in their communities. But Macy also argues that the meaning of the term “orders” remained somewhat fluid until the thirteenth century, and the connection of orders with sacramental ministry was also a later development.⁷ Later in the thirteenth

century, Thomas Aquinas considered the issue and concluded, on the basis of his theological anthropology, that women could not receive the sacrament of Holy Orders since they lacked “eminence of degree” (*Summa Theologiae* Suppl. Q. 39, a. 1). That is to say, Aquinas understood the person to be made up of form (soul) and matter (body). For women, their inferior form meant that they were incapable of receiving the sacrament. This conclusion, based on women’s ontological inferiority, for many centuries remained a benchmark position on the issue.

The Protestant Reformation shifted the issue of ordination in a very significant way, although the implications of this shift would not be felt for at least three more centuries. Martin Luther, with his principle of “*sola scriptura*” (the Bible alone) argued that the only valid sacraments were those that Jesus clearly instituted in the Gospels. For Luther, and subsequently for other Protestant traditions, only Baptism and the Lord’s Supper (the Eucharist) clearly met this criterion.⁸ The sole priesthood was that of Jesus, as evidenced in the Letter to the Hebrews. Luther’s own conception of ordained ministry, which was grounded in New Testament models of ministry and leadership, explicitly rejected the Roman hierarchical model, and his conception of vocation expanded to include the “priesthood of all believers.” Some Christians were called to church leadership, but all baptized Christians shared in the priesthood of Christ. Thus children and parents were priests to each other as were wives and husbands. Despite this expanded understanding of vocation, Luther believed that women’s true vocation was in motherhood.

The leadership of women became a reality in the Shaker and Quaker traditions. For Shakers, Christ’s revelation was not complete until it was also in the form of a woman, which is how Ann Lee, the Shakers’ founder, understood herself. For Quakers, all shared in a common ministry; women had been affirmed as spiritual leaders in the tradition since the seventeenth century. The

question of women as preachers became an issue in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as various spiritual movements (e.g., the two Great Awakenings) empowered women as well as men.⁹

In 1854, a significant step was taken with the ordination of Antoinette Brown by the Congregational Church, and over the next 125 years the mainstream Protestant traditions began to ordain women. Presbyterians began ordaining women in the 1950s and the mainline Lutheran churches did so in 1970. In 1974, another significant step was taken when eleven Episcopal women were "irregularly" ordained by three retired Episcopalian bishops. They thus forced the Episcopal Church in the U.S. to resolve the question, which it did at its General Convention in 1976, when it voted to affirm the ordination of women (although individual bishops could decline to ordain women in their own dioceses). In 1989, the Episcopal church ordained its first woman bishop, and in 1995 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America followed suit. In 1992, the Church of England voted to permit women's ordination. The issue continues to be a divisive one for the worldwide Anglican Communion as well as the U.S. Episcopal Church.

In 1975, the first (Roman Catholic) Women's Ordination Conference met in Detroit, Michigan, with a number of prominent theologians and some bishops arguing in favor of women's ordination. An organization bearing the same name was founded at this meeting. But in the fall of 1976, the Vatican issued its official declaration on women's ordination (*Inter Insigniores*) and declared itself "unable" to ordain women.

Inter Insigniores and Its Aftermath

Prior to issuing the declaration, Pope Paul VI had established a biblical commission to research the question of scriptural support for women's ordination.¹⁰ The conclusion of the biblical commission was that the Bible offered evidence on both sides of the question, and therefore could not be used

either to support or to deny the ordination of women. The declaration itself acknowledged this point. It also argued that the tradition had never authorized the ordination of women. But since historical precedent was not a sufficient argument against women's ordination, another key point in the declaration's argument was the significance of "sacramental symbolism." According to this line of thought, because "Christ was and remains a male," it is important for the faithful to recognize in the priest a resemblance to Christ.¹¹ Further, because sexuality has ontological significance — that is, sexuality is at the core of one's being — Christ's maleness also has an ontological character, which the priest must share. Therefore, not only for historical reasons (Christ never called any women to be one of the twelve; women have never been officially ordained), but also for symbolic and theological reasons, the church did not "consider herself authorized" to ordain women to the sacramental priesthood.

The declaration met with much criticism. (Many of these arguments are included in the volume edited by Leonard and Arlene Swidler; cf. note 10.) Whether or not Jesus actually "called" women to be among the twelve was disputed, and the obvious symbolic significance of the twelve as representing the twelve tribes of Israel was raised as an additional question. The Vatican's somewhat literal reading of the biblical accounts of Jesus' life, many argued, failed to recognize the role of social and historical context in interpreting these accounts. The historical evidence on "ordination" was also not as clear as the Vatican claimed it to be.

But some of the strongest criticism was reserved for the argument of "sacramental symbolism." The historical fact of Jesus' maleness was given a disproportionate significance, these critics argued. Jesus assumed human flesh, and the fact that this flesh was male was of lesser significance than the fact that he had assumed the entire human condition. To place such importance on his maleness led some critics to question whether women had

a real place in the economy of salvation. Some even raised the question whether women ought to be baptized if the incarnation of God was limited to the male sex.

In the years following *Inter Insigniores*, the issue of women's ordination did not disappear and, along with the movement for women's equality in society, the arguments intensified. The decision by a number of Protestant traditions to ordain women (particularly the Anglican Communion) became something of an obstacle to closer ecumenical relations between them and Roman Catholicism. It has also been suggested that the issue of women's ordination has become something of a "litmus test" for candidates for episcopal office in Roman Catholicism: that is, no priest expressing sympathy for the cause will be considered as a serious candidate for bishop. Such a practice, if true, both limits the numbers of men in the church hierarchy sympathetic to women's concerns and stifles the possibilities for new inspirations in the church. The divisiveness of the issue is also illustrated by the fate of the pastoral letter on women's concerns that was begun by the U.S. Bishops in the mid-1980s. The bishops encouraged their members to hold sessions in which the concerns of women could be heard, and the letter itself went through four drafts before it was eventually tabled. But in the process, concerns about the proper role of bishops as teachers, the status of disputed questions such as ordination and issues related to sexuality, and the authority of Rome, repeatedly delayed the completion of the letter and it was tabled in 1993.

Scholarly work on women's role in the church over history has only increased since 1976, and calls for women's full equality in the church have not diminished. In 1994, the Vatican issued *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, which stated that the question of women's ordination was now closed, and that the church's official position on the issue should be considered a part of the "ordinary magisterium." This statement raised concerns not only about the status of

women in the church but also about the role of Vatican offices to define "infallible" teaching and the role of the voices of the faithful to consider new questions.

Because of the extraordinary influence and length of John Paul II's papacy, it is worth noting his theology of sexuality and of the feminine and thus his influence on the Vatican's position.¹² John Paul II has had a lifelong devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus. She represents the fulfillment of both womanhood and of humanity. Her receptive and obedient attitude toward God (as evidenced in the Annunciation) and toward her son is repeatedly cited as a model for human beings, particularly women. According to John Paul II, women and men are unique in their distinctive sexualities and thus have very different vocations in life. All women are oriented toward motherhood, whether this be biological or spiritual. There is no corresponding notion of "essential fatherhood" for men. The primal relationship between human beings is that of Bridegroom and Bride, which is an imitation of God's relationship with humanity. Thus, because of their nature and God-given role, women cannot be ordained.

Current Discussion on Women's Ordination

In 1995, the Women's Ordination Conference held its twentieth anniversary meeting in Washington, D.C. and faced some of the issues that had remained unresolved. The basic question was whether the organization ought to continue to pursue its goal of the inclusion of women in the sacrament of Holy Orders. Some in the organization thought that this goal still remained important, especially as many churches, particularly in the rural U.S., now had women as "pastoral administrators" in priest-less parishes. A continued push for official recognition of women's pastoral ministry remained central for this group. Others, however, thought that the whole idea of "priesthood" as it is presently understood and practiced in Roman Catholicism needed

total transformation. The problems of the priesthood included its hierarchical character, understood in Canon Law as a position "above" the laity, the requirement of clerical celibacy, and a closed clerical culture, particularly in seminary training and in the isolated lives of diocesan clergy. This discussion was a heated one and led to some changes within the organization.

This debate remains unresolved, yet the conditions that gave rise to it remain very much alive. While some U.S. bishops welcome the presence of women as pastoral leaders within their dioceses, others have pulled back from the practices of their (perhaps more liberal) predecessors and no longer place women in pastoral leadership positions. This is not to say that women are absent from parish work; rather, the designation of women as parish leaders (e.g., "pastoral coordinators") is no longer a practice for many dioceses. Women are appointed diocesan chancellors, school superintendents, and are elected presidents of national scholarly organizations of Catholic theologians, yet are excluded from important decision-making processes because these are reserved for the clergy. The statement issued by the Vatican in the fall of 1997 on the laity's role ("On Certain Questions Regarding Collaboration of Non-ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest") in relationship to the clergy made it very clear that certain titles (e.g., chaplain) were to be reserved for clergy alone, and that a clear distinction between lay and clerical roles needed to be maintained.¹³

Yet many theologians, men and women, continue to argue in favor of the ordination of women. To engage in such an argument, as I would, means that one must grapple with the Vatican's "essentialist" understanding of priesthood and gender, in which God the "Bridegroom" invites humanity to be His "Bride." Pope John Paul II's "Theology of the Body" has in recent years become the subject of numerous lectures, workshops, and books; the ideas of male-female complementarity are basic to this theology.¹⁴

But despite the official theology of

the Vatican, the idea of and support for women's ordination remains very much alive. There are a number of ways that women and men are challenging the gendered ideology of priesthood. First, women are exercising pastoral roles in a way never seen before in Christianity and within Roman Catholicism.¹⁵ Because of the shortage of ordained clergy, women are *de facto* (but not *de jure*) pastors of churches throughout the world. Yet because they are not priests, they cannot exercise sacramental functions, like consecrating the Eucharist, hearing confessions, or administering the sacrament of the sick. It is worth noting, however, that any baptized lay person, including a woman, can baptize "in an emergency." In terms of Roman Catholic canon law, ordained deacons can witness marriages, but only priests can perform the other five (of the traditional seven sacraments) and only a bishop can ordain. And also in terms of canon law, the married couple are themselves the ministers of the sacrament to each other.

But these technical details are often irrelevant or even lost on many people "in the pews." The idea that "Sister's Mass" is preferable to "Father's Mass" is not unknown: that is, when a nun who is a pastor reads the scriptures, preaches, and distributes communion in the absence of a priest. Technically, this is not "Mass," but for many, this is what they have and it may as well be "Mass." Women are also preaching and bringing their gifts of interpretation to the pulpit, although not often enough.

Second, it is worth noting that a number of Catholic women reject the whole idea of the hierarchical priesthood. Whether or not to seek ordination within present church structures was, as I have already noted, a divisive issue at the 20th anniversary meeting of the WOC. And as much as the idea of a clerical, hierarchical priesthood is challenged by many (including many priests themselves), the Vatican has responded with a "hardening" of the definition of priesthood, as can be seen in Pope John Paul II's Holy Thursday letters, which are

focused on the priesthood. For the average Catholic, however, the finer distinctions between the Roman Catholic idea of hierarchical priesthood and the Protestant idea of ordained pastoral leadership are often lost. I would venture to say, then, that the classical idea of the Roman Catholic hierarchical priesthood is, if not eroding, at least under siege.

Third, the gendered ideology of priesthood is becoming more and more obvious, particularly when the question of ordaining gay men to the priesthood is raised. In the fall of 2002, the Jesuit Catholic magazine *America* published an article by a Vatican official alongside one by Bishop Thomas Gumbleton on the subject of gay priests.¹⁶ It was painfully obvious how the ideology of the bride/bridegroom informed the Vatican official's argument, and the letters that responded to these articles made the problematic use of this metaphor very clear. This argument, which is organized around the receptive bride receiving the love initiated by the active bridegroom — a model for the relationship not only of husband and wife, but also priest and congregation, and God and humanity — neither resonates with the contemporary experiences of many men and women, not only in the west, nor adequately accounts for the richness and multivalence of the nuptial symbol as it has been understood within Christian spirituality. In fact, the symbol is reduced to biological complementarity.

Conclusion

To return, then to the original question: can women become priests? My answer is this: if the traditional idea of Roman Catholic priesthood is maintained, then the answer is clearly No. In fact, those men and women who advocate for women's ordination make strong critiques of this particular construction of ordained ministry. But if one takes into consideration the historical, symbolic, and gender issues that are at stake, then the matter is far more complex. The ancient conception of the priest as the one who offers sacrifice to God on behalf of the

people is no longer the guiding idea of ordained ministry, even for many priests. As these traditional ideas are discussed, challenged, and even rejected, new ideas of ministry that include women's contributions will continue to engage the Christian community

Notes

¹ Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate (1520)*, translated by Charles Jacobs, *Luther's Works*, vol. 44, edited by James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 129-31; *Babylonian Captivity of the Church (1520)*, trans by A.T.W. Steinhauser, *LW* vol. 36, ed. by Abdel Ross Wentz (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), pp. 111-117.

² Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson (eds.), *Women and Religion: The Original Sourcebook of Women in Christian Thought*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1996), pp. 144-47; 263-64. The Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the American Lutheran Church (ALC), two of the three churches that merged to form the ELCA, began ordaining women in 1970. The Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, formed in 1976, also took this up. The practice of ordaining women continued when the three Lutheran Church bodies merged together in 1987 to form the ELCA (see ELCA website: <http://www.elca.org/cw/faq.html>). On Luther's claim that women should not be pastors, see *On the Councils and the Church (1539)*, trans. by Charles Jacobs, *LW* vol. 41, edited by James Atkinson, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 154-55.

³ Around 470 male clergy left the church, 58 of which returned ("Female Ordination in the Episcopal Church USA [ECUSA]," <http://www.religioustolerance.org/femclrg3.htm>)

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Providence, (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne Ltd., 1922), 19:51-53

⁵ Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests*, (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1993); Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*,

(New York: Crossroad, 1983).

⁶ Teresa Berger, *Women's Ways of Worship*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

⁷ Gary Macy, "The Ordination of Women in the Early Middle Ages," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000):481-507.

⁸ Luther even changed his stance on this issue. In *Babylonian Captivity* (1520), he asserts that there are three sacraments (baptism, the Lord's Supper ["the bread"], and penance (*LW*, vol. 36, pp. 18-19). However, later in 1523 in *The Adoration of the Sacrament*, Luther argues only for two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper ("the table of the Lord"; *LW*, vol. 36, pp.302-303).

⁹ See Rosemary Ruether's *Women and Redemption: A Theological History*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 147-77; esp. pp. 148, 150-58, 163-66.

¹⁰ John Donahue, "A Tale of Two Documents," in *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration*, Leonard Swidler and Arlene Swidler (eds.), (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), pp. 25-28.

11. Cf. the Vatican document *Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*, para. 27, <http://www.vatican.va>.

¹² Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, (Boston: Pauline Books, 1997); Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, para. 22-24; Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*; "Letter to Women," June 29, 1995 (these three can be accessed online at <http://www.vatican.va>).

¹³ "On Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest," August 15, 1997, articles 1 and 2, <http://www.vatican.va>.

¹⁴ Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II's "Gospel of the Body,"* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2003).

¹⁵ Ruth Wallace, *They Call Her Pastor*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), especially pp. 1-46.

¹⁶ The two articles are: Andrew R. Baker, "Ordination and Same Sex Attraction," and Thomas J. Gumbleton, "Yes, Gay Men Should be Ordained," *America*, (Vol. 187, no. 9, Sept. 30, 2002). Both can be accessed online at <http://www.americamagazine.org>.