

An Historical Perspective on the Ordination of Women

By Benedictine Sister Mary Clare Vincent

Since the question of Women's Ordination is still debated in many circles, I felt it timely to present this reflection that clearly explains the Church's teaching in this matter. It was written in 1988, six years before John Paul II definitively settled the matter in his Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*.
- Bishop Victor Galeone.

In America today there is so much speculation over the ordination of women that I would like to offer a few thoughts from a historical perspective only, which also acknowledges and deplors the unfortunate fact that in the course of time the priesthood has come to be considered an office of authority rather than of service, and to be linked more with the love of power than with the power of love.

Moreover, the Christian Faith and tradition, with a Savior whose message changed the world, and with its focus on the hidden but indispensable role of Mary, a woman, the apex of sheer creaturehood, yet not a priest, inevitably would run into some fundamental problems deriving from the feminist drive for ordination.

If we look at the Old Law first, which Jesus came to fulfill, we see that ruler, priest, and prophet were fundamental pillars of Israel's structure. In that structure, women were judges, queens, generals, soldiers, and prophetesses, but never priestesses. The omission was deliberate and countercultural. I am not giving theological reasons for this omission; as a historian, I am merely representing the situation.

Moses, also called the prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15) and the originator of the prophetic office, who anointed Aaron, the first high priest, and "put his hand" in this gift of God and so remained supreme over the priest, was not a priest himself. Indeed, the greatest heroes in Israel's history - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David - were not priests.

The feminists claim that barring women from the Christian priesthood was the inheritance of cultural, anthropological and social biases which today are being shattered. But the grim flaw in this reasoning is that Jesus did not mind at all overturning the social, cultural, anthropological, and religious biases of His time.

Going against the rabbinic tradition which said "It is better for the Torah to be burned than to put in the mouth of women," Jesus taught women (e.g. the Samaritan woman) and allowed them to teach others, including men. He encouraged them to "get out of the kitchen" so that they might choose the better part. He raised a woman from the dead; He cured the woman with the issue of blood and, allowing her to touch Him, He abolished the old blood taboos.

He allowed women to follow Him and He spoke to them in public when in the Jewish tradition of His time, a devout Jew would not talk to his mother, wife, daughter, or sister on the street. He sent Mary Magdalene to the apostles as the witness to His resurrection. They disbelieved her, perhaps because in a Jewish law a woman was not acceptable as a witness. Jesus rebuked them, thus repudiating yet another sociocultural bias against women.

Would such a man said, "Let not your hearts be troubled...be not afraid...all things have been delivered to Me by My Father, Without Me you can do nothing. Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."
Would He have been afraid to have made women priestesses, beginning with His mother?

Jesus revolutionized what had been considered for centuries the one, established destiny for women: created for men to be their wives and mothers. Not only did He treat women as men's equals, a startling doctrine in itself, but He required the same moral and spiritual standards from men as from

women. Divorce, for example, which was totally slanted to the advantage of men and meant merely the right of a man to reject his wife whenever he pleased, was sternly forbidden to the initial consternation of even the apostles.

The Sermon on the Mount, with its blessing on the meek, the down-trodden, the weeping, the non-aggressive, set up feminine ideals (which until then had been exacted or expected only of women) as now the norm for men. This must have been shocking for first-century masculine ears to hear. On the other hand, the feminists today seem bent on reestablishing macho male roles as the ideal, imposing them now on women and asking men merely to recognize women as emerging macho equals rather than the paradigmatic, spiritual pacesetters Jesus Christ intended them to be.

In the apostolic Church, Gnosticism was the earliest effort to subordinate the Faith to a private explanation. The Church replied by insisting that Christianity, by its very nature, is something to be transmitted by the believer as he or she has received it; that it cannot be remade by an human intelligence but it must be guarded by the Church's authority against any such remaking. The Montanists and Arians received the same answer.

The Church has excluded the ordination of women from her very beginnings. It has nothing to do with the superiority of one sex over the other any more than does the maleness of Jesus in the Incarnation. (It was a man who said to me that since the whole point of the Incarnation was God emptying himself, therefore God became a man, i.e., male, to show how low he could go.) If Christ, who amply exploded man-made myths, did not ordain women to the priesthood, his successors certainly cannot do so.

It is a fact of history that in the early Church the bishops' one weapon against innovations was the assertion that the innovation was at variance with what they themselves had received. The bishops today can give no other answer.

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