

Inter Insigniores
Pope Paul VI's Declaration
on the Question of
Admission of Women to
the Ministerial Priesthood

Pope Paul VI

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1. The Church's Constant Tradition

The Catholic Church has never felt that priestly or episcopal ordination can be validly conferred on women. A few heretical sects in the first centuries, especially Gnostic ones, entrusted the exercise of the priestly ministry to women: This innovation was immediately noted and condemned by the Fathers, who considered it as unacceptable in the Church. It is true that in the writings of the Fathers, one will find the undeniable influence of prejudices unfavourable to woman, but nevertheless, it should be noted that these prejudices had hardly any influences on their pastoral activity, and still less on their spiritual direction. But over and above these considerations inspired by the spirit of the times, one finds expressed — especially in the canonical documents of the Antiochan and Egyptian traditions — this essential reason, namely, that by calling only men to the priestly Order and ministry in its true sense, the Church intends to remain faithful to the type of ordained ministry willed by the Lord Jesus Christ and carefully maintained by the Apostles.

The same conviction animates medieval theology, even if the Scholastic doctors, in their desire to clarify by reason the data of faith, often present arguments on this point that modern thought would have difficulty in admitting, or would even rightly reject. Since that period and up till our own time, it can be said that the question has not been raised again for the practice has enjoyed peaceful and universal acceptance.

The Church's tradition in the matter has thus been so firm in the course of the centuries that the Magisterium has not felt the need to intervene in order to formulate a principle which was not attacked, or to defend a law which was not challenged. But each time that this tradition had the occasion to manifest itself, it witnessed to the Church's desire to conform to the model left her by the Lord.

The same tradition has been faithfully safeguarded by the Churches of the East. Their unanimity on this point is all the more remarkable since in many other questions their discipline admits of a great diversity. At present time these same

Churches refuse to associate themselves with requests directed towards securing the accession of women to priestly ordination.

2. The Attitude of Christ

Jesus Christ did not call any women to become part of the Twelve. If he acted in this way, it was not in order to conform to the customs of his time, for his attitude towards women was quite different from that of his milieu, and he deliberately and courageously broke with it.

For example, to the great astonishment of his own disciples Jesus converses publicly with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:27); he takes no notice of the state of legal impurity of the woman who had suffered from hemorrhages (Mt 9:20); he allows a sinful woman to approach him in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Lk 7:37); and by pardoning the woman taken in adultery, he means to show that one must not be more severe towards the fault of a woman than towards that of a man (Jn 8:11). He does not hesitate to depart from the Mosaic Law in order to affirm the equality of the rights and duties of men and women with regard to the marriage bond (Mk 10:2; Mt 19:3).

In his itinerant ministry Jesus was accompanied not only by the Twelve but also by a group of women (Lk 8:2). Contrary to the Jewish mentality, which did not accord great value to the testimony of women, as Jewish law attests, it was nevertheless women who were the first to have the privilege of seeing the risen Lord, and it was they who were charged by Jesus to take the first paschal message to the Apostles themselves (Mt 28:7 ; Lk 24:9 ; Jn 20:11), in order to prepare the latter to become the official witnesses to the Resurrection.

It is true that these facts do not make the matter immediately obvious. This is no surprise, for the questions that the Word of God brings before us go beyond the obvious. In order to reach the ultimate meaning of the mission of Jesus and the ultimate meaning of Scripture, a purely historical exegesis of the texts cannot suffice. But it must be recognised that we have here a number of convergent indications that make all the more remarkable that Jesus did not entrust the apos-

toxic charge to women. Even his Mother, who was so closely associated with the mystery of her Son, and whose incomparable role is emphasized by the Gospels of Luke and John, was not invested with the apostolic ministry. This fact was to lead the Fathers to present her as an example of Christ's will in this domain; as Pope Innocent III repeated later, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, 'Although the Blessed Virgin Mary surpassed in dignity and in excellence all the Apostles, nevertheless it was not to her but to them that the Lord entrusted the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.'

3. *The Practice of the Apostles*

The apostolic community remained faithful to the attitude of Jesus towards women. Although Mary occupied a privileged place in the little circle of those gathered in the Upper Room after the Lord's Ascension (Acts 1:14), it was not she who was called to enter the College of the Twelve at the time of the election that resulted in the choice of Mathias: those who were put forward were two disciples whom the Gospels do not even mention.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled them all, men and women (Acts 2:1, 1:14), yet the proclamation of the fulfillment of the prophecies in Jesus was made only by 'Peter and the Eleven' (Acts 2:14).

When they and Paul went beyond the confines of the Jewish world, the preaching of the Gospel and the Christian life in the Greco-Roman civilisation impelled them to break with Mosaic practices, sometimes regretfully. They could therefore have envisaged conferring ordination on women, if they had not been convinced of their duty of fidelity to the Lord on this point. In fact the Greeks did not share the ideas of the Jews: although their philosophers taught the inferiority of women, historians nevertheless emphasize the existence of a certain movement for the advancement of women during the Imperial period. In fact we know from the book of Acts and from the letter of St. Paul, that certain women worked with the Apostle for the Gospel (Rm 16:3-12; Phil 4:3). Saint Paul lists their names with gratitude in the final salutations of the Letters. Some of them often exercised an

important influence on conversions: Priscilla, Lydia and others; especially Priscilla, who took it on herself to complete the instruction of Apollos (Acts 18:26); Phoebe, in the service of the Church of Cenchreae (Rm 16:1). All these facts manifest within the Apostolic Church a considerable evolution vis-a-vis the customs of Judaism. Nevertheless at no time was there a question of conferring ordination on these women.

In the Pauline letters, exegetes of authority have noted a difference between two formulas used by the Apostle: he writes indiscriminately 'My fellow workers' (Rom. 16:3; Phil 4:2-3) when referring to men and women helping him in his apostolate in one way or another; but he reserves the title of 'God's fellow workers' (1 Cor. 3-9; 1 Thess 3:2) to Apollos, Timothy and himself, thus designated because they are directly set apart for the apostolic ministry and the preaching of the Word of God. In spite of the so important role played by women on the day of the Resurrection, their collaboration was not extended by St. Paul to the official and public proclamation of the message, since this proclamation belongs exclusively to the apostolic mission.

4. Permanent Value of the Attitude of Jesus and the Apostles

Could the Church today depart from this attitude of Jesus and the Apostles, which has been considered as normative by the whole of tradition up to our own day? Various arguments have been put forward in favour of a positive reply to this question, and these must now be examined.

It has been claimed in particular that the attitude of Jesus and the Apostles is explained by the influence of their milieu and their times. It is said that, if Jesus did not entrust to women and not even to his Mother a ministry assimilating them to the Twelve, this was because historical circumstances did not permit him to do so. No one however has ever proved- and it is clearly impossible to prove- that this attitude is inspired only by social and cultural reasons. As we have seen, and examination of the Gospels shows on the contrary that Jesus broke with the prejudices of his time, by widely contravening the discriminations practiced with

regard to women. One therefore cannot maintain that, by not calling women to enter the group of the Apostles, Jesus was simply letting himself be guided by reasons of expediency. For all the more reason, social and cultural conditioning did not hold back the Apostles working in the Greek milieu, where the same forms of discrimination did not exist.

Another objection is based upon the transitory character that one claims to see today in some of the prescriptions of Saint Paul concerning women, and upon the difficulties that some aspects of his teaching raise in this regard. But it must be noted that these ordinances, probably inspired by the customs of the period, concern scarcely more than disciplinary practices of minor importance, such as the obligation imposed upon women to wear a veil on their head (1 Cor 11:2-16); such requirements no longer have a normative value. However, the Apostle's forbidding of women to speak in the assemblies (1 Cor 14:34-35; 1 Ti, 2:12) is of a different nature, and exegetes define its meaning in this way: Paul in no way opposes the right, which he elsewhere recognises as possessed by women, to prophesy in the assembly (1 Cor 11:15); the prohibition solely concerns the official function of teaching in the Christian assembly. For Saint Paul this prescription is bound up with the divine plan of creation (1 Cor 11:7; Gen 2:18-24): it would be difficult to see in it the expression of a cultural fact. Nor should it be forgotten that we owe to Saint Paul one of the most vigorous texts in the New Testament on the fundamental equality of men and women, as children of God in Christ (Gal 3:28). Therefore there is no reason for accusing him of prejudices against women, when we note the trust that he shows towards them and the collaboration that he asks of them in his apostolate.

But over and above these objections taken from the history of apostolic times, those who support the legitimacy of change in the matter turn to the Church's practice in her sacramental discipline. It has been noted, in our day especially, to what extent the Church is conscious of possessing a certain power over the sacraments, even though they were instituted by Christ. She has used this power down the centuries in order to determine their signs and the conditions of their administration: recent decisions of Popes Pius XII and Paul VI are proof of this. However, it must be emphasized that this power, which is a real one, has definite

limits. As Pope Pius XII recalled: 'The Church has no power over the substance of the sacraments, that is to say, over what Christ the Lord, as the sources of Revelation bear witness, determined should be maintained in the sacramental sign.' This was already the teaching of the council of Trent, which declared: 'In the Church there has always existed this power, that in the administration of the sacraments, provided that their substance remains unaltered, she can lay down or modify what she considers more fitting either for the benefit of those who receive them or for respect towards those same sacraments, according to varying circumstances, times or places.'

Moreover, it must not be forgotten that the sacramental signs are not conventional ones. Not only is it true that, in many respects, they are natural signs because they respond to the deep symbolism of actions and things, but they are more than this: they are principally meant to link the person of every period to the supreme Event of the history of salvation, in order to enable that person to understand, through all the Bible's wealth of pedagogy and symbolism, what grace they signify and produce. For example, the sacrament of the Eucharist is not only a fraternal meal, but at the same time a memorial which makes present and actual Christ's sacrifice and his offering by the Church. Again the priestly ministry is not just a pastoral service; it ensures the continuity of the functions entrusted by Christ to the Apostles and the continuity of the powers related to those functions. Adaptations to civilizations and times therefore cannot abolish on essential points, the sacramental reference to constitutive events of Christianity and to Christ himself.

In the final analysis it is the Church through the voice of the Magisterium, that, in these various domains, decides what can change and what must remain immutable. When she judges she cannot accept certain changes, it is because she knows she is bound by Christ's manner of acting. Her attitude, despite appearances, is therefore not one of archaism but of fidelity: it can be truly understood only in this light. The Church makes pronouncements in virtue of the Lord's promise and the presence of the Holy Spirit, in order to proclaim better the mystery of Christ and to safeguard and manifest the whole of its rich content.

The practice of the Church therefore has a normative character: in the fact of conferring priestly ordination only on men, it is a question of unbroken tradition

throughout the history of the Church, universal in the East and in the West, and alert to repress abuses immediately. This norm, based on Christ's example, has been and is still observed because it is considered to conform to God's plan for his Church.

5. The Ministerial Priesthood in the Light of The Mystery of Christ

Having recalled the Church's norm and the basis thereof, it seems useful and opportune to illustrate this norm by showing the profound fittingness that theological reflection discovers between the proper nature of the sacrament of Order, with its specific reference to the mystery of Christ, and the fact that only men have been called to receive priestly ordination. It is not a question here of bringing forward a demonstrative argument, but of clarifying this teaching by the analogy of faith.

The Church's constant teaching, repeated and clarified by the Second Vatican Council and again recalled by the 1971 Synod of Bishops and by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its Declaration of 24th. June 1973, declares that the bishop or the priest in the exercise of his ministry, does not act in his own name, in *persona propria*: he represents Christ, who acts through him: "the priest truly acts in the place of Christ", as St. Cyprian already wrote in the third century. It is this ability to represent Christ that St. Paul considered as characteristic of his apostolic function (2 Cor. 5:20; Gal. 4:14). The supreme expression of this representation is found in the altogether special form it assumes in the celebration of the Eucharist, which is the source and centre of the Church's unity, the sacrificial meal in which the People of God are associated in the sacrifice of Christ: the priest, who alone has the power to perform it, then acts not only through the effective power conferred on him by Christ, but in *persona Christi*, taking the role of Christ, to the point of being his very image, when he pronounces the words of consecration.

The Christian priesthood is therefore of a sacramental nature: the priest is a sign, the supernatural effectiveness of which comes from the ordination received,

but a sign that must be perceptible and which the faithful must be able to recognise with ease. The whole sacramental economy is in fact based upon natural signs, on symbols imprinted on the human psychology: 'Sacramental signs,' says St. Thomas, 'represent what they signify by natural resemblance.' The same natural resemblance is required for persons as for things: when Christ's role in the Eucharist is to be expressed sacramentally, there would not be this 'natural resemblance' which must exist between Christ and his minister if the role of Christ were not taken by a man: in such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ. For Christ himself was and remains a man.

Christ is of course the firstborn of all humanity, of women as well as men: the unity which he re-established after sin is such that there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal.3:28). Nevertheless, the incarnation of the Word took place according to the male sex: this is indeed a question of fact, and this fact, while not implying any alleged natural superiority of man over woman, cannot be disassociated from the economy of salvation: it is indeed in harmony with the entirety of God's plan as God himself has revealed it, and of which the mystery of the Covenant is the nucleus.

For the salvation offered by God to men and women, the union with him to which they are called — in short, the Covenant — took on, from the Old Testament Prophets onwards, the privileged form of a nuptial mystery: for God the Chosen People is seen as his ardently loved spouse. Both Jewish and Christian tradition has discovered the depth of this intimacy of love by reading and rereading the Song of Songs; the divine Bridegroom will remain faithful even when the Bride betrays his love, when Israel is unfaithful to God (Hos.1-3; Jer.2). When the 'fullness of time' (Gal.4:4) comes, the Word, the Son of God, takes on flesh in order to establish and seal the new and eternal Covenant in his blood, which will be shed for many so that sins may be forgiven. His death will gather together again the scattered children of God; from his pierced side will be born the Church, as Eve was born from Adam's side. At that time there is fully and eternally accomplished the nuptial mystery proclaimed and hymned in the Old Testament: Christ is the Bridegroom; the Church his Bride, whom he loves because he has gained her by

his blood and made her glorious, holy and without blemish, and henceforth he is inseparable from her. This nuptial theme, which is developed from the Letters of St.Paul onwards (2 Cor.11:2; Eph.5:22-23) to the writings of St.John (especially in Jn.3:29; Rev.19:7,9), is present also in the Synoptic Gospels: the Bridegroom's friends must not fast as long as he is with them (Mk.2:19); the Kingdom of Heaven is like a king who gave a feast for his son's wedding (Mt.22:1-14). It is through this Scriptural language, all interwoven with symbols, and which expresses and affects man and women in their profound identity, that there is revealed to us the mystery of God and Christ, a mystery which of itself is unfathomable.

That is why we can never ignore the fact that Christ is a man. And therefore, unless one is to disregard the importance of this symbolism for the economy of Revelation, it must be admitted that, in actions which demand the character of ordination and in which Christ himself, the author of the Covenant, the Bridegroom, the Head of the Church, is represented, exercising his ministry of salvation — which is in the highest degree the case of the Eucharist — his role (this is the original sense of the word 'persona') must be taken by a man. This does not stem from any personal superiority of the latter in the order of values, but only from a difference of fact on the level of functions and service.

Could one say that, since Christ is now in the heavenly condition, from now on it is a matter of indifference whether he be represented by a man or by a woman, since 'at the resurrection men and women do not marry' (Mat.22:30)? But this text does not mean that the distinction between man and women, insofar as it determines the identity proper to the person, is suppressed in the glorified state; what holds for us also holds for Christ. It is indeed evident that in human beings the difference of sex exercises an important influence, much deeper than, for example, ethnic differences: the latter do not affect the human person as intimately as the difference of sex, which is directly ordained both for the communion of persons and for the generation of human beings. In Biblical Revelation this difference is the effect of God's will from the beginning: 'male and female he created them' (Gen 1:27).

However, it will perhaps be further objected that the priest, especially when he presides at the liturgical and sacramental functions, equally represents the

Church: he acts in her name with 'the intention of doing what she does'. In this sense, the theologians of the Middle Ages said that the minister also acts in persona Ecclesiae, that is to say, in the name of the whole Church and in order to represent her. And in fact, leaving aside the question of the participation of the faithful in a liturgical action, it is indeed in the name of the whole Church that the action is celebrated by the priest: he prays in the name of all, and in the Mass he offers the sacrifice of the whole Church. In the new Passover, the Church, under visible signs, immolates Christ through the ministry of the priest. And so, it is asserted, since the priest also represents the Church, would it not be possible to think that this representation could be carried out by a woman, according to the symbolism already explained? It is true that the priest represents the Church, which is the Body of Christ. But if he does so, it is precisely because he first represents Christ himself, who is the Head and the Shepherd of the Church. The Second Vatican Council used this phrase to make more precise and complete the expression 'in persona Christi'. It is in this quality that the priest presides over the Christian assembly and celebrates the Eucharistic sacrifice 'in which the whole Church offers and is herself wholly offered'.

If one does justice to these reflections, one will better understand how well-founded is the basis of the Church's practice; and will conclude that the controversies raised in our days over the ordination of women are for all Christians a pressing invitation to meditate on the mystery of the Church, to study in greater detail the meaning of the episcopate and the priesthood, and to rediscover the real and pre-eminent place of the priest in the community of the baptized, of which he indeed forms part but from which he is distinguished because, in the actions that call for the character of ordination, for the community he is - with all the effectiveness proper to the sacraments- the image and symbol of Christ himself who calls, forgives, and accomplishes the sacrifice of the Covenant.

6. *The Ministerial Priesthood Illustrated by The Mystery of the Church*

It is opportune to recall that problems of sacramental theology, especially when they concern the ministerial priesthood, as is the case here, cannot be solved except in the light of Revelation. The human sciences, however valuable their contribution in their own domain, cannot suffice here, for they cannot grasp the realities of faith: the properly supernatural content of these realities is beyond their competence.

Thus one must note the extent to which the Church is a society different from other societies, original in her nature and in her structures. The pastoral charge in the Church is normally linked to the sacrament of Order; it is not a simple government, comparable to the modes of authority found in the States. It is not granted by people's spontaneous choice: even when it involves designation through election, it is the laying on of hands and the prayer of the successors of the Apostles which guarantee God's choice; and it is the Holy Spirit, given by ordination, who grants participation in the ruling power of the Supreme Pastor, Christ (Acts 20:28). It is a charge of service and love: 'If you love me, feed my sheep' (Jn.21:15-17).

For this reason one cannot see how it is possible to propose the admission of women to the priesthood in virtue of the equality of rights of the human person, an equality which holds good also for Christians. To this end, use is sometimes made of the text quoted above, from the Letter to the Galatians (3:28), which says that in Christ there is no longer any distinction between men and women. But this passage does not concern ministries: it only affirms the universal calling to divine filiation, which is the same for all. Moreover, and above all, to consider the ministerial priesthood as a human right would be to misjudge its nature completely: baptism does not confer any personal title to public ministry within the Church. The priesthood is not conferred for the honour or advantage of the recipient, but for the service of God and the Church; it is the object of a specific and totally gratuitous vocation: 'You did not choose me, no, I chose you; and I commissioned you...' (Jn.15:16; Heb.5:4).

It is sometimes said and written in books and periodicals that some women feel that they have a vocation to the priesthood. Such an attraction however noble and understandable, still does not suffice for a genuine vocation. In fact a vocation cannot be reduced to a mere personal attraction, which can remain purely subjective. Since the priesthood is a particular ministry of which the Church has received the charge and the control, authentication by the Church is indispensable here and is a constitutive part of the vocation: Christ chose 'those he wanted' (Mk.3:13). On the other hand, there is a universal vocation of all the baptized to the exercise of the royal priesthood by offering their lives to God and by giving witness for his praise.

Women who express a desire for the ministerial priesthood are doubtless motivated by the desire to serve Christ and the Church. And it is not surprising that, at a time when they are becoming more aware of the discriminations to which they have been subjected, they should desire the ministerial priesthood itself. But it must not be forgotten that the priesthood does not form part of the rights of the individual, but stems from the economy of the mystery of Christ and the Church. The priestly office cannot become the goal of social advancement: no merely human progress of society or of the individual can of itself give access to it: it is of another order.

It therefore remains for us to meditate more deeply on the nature of the real equality of the baptized which is one of the great affirmations of Christianity; equality is in no way identity, for the Church is a differentiated body, in which each individual has his or her role. The roles are distinct, and must not be confused; they do not favour the superiority of some vis-a-vis the others, nor do they provide an excuse for jealousy; the only better gift, which can and must be desired, is love (1 Cor. 12-13). The greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven are not the ministers but the saints.

The Church desires that Christian women should become more fully aware of the greatness of their mission; today their role is of capital importance, both for the renewal and humanization of society and for the rediscovery of believers of the true face of the Church.

His Holiness Pope Paul VI, during the audience granted to the undersigned Prefect of the Sacred Congregation on 15 October 1976, approved this Declaration, confirmed it and ordered its publication.

Given in Rome, at the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on 15 October 1976, the feast of Saint Theresa of Avila.

† Franjo Cardinal Seper

Prefect

Notes