

# Admission of Women to the Priesthood in the Catholic Church

## Introduction.

Women now work in almost all spheres. It is fitting that they are able to assume their proper role in accordance with their own nature. It will belong to all to acknowledge and favour the proper and necessary participation of women in the cultural life.<sup>1</sup>

With this statement many people presumed that women would eventually be ordained in the Catholic Church. A male- only clergy has always been normative in the Roman Catholic Church although priesthood, as a specific ministry, did not exist in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> With the rise of Feminism and the subsequent emancipation of women, the moral norm of exclusion of women from the priesthood is being questioned. Recently several statements have been published which seek to formulate the Christian teaching on the issue of Womens' Ordination.

## Relevant Documents

In 1976 the declaration *Inter Insigniores*<sup>3</sup> gave reasons from Scripture and Tradition why women could not be admitted into the priestly order and ministry. This was despite the fact that a Pontifical Biblical Commission appointed by Pope Paul VI had previously reported that "Scriptural grounds alone are not enough to exclude the possibility of ordaining women".<sup>4</sup> At the same time the Anglican Church reported "a slow steady growth of a consensus of opinion ..... that there are no fundamental objections in principle to the ordination of women to the priesthood".<sup>5</sup>

Debate continued until 1994 when Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter was published with the final paragraph: "I declare that the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the faithful".<sup>6</sup>

**The Issues** raised by this final statement are complex; perhaps the most important is its infallibility or otherwise. Many Catholics see the exclusion as a case of injustice and discrimination against women, others see it as a human rights issue and have even suggested an appeal to the United Nations!<sup>7</sup> The perceived ban on discussion appears to be contrary to Vatican II documents which state that "Within the limits of morality and the common utility, persons can freely search for

1 . Vatican Council II, "Gaudium et spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (1965), 60.

2 . William J. Rademacher, *Lay Ministry: A Theological, Spiritual and Pastoral Handbook* (Crossroad: New York, 1991), 47.

3 . Declaration of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), "On the question of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood", 1976.

4 . Biblical Commission Report: "Can women be Priests?" *Origins* 6 (1976), 92.

5 . Letter from Donald Coggan, Archbishop of Canterbury, to Pope Paul VI, 9 July 1975.

6 . Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II, "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis: On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone", 1994.

7 . Hilary Charlesworth, "No Principled Reason", lecture at St. Paul's Cathedral. Printed in *Eureka Street*, October 1997.

the truth, express their opinions and publish them".<sup>8</sup>

issues, such as these, create tension between the current teachings and the body of the Church. Hogan said that "it was such tensions that initiated theological developments at the Second Vatican Council where several non-infallible positions and pronouncements were changed and even reversed".<sup>9</sup>

### Infallibility of the Vatican statements.

Karl Rahner accepted that the Declaration of 1976 "carried a certain weight" but added "Nevertheless, despite papal approval, the Declaration is not a definitive decision, it is, in principle, reformable and it can..... be erroneous".<sup>10</sup> The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), in 1998, disagreed with this view and declared that the teaching "Has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal Magisterium".<sup>11</sup>

Many theologians have rejected this claim to infallibility. Avery Dulles proposes that there is a need for clarification because of the confusion of terminology; he asks "can the Magisterium speak '**definitively**' without engaging '**infallibility**'?".<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Lash accuses Cardinal Ratzinger of attempting to make a teaching infallible simply by saying that it is so.<sup>13</sup> Francis J. Sullivan reminded his readers of Canon Law 749 paragraph 3, "No doctrine is understood to be infallibly defined unless it is clearly established as such".<sup>14</sup>

However, May disagrees with the arguments of 'revisionist theologians' and quotes the CDF as distinguishing between **questions** theologians raise and **dissent** from such teaching.<sup>15</sup> Thus infallible or not, the teachings of the Church require from the faithful a ready and respectful allegiance of mind (*Obsequium religiosum*). As this question appears to be unresolved, faithful Catholics will continue to raise the issue of the admissibility of women to the priesthood.

Arguments against the admission of women to the priesthood are based on Scripture and Tradition, and are clearly set out in the Vatican documents already referred to. They include:

- \* Christ chose only men to be his apostles.
- \* The Tradition of the Church has taught consistently that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is God's will.
- \* Mary was not an apostle and, when they elected a twelfth apostle to replace Judas, they chose another male.
- \* Since Christ was a male, the priest who represents him at the Eucharist can only be male.

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8 . Gaudium et spes, 59.

9 . Arnold Hogan, *On Being Catholic Today: What kind of person should I be?* (Collins Dove; Australia, 1993)

10 . Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol II (Darton, Longman and Todd: London, 1974), 37.

11 . "CDF Doctrinal Commentary on the concluding Formula of the *Professio Fidei*". (1998), 11.

12 . Avery Dulles, "How to Read the Pope", *The Tablet*, 25 July 1998, 968.

13 . Nicholas Lash, "On Not Inventing Doctrine", *The Tablet*, 2 December 1995, 1544.

14 . Francis J. Sullivan, "New Claims for the Pope", *The Tablet*, 18 June 1994, 767.

15 . William E. May, *The Church as Moral Teacher, An Introduction to Moral Theology* (Rev. Ed. Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 1994), 241.

These arguments can be questioned respectfully without denying the truth of the premises. For instance, if Jesus had called women to any public office, it would have been improper in that culture. Women were not expected to associate freely with men who were not of their family ; only prostitutes had this freedom. On the other hand there is enough evidence in the Gospels to demonstrate that Jesus did call women to be his disciples (eg Mary of Bethany in Lk 10:38-42 and the women after the Resurrection Mt 28:7). He treated women as equals at a time when they were discriminated against.

Arguments based on tradition can sometimes be on shaky ground because the Church, in the past, has often formulated and supported policies backed by doctrinal interpretations which have later been rescinded because of a new understanding of the truth. Here society can often influence the Church's traditional teachings, usually prior to a change in the latter's views. For example: the slave trade was abolished in England in 1807, then the owning of slaves was prohibited in the USA in 1863. At this time (1866) , the Roman Church declared that slavery was not contrary to the natural or divine law. This was revoked by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *rerum novarum* (1891).

The Vatican's argument against womens' ordination on the basis of Jesus' exclusion of Mary his mother is not as strong as it first appears. As priests bring Jesus into the world at the Consecration so Mary brought Jesus at his birth. Rademacher reminds us that , in 1873, Pope Pius IX called Mary a 'Virgin Priest'.<sup>16</sup>

The maleness of Christ is not at issue, the question is whether his gender is more important than his humanity. At the incarnation, "he came to share in our humanity, so that we may share in the life of his divinity..... it must be a humanity inclusive of women, if half the human race is to share in the Redemption he won for us on the cross".<sup>17</sup>

Many theologians agree that, although the Scriptures are a source of moral norms, they cannot be used to answer questions arising in a new age and culture. Therefore an argument based on Scripture cannot be conclusive. The Church, in her teaching authority, can and does re-interpret the Scriptures based on new understandings. Jesus himself did so on many occasions when he re-interpreted the Mosaic law (Mt 15 :1-20).

### **Arguments for the admission of women to the priesthood**

From the Gospels we are sure that Jesus treated women as equals and upbraided those men who put them down (eg the story of Simon the pharisee Lk 7:36-47). His stories and parables used the experiences of both men and women to illustrate his teachings. He never acted in any discriminatory way towards women. However, this evidence cannot be used to ascertain whether he intended women to be priests. It is salutary to remember that the 'priesthood' did not develop as a sacramental ministry until the 10th. century.<sup>18</sup> Even so there is some

16 . Rademacher, *Lay Ministry*, 163.

17 . Robert Runcie, Archbishop of Canterbury, letter to Pope John Paul II, 11 Dec. 1985.

18 . Rademacher, *Lay Ministry*,

evidence that women were ordained deacons according to ancient rituals from the 4th. to the 8th. century.<sup>19</sup>

"The Bible's affirmation of human dignity gives the rights of a person particular importance"<sup>20</sup> so that exclusion or discrimination on the grounds of gender would appear to be a 'human rights' issue. However, the Vatican states that no-one has a right to ordination which is a 'calling' by God. This is not disputed but surely all men and women have a right to have their presumed vocation authenticated? The Church needs to be open to the possibility that their call is from the Holy Spirit. Discerning the will of God, which is the task of theology, may be being thwarted by the withholding of another 'good' ie freedom of speech.

There are several dangers in the Vatican's authoritarian approach. One is that the lack of acceptance by those who wish to keep the debate open has already led to many leaving the church or their religious order. Ordination of women could prevent the further alienation of women and men and promote the flourishing of the Church. Another danger is that, if the Pope changes his mind, the credibility of the Church could be endangered; many believe that the teaching is infallible; clarity on this point is essential to avoid a crisis of faith.

The participation of women in the Church has increased enormously in the last 50 years; they are now represented on Pastoral councils, can be lectors and extra-ordinary ministers of the Eucharist. Many are chaplains in schools, hospitals and prisons, or theologians in educational institutions. As women have a special experience of life, these changes have already enriched the Church. It would seem to be a natural progression for them to take on the full duties and responsibilities of the priesthood which would provide a woman-to-woman ministry.

Finally, the admission of women as priests and deacons in the reformed churches does not appear to have had a detrimental effect on either those institutions or the ecumenical movement, despite it being forecast as a "serious obstacle" to that progress.<sup>21</sup>

### **Imaginative solutions to the problem.**

Assuming that the Vatican does not intend either to discuss the matter further or to change the teaching, it is now up to women themselves, with the encouragement of men, to take all ministerial opportunities open to them. Previously they have been inclined to accept a subordinate role in the church but must now be prepared to be more active. They should be willing to be elected to positions on committees where decisions are being made. There are many opportunities for adult education in theology and pastoral ministry which would provide the confidence and skills necessary. Once the people of the Church become accustomed to the presence of women in ministerial and administrative positions it is more likely that there will be a movement for total inclusion from the 'grass roots'.

One must sympathise with the Pope in his efforts to search for the truth; this may be an occasion where the whole Church should cooperate, perhaps in a Third Vatican Council, but this time women should be represented.

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19. John Wijngaards, "When Women were Deacons", *The Tablet*, 8 May 1999, 623.

20. R. Gascoigne, *Freedom and Purpose: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Newtown : Dwyer, 1993), 157.

21. Letter of Lord Runcie to Pope John Paul II, 11 Dec. 1985.

## Conclusion.

"In contemporary democratic societies a basic aspect of human dignity is the right to participation in decision making";<sup>22</sup> women have been denied this right and it is unlikely that the Pope will change his mind. In a "Letter to Women"<sup>23</sup> he refers to the 'Genius of women', their 'complementarity' with men and acknowledges that women in the past have not received recognition. He seems to appreciate women without understanding them. However, women do not relish being put on a pedestal and reminded that their vocation is as a 'server'; they would prefer to be listened to and share responsibility. The recent publication of the response of the Australian Catholic Bishops to the report "Woman and Man" has renewed optimism in the possibility of women taking a full and equal place beside men in the renewal of the Church.<sup>24</sup> The bishops acknowledge that the participation of women in the Church is a 'justice' issue and that there should be "ongoing dialogue and integration of ideas pertaining to women and their participation in the Catholic Church". This is a good start. It is important to remember that if it is God's will that women should be priests, The Holy Spirit will move within the Church to make it possible. If not those who advocate the admission of women to the priesthood will have to admit that they are wrong.

It seems clear that the arguments against the inclusion of women into the priesthood based on Scripture and Tradition are not convincing. At the same time it must be emphasised that it is a theological issue which cannot be resolved on sociological or cultural grounds".<sup>25</sup> A careful, theological study, which seeks to interpret the will of God on this new matter could be undertaken so long as the question remains open. The finality of the Pope's statement seems to have put a stop to this study.

Perhaps we can leave the last word with Oliver Cromwell: "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken".<sup>26</sup>  
(2068 words)

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22 . Gascoigne, *Freedom and Purpose*, 95.

23 . John Paul II, "Letter to Women", 29 June 1995. Written in preparation for the UN Conference on women to be held in Beijing.

24 . Social Justice Sunday Statement 2000, 13/9/00, available from:  
<http://www.cathcom.org>

25 . Cardinal Jan Willebrands, President of the Vatican Secretariat for promoting Christian Unity, letter to Robert Runcie 17 June 1986.

26 . Oliver Cromwell. "Letter to the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland", 3 Aug. 1650 in Thomas Carlyle *Oliver Cromwell's letters and Speeches* (1845).

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- I acknowledge the invaluable assistance of John Wijngaards' web site available at <http://www.womenpriests.org>