THE MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD

By PAUL LAKELAND

THE INVOLVEMENT of women in the life and growth of the christian community began with Mary's *fiat*, flourished during Jesus's ministry, and has been consistently diminished ever since. Women played a far more important role in the organization of the early Church, in the administration and care of the community, than they do in the twentieth century, a fact borne out by the number and nature of the references to women in the pauline letters. At the present time, to propose the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood is to ask the Church to reverse two thousand years of neglect. Or is it two thousand years of tradition? Unlike many of the objectives of the feminist movement, this one (as we shall shortly see) has to be furthered on an explicitly theological level. It requires the radical theologization of their case, a recognition that the movement for the equality of women with men in both Church and society is truly the Spirit speaking in the signs of the times.

That a periodical can devote an entire issue to Woman, where it would seem bizarre to do the same for Man, is in part an admission of the feminist case. Woman must come of age before she ceases to be a theme for special study. While the concept of women in the ministry remains in the same category as dogs walking on their hind legs, there is still a case to be argued. So perhaps the subject matter here is a kind of test case for the changing situation, discussed in the other studies which make up this number of *The Way*. Yet it is not an entirely common-sense matter. Certainly, that women should have equal rights with men is self-evident in our society; but we do make exceptions for good reasons. We do not like the idea of men being midwives or women commanding regiments in the army. In some way we cannot entirely justify, we find it not quite 'fitting' that men and women respectively should fill these roles. The objections to women as priests belong in part to this 'not fitting' category; but there is a more extreme attitude, which says, more or less, that it is impossible for women to be validly ordained: like the Old

Catholic bishop who maintained that if a woman attempted to consecrate the bread and wine she would simply explode, so much at variance were the nature of woman and the nature of the christian priesthood. Happily, such extremes are rare; but it remains true that discussion on this whole issue, even among the less eccentric, is far from positive.

A number of representative bodies within the anglican communion have concluded that they see no serious theological objections to the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood.[1] However, they usually refer the whole problem back for further study rather than recommend a decision. This is due in part to an entirely understandable nervousness at the thought of making such a major change in the tradition of their Church, and also to a laudable concern to make quite sure before giving final approval to the logical next step. These bodies have also been influenced by the serious divisions of opinion within the anglican communion, and they are concerned about the ecumenical implications of any change. However, these hesitations clearly indicate the sort of impasse we (anglican and roman) have reached in discussions. The major problem for anyone trying to break the deadlock is to coax those holding opposite points of view ('opponents' is an unfortunate but necessary shorthand description) onto common ground. The 'liberationists' (another regrettable term) would consider that the case for ordaining women is made merely by showing the redundancy of the theological arguments of their opponents; who, in their turn, not unreasonably conclude that a movement for change in the Church which has no explicit theological justification, has no theological justification at all.

This is the present situation, and as a result no fruitful exchange of opinion has as yet taken place; each group is still soliloquizing. It is as if two opposing armies were awaiting one another on different battlefields: neither is in danger of defeat or in a position to achieve victory; but both might be excused for thinking that they were victors by default. In an argument in which both sides believe their own position to be impregnable, the chances of progress are slim.

We have a situation, then, in which both sides argue that the

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[1] The most useful summary of the history of the anglican study of the problem is in the General Synod of the Church of England's document GS 104, *The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood.*

burden of proof lies with the other. Realistically, since the institutional Church leans towards the *status quo*, this amounts to saying that the forces desiring change must fight it out on their opponents' battlefield. However, this is not simply a matter of political (or military) expediency. What is called for is a recognition that, just as the theological ideas of the past were coloured by the modes of expression of their times, so the leading ideas of our own age must, if they are to mean anything to the christian community, be capable of being given theological expression. For woman to take her rightful place in society has to do with the re-ordering of society according to the christian ideals of justice and freedom. It is a question of progress in building up the body of Christ, which is the Church, into a more perfect expression for our times of what it means to be a community of believers in the gospel.

The proponents of the case against the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood reveal an alarmingly naive attitude to the socio-cultural conditioning of theological expression. Their scriptural arguments, for example, depend on rationalizations of the fact that Jesus did *not* do something (that is, make women his apostles), and on making absolutes of certain remarks in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, which rely for their meaning on a closely defined context belonging to the first century A.D. Just as in an earlier age some would have insisted that the universe was created in a week early in 4004 BC, thereby mistaking theological truth for its expression in terms of a cosmology now scientifically discredited, so some would like to give the same theological weight to a pastoral detail applicable in a local pauline community, as to a general theological statement, such as that in Galatians 3,28. Again, the implied understanding of tradition – a body of truths handed down from one generation to the next and guarded by the Church – would make the christian community, the presence of Christ in the world, not a dynamic body, a living and growing organism, but a two thousand years old vegetable kept alive on an ecclesiastical heart and lung machine. On this view, growth in understanding would end like revelation, with the death of the last apostle.

There is no space here to examine more in detail the many arguments drawn up against the ordination of women.[2] Nor is it essential for our purposes. The central point to be taken is that on the surface

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[2] The bibliography here is huge, but a learned book with positively no axe to grind is Haye van der Meer's *Women Priests in the Catholic Church?* (Philadelphia, 1973).

and according to the proponents of these arguments, their position relies entirely on theology. They argue, they would say, from the unbroken tradition of the Church, in its uniquely authoritative interpretation of scripture. What they perhaps fail to see is the close inter-relation between the linguistic formulation of theological insights and the prevalent ideas of the time in which they are expressed. This was admitted, though somewhat ungenerously, in the 1973 Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the erstwhile Holy Office), *Mysterium Ecclesiae:*

> . . . even though the truths which the Church intends to teach through her dogmatic formulas are distinct from the changeable conceptions of a given epoch *and can be expressed without them*, nevertheless it can sometimes happen that these truths may be enunciated by the sacred Magisterium in terms that bear traces of such conceptions.[3]

Most of us would, I imagine, want to go beyond this statement and certainly omit the phrase which I have italicized. The great contribution of *Mysterium Ecclesiae* to positive thinking was the formal recognition by a Vatican body of the truth of the Second Vatican Council's designation of the Church as 'pilgrim'. Its pilgrim nature is evident in its not yet having achieved perfection, and in its inescapable insertion in history. The dogmatic formulas of the Church, and still more its lesser pronouncements, since they must first be expressed in a particular historical moment, inevitably bear the linguistic and philosophical marks either of that moment, or, if a deliberate choice is made to do otherwise, of a previous age. They cannot speak in the language of the future.

What is quite beyond doubt about the history of the Church, is that all her pronouncements on the priesthood, and on the place of women in society and in the Church, up to and perhaps including the present moment, have been made in a time when the nature and role of woman was misunderstood and undervalued. Another way to put this is to say that whenever in the past the Church has pronounced on 'woman', its concept of womanhood has borne little relation to the facts. Through no fault of its own, but merely through sharing the biological, psychological and other misconceptions of the past, it has not actually been talking about woman. At a time when the female child was thought to be the result of some unfavourable circumstance at the moment of its conception, such as

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[3] *Mysterium Ecclesiae:* see *The Tablet* for 14 July 1973.

the prevalence of a moist south wind, it was difficult for woman to be seen as much more than a walking, talking seedbed used by man (according to God's plan) in his work of multiplying and filling the earth in order to have dominion over it. How much of the Church's past teaching on sexual ethics, some of it not so long past, stemmed from a kind of 'right use of creatures' attitude to man's relationship to his 'helpmate in procreation'?

In these ways, a complex of arguments, all of which lean heavily on the socio-cultural attitudes of the times when they were framed, is presented as dispassionately and purely theological. Such a case takes account neither of the tension between greek and jewish thought-patterns in the writings and ecclesial organization of the early Church, nor of the primitive aristotelian biology holding sway in Aquinas's discussions of the complementarity of man and woman. More importantly, it gives no consideration to the effect on the choice and development of theological symbols of an unbroken two thousand years of male theologians reflecting on a Church run by and largely for men. Was it not Aquinas himself who said that the privileged position of a nun before God had to do with her having been granted 'a certain approximation to manly dignity'?

At the present time, this general outlook issues in a practical attitude perhaps best labelled 'complementarism': that is, certain functions and offices are best performed by men, and certain others by women; and it just happens (for theological reasons like those touched on above) that the role of the priest is best filled by a man. Of course, no one wants to deny that men and women are complementary rather than directly competitive. The question is whether they achieve the best complementarity by each exclusively fulfilling certain roles in community or Church, or by each bringing their specifically male or female gifts to whatever role their inclinations and talents fit them for. Clearly, biological make-up assigns certain roles to men and others to women; but how much does emotional and/or psychological make-up similarly determine their respective possibilities? There are two presuppositions in the complementarist position which call for scrutiny. First, the assumption that men fill the role of priest best is often reached without asking to what extent the concept of the priesthood is determined by the fact that only men have exercised the office. Secondly, the question, who can best fulfil the role?, is posed and answered on the basis of a statistical and symbolic concept of man and woman, one which is

in part an average, in part an ideal. Unfortunately, the 'average' man or woman of statistical analysis is a purely artificial construct, whilst male and female symbols are theoretical amalgams of qualities derived from the total human experience about differences in men and women of temperament and behaviour. No man or woman is average, except insofar as they accidentally fall near the mean on the graph of behaviour; nor is any man or woman archetypically Man or Woman. We are all mixtures of male and female qualities; and each of our individual personalities is a unique mixture. Biological role apart, no one can point to a quality or characteristic which is exclusively the possession of men or women.

Man and Woman are powerful symbols: symbols for the most part created from reflections on the biological roles and emotional characteristics of the two sexes. Thus Man is father, hunter, provider, organizer; Woman is mother, home, care. Man is aggressive, active, creative, powerful; while Woman is dependent, passive, preservative and yielding. Such breakdowns of the constituent elements of symbols are inevitably banal; but their power remains in the terms Man and Woman or Mother and Father. They have universal human significance. The difficulty lies in fitting actual flesh and blood men and women into their symbolic categories. It is, in fact, impossible, because symbols are not meant for that purpose; they are themselves abstractions from the characteristics of actual men and women. Jung's *animus* and *anima* are not two types of human beings; they are two ways of being human, two emphases in which we all share, whatever our sexual identity. Thus, the Man and Woman symbols have relevance in the lives of both men and women. If, then, these symbols are extrapolations from the qualities of existent human beings, and if they each say something meaningful about the nature of each man and woman, what happens when we begin to apply male and female characteristics and language to God?

It would seem that this masculine language predicated of God depends on a symbolism which is no more than an imperfect reflection of human activity. Can such talking about God be turned back upon the humans who created the limitations of the system in the first place? Is it right that individual men and women should be at the mercy of a concept of the Godhead whose limitations are a product of their own imperfect understandings? If we have a male God only because we have always talked about God as man, why should the male symbolism we now find in God be used as an argument for the retention of an exclusively male priesthood? We could, in fact,

remake our image of God as female by taking different aspects of the effect of God in the world. In doing this, we should no more be saying that he is female than we were saying that he is male. We would be simply showing that 'male' and 'female' are ways of making God in our own image. Christ certainly taught us to pray to our Father in heaven; and it may be that this is emotionally and symbolically the most satisfactory way in which to think of God. But there is nothing in the *nature* of God that is male or female. Rather, all masculinity and all femininity have their origin in him.

Is there, then, something inherently masculine in the nature of the priesthood to prevent women assuming that role in the christian assembly? The crux of this issue lies in defining more precisely what is meant when we say that the ordained priest represents Christ. Taken out of the context of the entire priestly office and restricted to the preformance of sacramental ritual, the term 'Christ's representative' can be misleading. In one sense, the priest is not the representative of Christ at all, but of the people of God before God, and hence of an entity (the Church) traditionally represented in feminine language and symbolism.

At its crudest, the 'representation' argument simply says that as Christ came on earth as a man, and as the priest is the representative of Christ, so the priest must be a man. But Christ died for mankind (not men) and rose to save mankind; in the saving act of his death and resurrection he brought all human perfection, male and female, into the new life in him. In him, for that very reason, 'there is neither male not female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'. So 'male and female in Christ' indicates neither rank before God nor rank in christian society. Redeemed humanity is all one, in the sense of being equal before the Lord. Christ's maleness is in no way important to the saving nature of his life and death. He saves humanity in his humanness, not in his maleness; and he is a man because he had to be something. In his divinity, the saving act transcends sexuality as the divine transcends the human.

For the priest, as representative of Christ, this picture has certain implications. In the first place it means that he is not a representative of Jesus of Nazareth in any fundamentally literal sense. If he were, then he would be chosen for his likeness to Jesus; and men aged about thirty with jewish features and swarthy skins would be the only people admitted to the clerical ranks (and that probably only for a three-year ministry). Rather, it is in his saving theological significance that Christ is represented by the priest; and it is pre-

cisely in this context that his humanity, and not his sex, is relevant. It would seem to follow that to represent Christ in a theologically significant act and not in a dramatic context, it is essential for the representative to be human, but it is confusing to insist that being male or female is either a help or a hindrance.

The same could be said of another favourite 'representation' argument, one which draws on the familiar theological image of the bridegroom (Christ) and the bride (the Church). In the relation between the priest and the laity, the priest exercises the function of bridegroom in representing Christ, and only a man can be a bridegroom. So, runs the argument, only a man can be a priest. There are two questions we need to ask about this: in what sense, metaphorical or literal, is Christ the bridegroom of the Church, and in what sense, if any, is this relationship carried over to that of the ordained priesthood?

The marriage image is certainly not the ideal description of the relationship between Christ and the Church. Christ is primarily present in the world in the Church, and the Church is us: we are 'other Christs', we are Christ in the world. This is part of the priestly nature of the whole people of God, that we mediate Christ to the world. While we are Christs, this ministerial priesthood which is composed of 'representatives of Christ' is also composed of individuals who, like ourselves, are members of the Church. That is, they are members of the bride, the Church, which is feminine, at the same time as they are Christ, masculine, the bridegroom. But they cannot be said to be both bride and groom, both masculine and feminine, out of their very nature. We can only overcome this situation if we give something other than ontological significance to this or any other theological image. We may say, perhaps, that there are two ways of looking at an individual member of the ministerial priesthood; he is a priest, in that he has certain functions related in a special way to the person of Christ; but he is also a member of the Church, in which he is a christian like ourselves. At one and the same time he acts under both masculine and feminine symbols, and neither symbolic role is affected or falsified by his sex. (This is, incidentally, exactly what we would expect from our examination of the relationship between symbols and actual living human beings.) In other words, if a man can be a member of the Church, symbolically feminine, then a woman can be a member of the ministerial priesthood, symbolically masculine.

So far we have examined the complementarist position, and on

its own terms we have shown that women could equally well represent Christ. It remains to offer a glimpse of a way in which the woman may be more suited than the man to be a priest. Christ's saving act for mankind is accomplished by the grace of God; and through this grace new life is brought to the followers of Christ, the Church. The Church is, then, sustained by the grace of God flowing through the head of the Church, which is Christ. Christ is at once the source and the mediator of the life of the Church. In co-operation with the Father, the Church is born. Christ comes to bring new life to the world, but the new life he brings is not something which comes from him alone. It comes from him and from the Father. He is then the agent of handing on life which, in his humanity, he has received from another (God), and which, in his divinity, he has possessed from all eternity. He is the cooperator who is involved in the creation of new life for the Church; he is the source and the carrier of the life of grace. He is, in other words, more properly represented by a feminine symbol. Hence, the suitability of women for the priesthood, understood as mediation and cooperation in the life of grace, is far clearer than it is for men. If we are going to allow men to be priests and yet exercise functions which are symbolically feminine, then it is no argument against ordaining women to say that they would have to perform certain symbolically masculine acts.

There is clearly room for disagreement in this kind of argumentation; but it undoubtedly takes the discussion on the explicitly theological level demanded by those opposing the ordination of women. In so doing, it is simultaneously a step in the necessary theologization of the 'liberationist' case. Both sides of the discussion are perhaps being nudged a little closer to one another. The great temptation is roundly to assert that it is no theological problem at all, but merely a matter of identifying and eliminating socio-cultural prejudice. This begs the central question of the nature of the relation between theological truth and its manifestation in a particular culture. Perhaps it is truer to say that the principal theological problem to be solved is whether the ordination of women is a theological issue at all. There is no theological value in the statement that Jesus chose only men to be his apostles; but an examination of *why* he may have done so could conceivably turn up some theological point. Ultimately, I feel, a string of whys will lead us back to the inescapable conclusion that Jesus shared the unspoken assumptions of his time. Translating that feeling into a moral certitude would be a very valuable theological investigation.