

The Ordination of Women: The Witness of Sacred Tradition

Introduction

Does Sacred Tradition support or admit the possibility of the ordination of women to the Christian priestly ministry? To deal with this question, we must first consider the nature of Christian tradition.

The Nature of Tradition

The term is derived from the Latin *traditio* – meaning the action of handing over, “to trade”; the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction. (Webster)

The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* describes it thus:

In the early Christian Fathers, tradition (*traditio*) means the revelation made by God and delivered by Him to His faithful people through the mouth of His prophets and apostles. It does not mean something ‘handed down’ but something **‘handed over.’** Similarly in the New Testament the word, or its corresponding verb, is applied equally to be betrayal [handing over] of Christ by Judas to the Jews, and to the delivery [handing down] of Christian teaching by St. Paul to his converts. The tradition was at first called ‘apostolic’, because [it was] delivered by the apostles to the Churches which they founded, and later also ‘ecclesiastic’, because [it was] delivered again in each generation by the Church’s teachers to their people. Its substance was held to consist of the central facts and beliefs crystallized in the creeds of the great orthodox bishoprics. **From the beginning of the third century, the tradition was something expressly identified with the Gospel record contained in Scripture.”** The occasional references in early Christian literature to an ‘unwritten tradition’ left by the apostles appear to relate not to any body of information independent from Scripture, but to the **evidence of primitive Christian institutions and customs which confirms Scriptural teaching.** In a more modern sense, tradition means the continuous stream of explanation and **elucidation of the primitive faith,** illustrating the way in which Christianity has been presented and understood in past ages. It is the accumulated wisdom of the past. Sometimes, again, it means simply customs and ideas which have grown up imperceptibly and been accepted more or less uncritically. All tradition in these modern senses needs to have its true value proved by the double test - (1) whether it is in accordance with the principles embodied in divine revelation, and (2) whether it can be justified by the right reason.

Tradition in Scripture

Francis J. Hall's *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2, says the following:

The New Testament is clear in regard to the function and duty of the Church to **transmit that, and only that, which has been revealed**. The Spirit's guidance is to bring such things to remembrance (John 14:26); Christ's ministers are stewards, not creators of divine mysteries (I Cor. 4:1-2; 15:3); Christians are to hold fast the traditions (2 Thes. 2:15; 3:6); the church is the pillar and ground, not the inventor (I Tim. 3:15); what is committed to our trust must be kept (I Tim. 6:20) even in the form of sound words (II Tim. 1:13-14, 3:14); what had been seen and heard was taught by the apostles (Heb. 2:3; I John 1:1-3); those who lack this doctrine are to be shunned (II John 10); the faith once for all delivered is to be contended for (Jude 3). On the other hand, the accretions of man made traditions is possible, and such "traditions" are condemned (cf. Matt. 12:1-8; 15:2-20; Mark 7:3-9; Luke 6:1-11; Col. 2:8; I Tim 1-4; 4-7; I Peter 1:18).

The patristic recognition of the importance and authority of tradition is emphatic. Clement of Rome, Epistle to the Corinthians 13:1, condemns innovation upon tradition. The *Didache*, chapter 4, urges "to keep what thou hast received, neither adding to it nor taking from it." Teachers who do otherwise are not to be received (chapter 11). Ignatius, to the Magnesians, chapter 13, makes "the ordinances of the Lord and of the apostles" paramount. Irenaeus identifies heresies by their modernness (*Against Heresies* III, 4:3); and contrasts their waywardness to the sure and consentient traditions of the Church (V, 20:1), etc. [Francis J. Hall, *Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. II, **Authority**, pp. 118-119.]

From the above it can be said that **ecclesiastical tradition** (Sacred Tradition) is something well known by the bishops and other teaching authorities, something that is necessary to the life of the Church, and something that is fixed with regard to its essentials.

The Concept of Evolving Tradition

In the 20th century in particular, the idea was advanced in some circles that tradition is evolving, in a parallel manner to Darwin's theory of evolution. In many instances, proponents of an evolving tradition point to John Henry Newman's idea of "development of doctrine." To use this as a basis for an ever-changing, ever-expanding ecclesiastical tradition is to misunderstand the cardinal's premises. Richard John Neuhaus, a contemporary writer, summarized Newman's reflections on the development of doctrine in this way.

"Authentic" development has seven marks:

- 1) It preserves the church's apostolic form.
- 2) It reflects continuity of principles in testing the unknown.
- 3) It demonstrates the power to assimilate what is true,

even in what is posited against it.

- 4) It follows a logical sequence.
- 5) It anticipates future developments.
- 6) It conserves past developments.
- 7) Throughout, it claims and demonstrates the vigor of teaching authority.

St. Vincent of Lerins in the fifth century held that in authentic development of doctrine nothing presents itself in the Church's old age **that was not latent in her youth.** [emphasis mine] Such was the truth discovered by Augustine of Hippo, a truth "ever ancient, ever new." [*First Things*, Number 122, April 2002, pg. 19].

Sacred Tradition and the Ordination of Women

The Commandment of Christ

The sacred ministry, instituted by Christ himself in the calling of the 12 apostles and commissioning them to make him sacramentally present to current and subsequent generations ("on the night before He was betrayed ... Do this in remembrance of me." I Cor. 11:23-25), is intended to **act in the person of Christ** ("He who hears you hears me" Lk. 10:16 ... "And he who sees me sees him who sent me" Jn. 12:45 ... "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide ... " Jn. 15:16).

The Apostolic Tradition

The New Testament provides **no exceptions** to the male gender for apostolic ministries. "Now a bishop must be ... the husband of one wife ... " (1 Tim. 3:2); "... and appoint elders in every town as I directed you, if any man is blameless, the husband of one wife ... " (Titus 1:5-6). The apostolic ministry is conferred upon by men the laying on of hands (Acts 8:17; 9:17; 13:3; I Tim. 4:14; II Tim. 1:6). There are no exceptions to the recipient being male. It can be said that a male ministry, commissioned by Christ himself, is integral to the New Testament tradition. This is what was handed on to subsequent generations.

Later Sacred Tradition

Sacred tradition has unfailingly interpreted this to mean that the sacramental minister must therefore correspond to the maleness of Christ and provide absolute clarity as to his status as well as to fulfill the image of the bridegroom in relation to the Church as a bride described in Ephesians 5.

Heretical Movements

In the patristic period some heretics, notably Montanists, experimented with priestesses. They were soundly condemned by those who maintained Catholic faith and order. Tertullian even reiterated the Pauline prohibitions against women speaking and teaching in church. Tertullian also adds, "She is not allowed to teach, to baptize, to sacrifice or presume to the rank

of male office, not to mention the priestly office” (Hauke, *Women in the Priesthood*, pg. 407). Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, fourth century, anchors the exclusion of women from the priesthood in the will of Jesus, which is the divine plan of salvation (Hauke, pg. 418).

Both St. Augustine of Hippo and St. John Damascene expressly categorize female priesthood as heresy. (Hauke, pg. 418). Hauke further states, “Whenever the Church Fathers have occasion to speak, directly or indirectly about “women in the priesthood,” they reject it clearly and unanimously” (pg. 425). Moving to the scholastic period, both Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure reject it. Duns Scotus, the subtle doctor, makes this astonishing statement: “I do not believe namely, that any office useful for salvation has been withheld from any person through institution by the Church or prescription of the Apostles, and much less still from an entire sex. If, then, the apostles or the Church cannot justly withhold from a person any office useful for salvation unless Christ as their head, has so determined, and much less still from the entire female sex, therefore Christ alone first prescribed this, **He who instituted the sacrament**” (Hauke, pg. 455, emphasis mine). The reformers, Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, though they had no use for the Mass and therefore no use for an apostolic priesthood as it was commonly understood, upheld the tradition of a male ministry.

Anglicans and Sacred Tradition

Do we as Anglicans have an obligation to uphold this tradition? **First a male priesthood knows no exception for two millennia.** It is rooted in the action of Christ himself. Even after separating from the See of Peter, the constant claim of Anglicans is that ours is not a new church, but a part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church as stated in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds. At the Reformation, Anglicans appealed to Sacred Tradition, particularly the Fathers and the first four ecumenical councils, in order to strip away accretions and clarify authentic Catholic faith and practice. Anglican reformers were not seeking novelties; in fact, just the opposite! They sought to establish what they believed to be authentic tradition rooted in Holy Scripture.

In the Episcopal Church, the Preface to the Book of Common Prayer (1789) states, “It will also appear that this church is far from intending to depart from the Church of England in any essential point of doctrine, discipline, or worship; or further than local circumstances require.” In the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, the candidate to be consecrated bishop is asked, “Are you ready, with all faithful diligence to **banish and drive away from the church all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God’s Word**; and both privately and openly to call upon and encourage others to do the same?” The candidate for priesthood is asked a similar question.

Finally, the Catechism of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer describes sacraments to be “given by Christ as **sure and certain means** by which we receive that grace.”

Q: What are the Sacraments?

A: The sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as **sure and certain means** by which we receive that grace. (BCP, pg. 857)

The outward sign consists of “*matter*” and “*form*.” It is the means whereby grace (an unmerited divine gift of favor) is imparted. The *matter* consists of the physical actions and materials which are required, and the *form* of the prescribed words that signify the intention of the sacrament. Thus the pouring of water (*matter*) over the recipient accompanied by the *form* “I baptize you in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost” recited by the minister with the right intention constitutes the valid conferral of the sacrament of baptism. The minister must not only be officially competent but must **intend** to do what the church intends and has always intended in the sacrament. To substitute canola oil for water nullifies the sacrament. To change the *form* from the Name to a description (e.g., creator, redeemer, sanctifier) nullifies the sacrament.

In the celebration of the sacraments, it is Christ who celebrates them using the appropriate human ministers, and in this celebration the Church confesses the faith received from the apostles (“the faith once delivered to the saints,” Jude 3). Because “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8), no sacramental rite may be altered or changed or manipulated at the will of the community or the minister. To change the sacrament is to nullify its efficacy. The attempt to ordain women to the episcopate and presbyterate is currently being used as some justification for so-called same-sex marriages. If the recipients of holy orders can be arbitrarily changed from men to women, why cannot a man and man or woman and woman be the recipients of matrimonial grace? If one sacrament can be changed, they can all be changed and thus destroy forever the theology of a **sure** and **certain sign** given by Christ.

The Authority to Institute a Female Priesthood

If Christ established the apostolic ministry, and both scripture and unwavering tradition attest to this, then how can it be changed and by what authority? The current Bishop of Rome, John Paul II, echoed the words of his predecessor Pius XII when he stated that the church has no authority to change that which is given by Christ. **Sacred Tradition will admit no change.** The same must be true in Anglican practice if we profess to believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Altering the essential matter of sacraments and sacramental rites exceeds our sphere of competence and **destroys** those things given by Christ as “sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.”

Tradition speaks with **one** voice. The recipient of Holy Orders must be a baptized male.

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