

REASON AND THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN TO THE PRIESTHOOD AND EPISCOPATE

INTRODUCTION

First impressions can be very powerful, but they can also be quite mistaken. When the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate emerged as a significant issue and serious possibility in the Episcopal Church, USA, the concept was accepted *prima facie* as reasonable by most Episcopalians.

Opponents of the practice of the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate cited its lack of consistency with the thrust of Holy Scripture, its incompatibility with holy tradition and its deleterious effects on ecumenical relations. However, there was a general willingness, even by those who doubted or disputed its validity, to concede that reason appeared to support the notion. After all, it could be argued, if a woman could be a head of state or hold any number of other leadership positions, why should her gender restrict her from the presbyterate or the episcopate?

Regarding this part of the argument traditionalists could cite only a vague, intuitive unease with the idea. These reservations were dismissed by its proponents as either simply a reflexive resistance to change or as an expression of paternalistic bigotry. It was assumed that the passage of time, the retirement and death of clergy who questioned the validity of women's ordination, and the experience of encountering women successfully acting in priestly and episcopal ministry would eventually sweep aside these objections.

However, now that the Episcopal Church has had 25 years of experience of the practice, a more measured assessment of the relationship between theological reason and women's ordination to the priesthood and episcopate can now be made.

Based on the evidence now available, it is apparent that, surprisingly enough, the uncertain intuition that caused feelings of discomfort with women's ordination to the priesthood and episcopate deserved to be heeded, researched, and taken far more seriously than they once were.

This conclusion is based upon the nature of theological reason, a comparison of the promises of women's ordination as opposed to the results, the concept of proportionality, and the Christian understanding of human nature.

THE NATURE OF THEOLOGICAL REASON

In the Anglican tradition, theological reason includes not only the cognitive processes but the contributions of experience and intuition as well. This may be seen in the Anglican acceptance of the Vincentian Canon's requirement that a doctrine have universal acceptance by the vast majority of orthodox Christians in order for it to be truly Catholic.

REASON AND THE NATURE OF HOLY ORDERS

Introduction: Both the Anglican Communion in general, and the Episcopal Church in particular, have repeatedly made it clear in their official pronouncements that they intend to be part of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ. They have also expressed countless times that they intend to continue the three-fold Catholic ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons through the apostolic succession. Therefore we must ask, Is the ordination of women to the episcopate and presbyterate consistent with the oneness, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity of the Church?

Oneness, catholicity and apostolicity: It is extremely unlikely that the faithful throughout the world would accept the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ as valid. Whatever the practice is, it cannot reasonably be called catholic or apostolic, and it imperils the oneness of the Catholic Church.

Holiness: The question of whether the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate has enhanced the holiness of the Church depends for its answer upon whether one regards the notable changes in the moral and ethical standards of the Episcopal Church since 1976 as promoting the holiness of either individuals or of the Christian community. The Diocese of Fort Worth maintains that these changes have demonstrably decreased the holiness of both.

Conclusion: In brief, the practice of ordaining women to the priesthood and episcopate is contrary to the very nature of the Church, its oneness, holiness and catholicity. It cannot be regarded as a sacramental rite of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

HUMAN NATURE

The Christian conception of human nature holds that human beings are inherently either male or female. There is no asexual human nature. Maleness and femaleness are both required for the full expression of human nature. This bi-fold sexual nature of human beings is not a choice; it is a part of the order of creation. Since sexual differentiation is fundamental to human nature, it is far different from and more significant than "accidentals" such as race, appearance, skill, talent, temperament, etc.

Consequently, an ontological sexual identity as male or female is an integral part of the dignity of every human being that Episcopalians vow to respect in the Baptismal Covenant (BCP, pg. 305). Maleness and femaleness each has a dignity that cannot be obliterated by falsely suggesting that the two are essentially synonymous in every way except physical attributes. Male and female human beings are not interchangeable but have distinctive gifts that make unique contributions to human life. To pretend otherwise is to diminish the dignity of every human being.

THE PROMISE OF WOMEN'S ORDINATION

When the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate was being championed in the 1970s its proponents maintained that it would:

- enhance the life of women in the Church
- benefit the Church at large by making it more relevant
- make it attractive to modern people

It was asserted that the implementation of women's ordination would prevent erosion of the Church's membership caused by the disaffection of those opposed to a solely male priesthood. It was also held that the role of women would be enhanced by women's ordination, as women would be able to reach their full potential. Furthermore, justice would be served when women were no longer denied their equal civil right to ordination by what was portrayed as a patriarchal Church establishment.

Concomitant to this, the Church at large, having become a more just institution, would be viewed by society as more relevant to the prevailing culture of egalitarianism. It was maintained that any loss of membership from disaffected conservatives would be more than offset by gains among the younger (and, it was presumed, more liberal) generations.

Regrettably, on closer examination, each of these assertions has proven to be baseless or utterly false.

EQUALITY

As has been shown elsewhere in the essay, it is disingenuous to suggest that when St. Paul declared the equality of all Christians in relation to salvation through Holy Baptism in his epistle to the Galatians that he meant to suggest that baptism obliterated any significant differences between men and women. St. Paul was reasonable enough to know that a baptized man still could not bear children. Sacramental grace, like all grace, does not change nature (in this case, human nature) but transforms it.

The recognition of genuine differences does not necessarily equate to positions of either inferiority or superiority. Reason and experience have made clear that being born with blue or brown eyes, pale or dark skin, small or large stature, does not make one of greater or lesser value. Such differences may affect how we live and in what ways we contribute to society, but they do not make us better or worse human beings. While both a short person and a tall person may be able to do most of the same things, a short person cannot reasonably expect to play for the NBA and a tall person cannot reasonably expect to serve as a Tunnel Rat in the military. However, both the tall and the short have made countless valuable contributions to human life and are judged by all reasonable people ultimately to be of equal worth.

Likewise, the differences between the sexes are not a matter of equality, since they do not make one sex superior or inferior. In fact, these differences are among the greatest assets of the

human race. To claim that such differences do not exist is not to elevate womankind but to reduce it to something less than it is, to the detriment of all humanity.

The true dignity of women does not rest so much on their similarities with men as it does on their distinctive God-given gifts. For example, a woman, and only a woman, could have been the mother of Jesus Christ, for only females can be mothers. A man is not denied the fulfillment of his human potential because he cannot be a mother. That potential does not exist in the human male in the first place. A coherent, rational argument demonstrating with the sureness and certainty necessary to the validity of the sacraments (Catechism; BCP, 857) that women have the potential to be Christian priests and bishops has yet to be enunciated. Therefore it cannot be shown that an exclusively male priesthood prevents women from reaching their human potential. Ordination is not an issue of justice.

Likewise, it is unreasonable to suggest that the true dignity of the female sex depends upon whether women can be valid Christian priests and bishops or not. Men are not inferior to women because they cannot be mothers or sisters. Women are not inferior to men because they cannot be fathers or Christian priests.

Indeed, historically, religions in which women have been “priests” have accorded women far less status than Judaism and Christianity, faiths that have had no women “priests.” The cultures of the ancient world that competed with early Christianity combined having priestesses with sacred prostitution, the routine exposure of female infants, the practice of aborting girl babies, and easy divorces for men that frequently left women destitute. All of these bespeak a degraded place for women in society, and a near total lack of women's rights.

By contrast, Judaism and Christianity had no female “priests” but a greater regard for women as human beings. Both forbade the exposure of babies, abortion, easy divorces for men and sacred prostitution. History clearly demonstrates that priestly status is not directly related to an equal or elevated status for women.

ORDINATION AND CIVIL RIGHTS

Some regard the question of the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate as a matter of civil rights. This is to misunderstand the nature of civil rights. In fact, ordination is neither a civil matter nor a question of rights.

The sacramental rite of ordination came into existence as the Church's method for perpetuating the sacerdotal functions of Jesus Christ as our great high priest (Hebrews 3:1, 4:14 ff.) and bishop of our souls (I Peter 2:25) until the Second Coming. Consequently, ordination is an altogether ecclesiastical (church) matter and cannot be regarded as a civil one in a secular state such as the United States.

In addition, it cannot be a question of rights, since ordination is always a gift (II Timothy 1:6; I Tim 4:14) and therefore never a right. Neither graduation from seminary, long service to the Church, nor anything else confers a right to be ordained. A person can prepare to receive a gift, but no one has a right to demand one.

ORDINATION AND EXPERIENCE

Since 1976 Episcopalians have had three kinds of experience of women who are functioning as priests: individual experience, corporate experience and societal experience.

INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE

While some women who have functioned in the Episcopal Church as priests have been very poor examples, it must be acknowledged that others have made a very favorable impression as individuals. The teaching, preaching, administrative skills and pastoral care demonstrated by such women have been cited as examples of women excelling in priestly ministry and as experimental validation of women's ordination to the priesthood and episcopate. However, to do so is to misunderstand the nature of the Christian priesthood and episcopate. Teaching, preaching, administration and pastoral care are all important ministries, but they are not distinctively priestly or episcopal functions.

Because ordination is a sacrament, it transcends these ministries, both individually and collectively. By including women as candidates for the priesthood and the episcopate, the sacrament has been changed (cf. "The Witness of Sacred Tradition," preceding). However, catholic Christians hold that the sacraments were instituted by Christ. Thus we come to what appears to be a logical contradiction: *If a human being presumes to alter a sacrament given by God, does the sacrament remain valid?* If we are not certain about this point, then we cannot be certain that a woman ("ordained" under this altered sacrament) who performs the distinctively priestly acts of blessing, consecrating and absolving in the name of the Church is indeed confecting valid sacraments, sacramental rites and sacramentals. Whatever warm feelings may be generated in the hearts of those who behold a woman performing these acts, it has not yet been proved that women are sacramentally enabled to confect valid sacraments, sacramental rites and sacramentals. On the contrary, for the very reason that the sacerdotal function performed by women is of dubious validity in the minds of many, the women performing these acts not only introduce an element of doubt on the occasion, but they have reduced, rather than enhanced, the authority of the priesthood and episcopate.

In addition to the experience of the recipients of these ministrations there is also the experience of the women themselves to be considered. If the women who are functioning in the roles of priest and bishop are indeed not valid Christian priests and bishops, as remains to be conclusively proven, then they are living a lie. As we do not know with certainty that these women are valid priests and bishops, likewise we cannot calculate the harm they are doing their own psychological and spiritual health if they are not. It hardly seems to be a loving or pastoral act by the Church, which is called to be the pillar and bulwark of truth (I Tim. 3:13), to deceive a woman by an ordination ceremony of questionable validity, into living a life of dubious integrity at best and falsehood at worst. The Church has a pastoral responsibility to its female members not to put them in this dreadful dilemma, even if they seek to be placed there.

CORPORATE EXPERIENCE

Women's ordination to the priesthood and episcopate has been an ecumenical disaster. It has created a major stumbling block to inter-communion with the Roman Catholic Church and had a devastating effect on our relationship with the Eastern Orthodox. These communions show absolutely no sign of following our "lead" or accepting women as valid Catholic priests and bishops now or ever.

Has the practice of ordaining women to the priesthood and episcopate enhanced the priesthood and episcopate? The only way to judge this is to look at the most significant development in regard to the priesthood and episcopate since the inception of women's ordination.

Currently there is such a degree of confusion over the nature of the catholic priesthood that in our recent Concordat with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America the Episcopal Church appears to have agreed that catholic priest in the apostolic succession and protestant pastor outside of it are equivalent terms, both able to confect a valid Eucharist. Otherwise, the inter-communion agreed upon is meaningless, except as a gesture of goodwill. To reduce the sacrament of eternal life to such a status cannot be regarded as an enhancement.

MEMBERSHIP

Since adopting the practice in 1976 there has been no flooding of Episcopal churches by disaffected women, no growth among teens and young adults. Instead, we experienced the schisms from the Episcopal Church of the various Continuing Anglican Churches, a division in the Body of Christ, against the express wishes of Jesus Christ, our the great high priest. In 1975 the membership of the Episcopal Church was officially recorded at 3,039,136. In the year 2,000 membership had shrunk to 2,333,624, a 22.88% decline. The last 10 years of this period was touted as a Decade of Evangelism in which ECUSA concentrated on numerical growth.

In the United States, during the same period, the Roman Catholic Church, with its exclusively male priesthood, has been growing dramatically. Evangelical denominations have been increasing at such a rate that a book entitled *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* was produced.

Overseas, the Nigerian Anglican Church, which does not attempt to ordain women as priests and bishops, has tripled during the Decade of Evangelism. Contrariwise, there has been a decline in all western Anglican provinces where it has been adopted.

Most organizations, after looking at these statistics, would have reconsidered the direction in which they were headed long before now.

SOCIETAL EXPERIENCE

It is difficult to judge whether the Episcopal Church is now accounted more relevant than it was before 1976. Societal perceptions often lag behind events in the Church, and women's ordination cannot reasonably be seen as the sole factor or issue which determines the view of society at large toward the Episcopal Church.

However, it is evident that whatever additional relevance women's ordination to the priesthood and episcopate may have with some people, it clearly has not been sufficiently significant to motivate large numbers to join the Episcopal Church. There is also good reason to think that others may in fact regard the ECUSA as less relevant, since it appears to be unable to remain faithful under pressure to its own principles. Its voice has been gradually reduced to that of an increasingly discredited and irrelevant, although highly vocal, minority within American society.

Finally, women's ordination may well have had a deleterious effect on society itself, adding to the current confusion over gender roles and the myth of the interchangeability of the sexes rather than leading society to a more balanced view.

The promises of numerical growth and societal relevance by “ordaining” women to the priesthood and episcopate has proven not only illusory but quite the reverse has been the effect.

PROPORTIONALITY

Reason dictates that there be some proportion between the price paid for a given thing and the value of that entity. The Episcopal Church has paid an enormous price for the experiment of attempting to ordain women to the priesthood and episcopate. It is reasonable to expect that there be some proportionate gain in membership, in depth of faith and morals or the like, to make up for these losses.

Sadly, quite the opposite has been the case. Each has plummeted in the 25 years since the practice of ordaining women to the priesthood and episcopate was implemented. Bishops have gone on record repudiating key articles of the creeds, and General Convention has been asked to endorse flagrant immorality, a situation that was unimaginable in 1976. The degree to which women who have been ordained to the priesthood and episcopate have personally contributed to this precipitous decline cannot be gauged with any accuracy. While many have been vocal supporters of the most flagrant abuses of the radical agenda, others have bravely attempted to uphold Christian faith and morals.

However, the overall effect remains that the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate has not lived up to its promises. It has utterly failed to demonstrate that it was worth the exorbitant price paid for it. Clearly, women's ordination to the priesthood and episcopate can no longer be regarded as reasonable.

REASON AND THE FUTURE

Is it reasonable to expect a reversal of women's ordination to the priesthood and episcopate? Certainly it is not immediately likely, nor can it be expected in the foreseeable future. The idea is too firmly entrenched in the minds of those who control the Episcopal Church. Yet it is not hopeless to think that the time may come when reason will prevail over prejudice.

However, history indicates otherwise. Aryanism once appeared to be triumphant in theology. For centuries slavery and the divine right of kings were similarly regarded as "givens." Likewise fascism, National Socialism and Soviet communism were at one time considered inevitable, irresistible forces in the modern world. A merciful God has seen to it that each of them has been consigned to history's dustbin.

It is reasonable then to hope that women's ordination may likewise come to be viewed as an experiment that failed, a concept that seemed rational enough at first, but eventually was recognized by more thoughtful generations as hollow and counter-productive.

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