

A PASTORAL - THEOLOGICAL
REFLECTION
ON
POPE JOHN PAUL II's
APOSTOLIC LETTER CONCERNING
ORDINATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD

Bishop P J Cullinane Feast of St John Vianney, 1994

On 22 May 1994, Pope John Paul II issued a declaration reaffirming the Catholic tradition of reserving ordination to men. The Pope's intention was to prevent false hopes and expectations, and for this reason he wanted to put the matter beyond all doubt.

Such an exercise of the Pope's authority calls for a response that corresponds to his role as the successor of St Peter. This involves faith, and faith's search for understanding. It says "yes, but why?" Or, like Mary at the Incarnation, some might ask for clarification before they say "yes": "but how can this happen, since.....(God has made both sexes equal)?"

In this letter I invite you to explore these questions with me. I also realise and accept that some are feeling too hurt and angry to make this journey yet.

Hurt and Anger

There was a time when the Church's teaching that only men could be ordained was simply taken for granted, and did not involve a conscious sense of hurt or loss. But in our time that has changed. Accordingly, we must expect and accept the anger and grief which Pope John Paul's reaffirmation of this teaching will cause among some.

With St Paul, we will grieve with those who grieve (cf Rom. 12:7). Those who grieve together can also believe together. In practice this means belonging to that pilgrim people which is sure of its Goal and of its Way (John 14:6), even while there is much else it does not understand.

People had been right to ask whether this practice of the Church might have been based on merely cultural, and therefore changeable, factors. The Pope's teaching is that there are deeper reasons, which relate to the very nature of the Church. Anyone who finds the reasons difficult to understand is not alone. Theologians are still exploring them. The Church has often been sure of its faith before it was sure of its reasons.

Still Searching?

Earlier catechisms created an impression that everything the Church knows can be fairly fully expressed. That is not so; it never was, and never will be. Even lovers cannot adequately put into words the whole of what their relationship means to them. This does not make them less sure. It just means that what they know is greater than what they can explain. Likewise, what the apostles "knew" from their experience of Jesus' life, death and resurrection was immeasurably greater than what could be put into words. Often the Church knows before it can explain.

When eventually the reasons for a Church teaching do emerge, they give only a glimpse of the truth to which they point. Doctrines are a bit like windows. We look through them to see the realities beyond. They give us a sure glimpse of what is there, but the realities to which they point are so much greater than what can be circumscribed within the frame of doctrine.

Not surprisingly, then, our enquiry into why the Church considers it cannot ordain women must have the characteristics of a

journey - faith in search of understanding. Sharing this journey means taking each step together - no short cuts, no side tracks, no running ahead and facing each other from opposite directions. With careful thinking we shall discover that our journey leads not to the end of the road but to the beginning.



An Obstacle on the Path

The debacle over altar girls, the exclusion of women from non-ordained ministries (canon 230), and persistent insensitivity over inclusive language have not exactly paved the way for the Pope's recent declaration. It is hardly surprising that some see it as just another exclusion of women based on gender. Consequently they are inclined to dismiss it, just as they have felt entitled to repudiate the other exclusions.

This situation is itself a serious pastoral difficulty for bishops who can see what is happening, and who accept their responsibility to deal with the causes of scandal and disaffection. We must take very seriously the pain experienced by Catholic women who love the Church and feel partly disowned by it.

But there is also a challenge here for us all: the journey in search of understanding is still *our* journey and *our* responsibility. We can choose not to take scandal even where scandal is given. The key to not being hindered is to deal with each issue according to its own meaning, rather than to lump them all together. (To look *at* all the windows affects us one way; to look *through* each window out on to the scene proper to it gives us a very different perspective.) In this letter our focus is on the Church's ordination practice.

Dispositions for the Journey

We will not discover what God might have *chosen to do* if we have already set limits on what God *can do*.

God is perfectly capable of giving roles to women and men that are different without this implying any inequality. In fact, God has already done this in a most fundamental way just by making us male and female. At the very heart of creation God has created

profound difference within absolute equality. The on-going work of creation depends on it.

Is there really any reason why God could not choose to build difference into the work of *salvation*, just as God has chosen to do in the order of *creation*? We need to answer that question before our journey can really begin.

There is one thing we can be calmly and unmistakably certain about before we start the journey: if the Church's practice of restricting ordination to men really comes to us from Christ, then the reason cannot possibly be to demean or diminish women's part in the work of salvation.

More than that: if it comes from Christ, then it belongs with everything else that comes to us from Christ, and shares in the dignity and beauty to be found in all that is part of God's plan for our salvation.

Once we have deeply identified with that fundamental premise, we become free to ask "why?" without fear of where our journey might take us.



Looking in the Right Place

Ordained ministry ultimately comes to us from Christ. But if we would look for the link between Christ's will and the Church's ordination practice we need to avoid false historical assumptions.

Jesus did not "ordain" anyone, nor did he institute ordination as we know it. Priestly ministry as we know it did not fully emerge until after the apostolic era.

Nor can we expect the scriptures to say everything we need to know. As God's word, they are normative for the Church's faith, but they are not faith's total expression. Our faith finds new expression as new questions arise. Sometimes we need to ask questions about what Christians of an earlier time simply "knew" and didn't have occasion to analyse or define.

Any link, therefore, between the Church's ordination practice and the will of Christ should not be based on wrong assumptions concerning the scriptures or history. If there is a link, it would have to belong instead to *the nature of the Church* which Christ founded to continue (i.e. make present) his own work.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church developed its life, mission and sacraments with a sure sense of what the Church existed for. (This is not to say that every development is authentic; that is why the Church has an ongoing task of discerning.)

Asking the Right Questions

Returning to the analogy of the windows: questions about whether a window is in the right place or is the right size may well be appropriate questions. But only if we have first looked to see what the window looks out on.

Similarly, the first question to ask about a teaching of the Church is not whether it is what we were expecting, or wanted, or whether it is "fair". These questions *also* need to be answered, but in their proper turn. The first question is: what does this teaching mean? What is it pointing us to?

Distorted Context

To be honest, much of the discussion about the ordination of women in recent times has hardly touched on the meaning of ordained ministry. The discussion has centred around questions of equality, justice and discrimination.

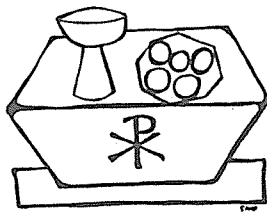
These issues must be addressed. But they cannot be the starting point from which the discussion proceeds because they depend on a prior question: does the Church have authority to ordain women? Only when this question has been answered can we know whether injustice is involved. We need to know what ordination is for before we can talk about *who* can be ordained.

To reverse the order of these questions is to make the Church's position appear unjust and discriminating even before this has been established. This leads not to clarity but to terrible hurt. For the same reasons, the experience of women's ordination in other

churches has naturally been an experience of relief and a sense of justice being done.

Neither the meaning of ordained ministry nor the issues of equality and justice could be properly addressed so long as these distinct questions remained tangled.

In this letter, we shall deal with *both* sets of questions. It seems to me that the Pope's recent declaration serves to untangle these questions, setting them free for new developments that can only come about if they are each addressed in their own right.



Ordained Ministry

Ordained ministry is specifically that ministry which makes present the ministry of Christ as the shepherd and servant of all.

The ordained minister speaks for Christ when he says "this is my body" and "I forgive your sins". Likewise, in the ministry of the word, "it is Christ himself who speaks when the scriptures are proclaimed in the assembly" (Vatican II, Liturgy, n.7).

That is how ordained ministry *re-presents* or makes visible Christ's relationship to his body. To act "in the person of Christ" (Vatican II, Church, n.10) requires authorisation by Christ; that is the meaning of ordination.

But why males only?

In a letter to the NZ Tablet, (29 May 1994) a correspondent pleaded: can someone *please* tell us why the ordination of women is not permitted? To simply reiterate that Jesus chose only men as his apostles, or that this is what the Catholic Church has always done, is not enough to address that question.

In order to make up for what is lacking in explanations which start with what Jesus did, we need to go one step further back and ask why Jesus himself was male.

Undoing Sin

There is nothing in God that made it necessary for the Word to become incarnate in male human nature; (God is not male). Nor is there anything in human nature that required this; (male is not more like God). It was necessary only that our Saviour be truly human.

Because the Incarnation did not have to be in male human nature, it is all the more significant that this is what God freely chose to do. Because the reason is not to be found in the nature of things (in God's nature or ours), the reason must belong to the realm of free choice and history.

Could the reason be something like this?: The purpose of Christ's coming was to undo sin. Perhaps the most universal, pervasive and far-reaching manifestation of sin from the beginning has been the domination of women by men (cf John Paul II, *On the Dignity of Women*, n.10). It is a sin which goes to the heart of creation, distorting the very relationships that were intended to image the life and love of the divine persons. Consequently, Christ's mission to reverse sin would be *highlighted* by his being a male in the service of all.

Obviously, our redemption is not due to Jesus' being male. It was through his faithfulness to "the Father" that he overcame sin, and Calvary was the ultimate expression of his faithfulness. God had chosen, however, that the One who was to carry out that mission was to be a male member of our race. Given the history of sin, manifested so much in the domination of women by men, God's choice was surely a *sign* of what God was doing in Christ. Something of God's plan for restoring right relationships and undoing sin was *revealed* by his being a male in this role.

Making present

In the Incarnation, God's plan for our salvation and the One sent to save us were revealed and made present. This "making known to us the mystery of God's purpose" (Eph. 1:9) was the original "sacrament". In the Church, the same salvation and the same saviour continue to be revealed and made present. This is "how the mystery is to be dispensed", (Eph. 3:3-5, 8¹¹; Col. 1:25-27). The Church continues the "sacrament".

A sacrament signifies what is actually happening, and makes happen (makes present) what it signifies. This is the work of the Holy Spirit; (cf Rom. 8:9-11).

In the celebration of Eucharist, the work of our redemption is sacramentally *re-present*-ed. It is Jesus himself, now risen, who is present; and his life, death and resurrection are present as part of who he now is.

Ordained ministry exists for the purpose of this eucharistic *re-present*-ing of Jesus and his life, death and resurrection. If the celebration of eucharist merely recalled or re-enacted Christ's death-resurrection, then the gender of the person acting the role of Christ would not matter. But in the Catholic Tradition it is much more than merely recalling; it is *making present* the original reality.

The One who is present in this way is forever the same person who lived, died and rose for us - Jesus of Nazareth. His personal identity includes his maleness. (Sexuality is not some kind of addition to a person's human nature; it is each person's way of possessing human nature, - of being human. In this regard, sexuality is different from merely contingent aspects of one's historic life.) We are dealing here with the real presence of the historic person, Jesus of Nazareth.

If Christ's male identity was intended to be a sign of his mission of reversing the disorder of sin, and if this sign was intended to live on in the Church's celebration of his life, death and resurrection, then it at least makes sense that those who are ordained to act "in the person of Christ" for the purpose of continuing this sign are themselves male. This is not just about *re-present*-ing Christ, which all Christians do as the body of Christ (and that is the greater vocation); this is about *re-present*-ing *the role assigned to the man Jesus of Nazareth*.

This is one of the specific ways Christ is *re-present*-ed in the celebration of Eucharist, where he is differently present in the consecrated species, in the word, and in the community, (cf Second Vatican Council, Liturgy, n.7).

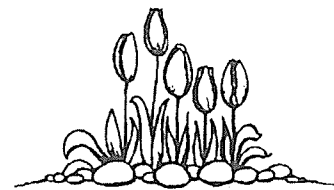
Sign Language

Just as there was no intrinsic reason why the Incarnation could not have been in female human nature, likewise there was no intrinsic reason why women could not have been called to perform ordained ministry. We are in the realm of signs - over and above what would have been sufficient, viz. human nature.

In the plan God chose for our salvation, male identity was given to the One who "emptied himself" and "gave himself up for us". In the revelation of this plan, female imagery ("bride") is used to identify those for whom he gave himself up (cf Eph. 5:28-33, Rev. 21:2, 9; 22:17.) Great is the dignity of those for whom One of so great dignity "emptied himself" and "gave himself up". Sign language is very much part of God's language (deeds) in the undoing of sin.

The Church exists to make present, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the very same realities revealed in God's plan. That is why it must "speak the same language" that God spoke in Christ; continue the same signs.

We are in the realm of signs, or more correctly, symbols. Symbols serve to suggest *aspects* of meaning, and so they do not need to conform to strict logic; "bride" can stand for all the redeemed, men as well as women; one person can stand for many, and so on. Such symbols are based on historical choices, not on inner necessity or exact likeness, and so they are not necessarily reversible; the role given to one gender - in the realm of symbolic language - is not necessarily given to the other.



Glancing back on our journey so far

The starting point was not the issue for justice and equality; these are proper concerns, but they do not reveal what God has actually done in history.

Nor did we start with the claim that Christ chose only men for ordained ministry, because that claim leaves many questions unanswered and so it fails to convince.

We started with why Jesus himself was male. This took us to the actual history of sin and redemption. As part of that history we came to the sacramental nature of the Church: through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church "makes present" to us the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is what happens above all in the celebration of Eucharist. And in the celebration of Eucharist, the ordained minister makes visible the role of the historic Jesus.

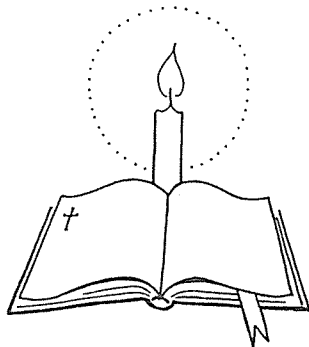
Ordained ministry points back to (by making present) the role of the historic Jesus; the mission of Jesus points back to (by making present) God's eternal plan for the undoing of sin.

From experience to understanding

The telling-power of symbols is related to experience. What they evoke in our awareness depends on how we have experienced them.

So, we pay tribute to all those priests down the centuries and in our own day who have personally re-lived Christ the good shepherd, Christ the servant of all, Christ the faithful one. In a real sense, it is the lived reality of this ministry that carries within it the Church's eventual understanding of what this ministry is meant to be.

On the other hand, unfortunately, when priestly ministry is associated with the exercise of power, then it comes to be perceived in that way. This brings us to the other questions we promised to deal with.



Questions of Equality and Justice

By leading us to reflect more deeply on what ordained ministry is meant to be, the Pope's declaration also helps to identify what ordination is not intended for. Historically, numerous prerogatives have been accorded to ordained ministry that were not really based on the meaning of Holy Orders; insofar as they have

involved unnecessary exclusion and domination, they have even contradicted the meaning of ordained ministry. The whole Church stands to benefit by changing this.

The wrongful exclusion of women from some aspects of participation in the life of the Church has created its own backlash; it has created the impression that ordination is the only real way into authority and decision-making in the Church. As Bishop E. Curtiss of Helena, Mont. has said:

When.....women feel excluded from significant roles in the Church and from responsible ministry; when their gifts and charisms are not appreciated fully or accepted or utilised; when they experience powerlessness in terms of planning and decision-making and evaluation, then it is no wonder that some exert pressure to be numbered among those who manage the resources and make the decisions.

When total control of the Church is perceived or experienced to be in clerical hands alone;..... when the ministry of women seems only to be tolerated or even discouraged when it reaches a certain administrative level, then the issues about the ordination of women to priesthood and episcopacy are raised because they seem the only way to authority and power in the Church. (cf Origins, 21 Dec. 1989, p.476).

As the process of undoing clerical privilege unfolds, it can be expected that women will participate in ways that are currently, but unnecessarily, restricted to men. Pope Paul VI looked into the future when he said:

....It appears evident that women are asked to become part of the living and operative structure of Christianity in a way which is so important that perhaps all its possibilities have not yet been discovered. (Address, 1976).

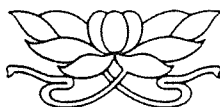
We should not underestimate this development, nor pre-set limits to it. For example, it is not the theology of Holy Orders that requires us to restrict to men the roles of electing Popes or being Nuncios of the Holy See. We mean no disrespect to those who presently serve in these ways. The examples only illustrate the point that some opportunities to participate in significant decisions are currently closed to women not because of Holy Orders, but because of the status accorded to ordained persons in a clerical model of Church.

The simultaneous clarification of what ordained ministry is for, and what it is not for, will help to bring forward the day when exclusions that are not based on the meaning of ordained ministry will be corrected. The 1983 Code of Canon Law has moved, somewhat nervously, in this direction; cf canons 129, 230, 483/2, 517, 766, 1421/2. It is not the function of law to break new ground.

But it is meant to happen, as an ordinary part of the Church's life. The fuller participation and equality of women will be helped as the sacraments of initiation come to be seen more clearly as the sacraments through which we all enter into the life and mission of the Church.

In his letter, the Pope repeats the view that women's "role is of supreme importance both for the renewal and humanisation of society and for the rediscovery by believers of the true face of the Church."

The true meaning of ordained ministry will arise as the strongest condemnation of male privilege and clericalism. The call to be true to it is a call to personal and institutional conversion.



The Wider Context

Theologians look for the historical circumstances in which particular teachings come to be clarified or emphasised. In the present case, it was Pope John Paul's intention to safeguard two other important truths: namely, that the equality of women and men does not depend on the eligibility of both for the same ministries; and that the calling to ordained ministry is a choice God makes, not a right any of us can claim.

Perhaps if these two truths had not been in danger from claims that were being made, the present declaration would not have been made at this time. Let it also be acknowledged that these two truths are even more fundamental than the question of who can be ordained.

Their bearing on the question of ordination is also important. After all, do we really want to claim that women and men are equal only if they are eligible for the same roles in the mission of the Church? And is that the premise on which anyone would want a case for women's ordination to depend?

There are also other questions we need to ask ourselves:

- Do erroneous assumptions about ordination arise partly because we have been under-estimating what we become through baptism, confirmation and eucharist? How else are we to account for the feeling that priests participate in the eucharist more fully, and even belong to the Church more fully, than the rest of the baptised? Has baptism been under-estimated because of imbalance in the roles and status accorded to ordained persons?
- Do we really hear ourselves when we acknowledge that vocation to ministry is a matter of God's free choice, and that whatever God's purposes might be, they cannot be unfair or unjust?
- Does the Church also suffer from our under-estimating the greatness of other vocations, including the vocation to *re-present* in Christian marriage Christ's own love - faithful and forgiving, life-long and life-giving?
- Is there a proper appreciation of how the reign of God is made present in lives consecrated to God and the service of others?

Perhaps if we had these aspects of our faith in true perspective, the context of our present discussion would be different.

Yes, ordained ministry is a wonderful vocation. But I could not presume that the work of bishops does more for the coming of God's reign than what is done by Christian spouses and parents, or by the faith of the youth who gather at Taize or Calcutta, or by the unheralded heroism of missionaries, or the consecration of those who give their whole selves to God through the vows, or the quiet prayers of a lonely or aged person.

In his present declaration, the Pope endorsed the statement that "the greatest in the kingdom of heaven are not the ministers but the saints."

Gradual assent

There are many reasons which militate against the ready acceptance of the Pope's teaching. Inconsistencies within the Church's own practices, a prevalent mood which focuses on justice before it has focused on meaning, a prima facie case that cultural factors might have accounted for the Church's tradition, the inadequacy of naming Tradition as the answer when the meaning of that Tradition was the question, - these are the sort of factors that have created a deep dissatisfaction, which will not be removed just by an authoritative statement.

Neither will this teaching become plain through the force of logical argument. What is communicated through symbols is known rather through insight. Only dispassionate reflection on the Church's role in making present the mystery of Christ will lead to the insights that are needed. That reflection requires within the Church a climate of credibility, and requires of each of us a personal faith that wants to know.

The Pope's decision to present his declaration in the form of an Apostolic Letter and not in a more solemn form is significant, but does not mean it can be treated lightly. However, it does mean that for those who struggle to accept this teaching, what is at stake is not their identity as Catholics, but the degree of their identification with Catholic teaching, and this can be gradual.

Ecumenical Note

We respect those women who are ordained ministers of other Christian Churches, and we appreciate their work.

The present clarification of Catholic teaching is not about the practices of the Reformed Churches; their practices are co-relative to their understanding of ministry, ordination and eucharist.

The practice of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches is co-relative to their understanding of ordained ministry, ordination and eucharist.

Differences of practice ultimately reflect differences of understanding. They are being faithful to their understanding of eucharist and ordination; we are being faithful to ours.

Conclusion

Our grandmothers taught us that when God closes a door it is in order to open another. The way has been opened towards a new appreciation of how ordained ministry is intended to be a sign of the servant Christ, and towards the fuller participation and equality of women that will emerge with the demise of clericalism. Two doors have been opened.

Shall we now stand before the door that has been closed, perhaps banging at it, or shall we go through the doors that have been opened? Together we are called to enhance the Church's credibility as the sign of salvation - the sacrament of what Christ is doing.

