

Ordaining Women: Studying the Evidence

by Steven L. Kellmeyer

American Catholics like to question things. In any serious discussion of the Faith, the question of women's ordination will arise. We should not be surprised. The early fathers of the Church and medieval theologians both faced this issue in their own cultures. While the arguments in favor of such ordination haven't changed much with the passing millenia, the Church's understanding has definitely grown and deepened, as a study of Scriptural, patristic, and Magisterial evidences demonstrates.

From Abraham through the time of Christ's death to the present day, the priest's primary function has been to offer sacrifice. Prior to Israel's Egyptian exile, though only men constructed the altars and offered the sacrifices, sacrifice was not restricted to any one group of men. However, after Israel's idolatry with Golden Calf (Exodus 32), God pronounced the sacrificial restrictions described in Exodus and Leviticus. From that day forward only the faithful men of Levi's tribe could offer sacrifice for the people.

History shows God always had restrictions on both priest and victim. While Abraham's sacrificial victims were specified both male and female at the establishment of the first covenant (Gen. 15:9), they were exclusively male at the time of God's promise of worldwide blessing (Gen 22). The first perpetual sacrifice, the Paschal Lamb, required a male victim (Ex 12:5). God narrowed the sex of the victim before He narrowed that of the priest. Why? Because the first victims of sin were Adam and Eve, while the perpetual victim is the new Adam, Jesus Christ. The Abrahamic sacrifices foreshadowed Gospel events.

The Levitical restrictions are similarly informative. The sin offering for a common person (Lev 4:27-28) and for special cases of ritual uncleanness (Lev 5:6) required a female victim, foreshadowing the cleansing of individual members of the laity, the Bride, by Christ. Offerings made at the fulfillment of a vow (the *eucharasis*, or peace offering) could be either male or female (Lev 3:1), because both men and women assist at Mass. However, the Holocaust offerings (Lev 1:3), sin offerings for priests (Lev 4:3), for princes (Lev 4:22-23), and for the whole community (Lev 4:13-14) or for guilt (Lev 5:15), all had to be male. These Levitical offerings foreshadowed Jesus who is the Holocaust Offering, the Kingly High Priest who took on the whole community's guilt. Sex restrictions applied to both priest and victim even though priest and victim had separate identities in the Old Testament. With Christ's self-sacrifice, the priest-victim identities coalesce, providing serious difficulties for the proponent of female ordination. This is especially true given that Israel was unique in its sacrificial requirements. Surrounding pagan religions all had priestesses. Though Israelite women often took leadership roles (cf. Miriam, Judith, Esther), no Israelite woman held priestly office, none offered sacrifice.

Some use Romans 16:1 to argue that, just as God expanded the Old Covenant to include all nations, God also expanded the priesthood to include women, since Paul calls Phoebe “a minister (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae...” Twentieth-century minds equate this with Holy Orders. Deacons may not offer the sacrifice of the Mass, but they assist at Mass. The case seems clear.

It is not. In the New Testament, the two words used to indicate service within the Church, *episkopos* and *diakonos*, were not well-defined when Romans was written (57-58 A.D.). Worse, *diakonos* is masculine; no feminine form exists until the *Didascalia*, about the 3rd century. The New Testament uses it frequently and broadly, associating it not with sacrifice, but with finance,

administration and ministry in general. Romans does not tell us Phoebe's role, but "there is little to suggest that in NT times the term 'deacon' is ever more than semi-technical."¹

Note that none of the ancient heretical groups which ordained women used this supposed Scriptural reference to promote female ordination: the ancient heretics knew better. *Deaconissa* was a word commonly used for both a widow and the wife of a deacon, as *presbytera* was for the wife of a priest, and *episcopa* the wife of a bishop. St. Epiphanius of Salamis, writing in *Against All Heresies* (c. 377 A.D.), describes her role:

It is true that in the Church there is an order of deaconesses, but not for being a priestess, nor for any kind of work of administration, but for the sake of the dignity of the female sex, either at the time of Baptism, or of examining the sick or suffering, so that the naked body of a female may not be seen by men administering sacred rites, but by the deaconess.²

as the *Apostolic Constitutions* confirm (c. 400 A.D.).³ The First Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) explained: "We have made mention of the deaconesses, who have been enrolled in this position, although, not having been in any way ordained, they are certainly to be numbered among the laity." (Canon 19).⁴ Further:

A deaconess does not bless but neither does she do anything else that is done by presbyters and deacons; but she guards the doors, and greatly assists the presbyters, for the sake of decorum, when they are baptizing women. A deacon excommunicates a subdeacon, a lector, a cantor, and a deaconess, if there be necessity of such action and there be no presbyter present. A subdeacon is not permitted to excommunicate, and certainly it is not permitted to a lector, nor a cantor, nor a deaconess to excommunicate, whether cleric or layman, for they are the inferiors of deacons. (*Apostolic Constitutions*)⁵

¹ Douglas, J.D., *New Bible Dictionary*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 1994, p. 262. While the word is used in non-canonical Christian writings such as 1 Clement 42, Ignatius, Magnesians 2:1, Trallians 2:3, 7:3, the functions of the class are never specified.

² W. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, Liturgical Press, 1970, no. 1112.

³ *ibid*, no 1231.

⁴ *ibid*, no 651y.

⁵ *ibid*, no 1236. See Ex 33:7 and 1 Sam 2:22 for female "gatekeeper" references.

St. Polycarp of Smyrna (d. 3rd or 4th c.) agreed, and Ambrosiaster (d. 4th c.) stated:

Since the apostle speaks about women after the deacons, the Cataphrygians seize the favorable opportunity for heresy and maintain with vain insolence that deaconesses must be consecrated, too; and this, even though they know that the apostles chose seven men as deacons. Are we to suppose that no suitable woman could be found at that time, when we nevertheless read that holy women were present along with the twelve apostles?⁶

But if the Romans passage does not support women's ordination then or now, another passage seems to: "There is not among you Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female: for we all are in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Since Genesis 1:27 says man and woman are in God's image and likeness, proponents have long used this passage to argue that Christ does not distinguish between men and women. If Christ makes no distinctions, then neither should the Church.

Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 377) knew of this objection. Writing on the Cataphrygians, a heretical Montanist sect in Pepuza in Phrygia, he says: "They use both old and new Testaments, they claim Quintilla and Priscilla as their authors as the Phrygians do... Among them women are bishops and priests and they say nothing makes a difference, 'For in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female.' (Gal 3:28)"⁷ He disagreed strenuously. "Never from the beginning has a woman offered sacrifice to God - not even Eve, although she had committed the transgression; but she did not dare attempt something so sacrilegious. Nor did any of her daughters..."⁸ St. Irenaeus (d. 202) disparagingly refers to a heretic named Marcus who pretended to consecrate wine and invited his female followers to attempt consecration.⁹ Firmilian (d. c. 154), in his epistle to Cyprian, reported a woman possessed by a demon who did many remarkable things to

⁶ Manfred Hauke, *Women in the Priesthood?*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, CA 1988, p. 422.

⁷ Epiphanius, *Against Heresies*, 49:2-3

⁸ Coyle, John, "The Fathers on Women and Women's Ordination", *Eglise Et Theologie*, 9:51-101, January 1978, p. 82.

⁹ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1:13:2

deceive the faithful, among them, “she was sanctifying bread, and offering a sacrifice to the Lord, with the usual words for the proclamation, and she also baptized many with the regular legally correct words of interrogation, so that she seemed no different from the norm of the Church.” Part of Cyprian's proof for demonic possession was her attempt to consecrate. Tertullian (c. 200) speaks disparagingly of "heretical women ...[who] make bold to teach, to debate, to work exorcisms, to undertake cures, and perhaps even to baptise."¹⁰ The *Nomocanon* of Photius agreed "A women does not become a priestess." (1:37) and the *Apostolic Church Order* stated "When the master prayed over the bread and the cup and blessed them saying 'This is my Body and blood' He did not allow women to stand with us." (ca. 4th c.)¹¹ The Council of Laodicea clearly stated "the so-called presbyteresses or presidentesses are not to be ordained in the Church."¹² This prohibition was repeated again by the Council of Nimes, canon 2 (394 A.D.), and the first Council of Orange, canon 25 (441 A.D.).¹³ In 494, Pope Gelasius repeated the prohibition in an epistle directed to all the episcopates in Lucania, Bruttium, and Sicilia, where Gnostic heresies had broken out.¹⁴

Sadly for proponents, the Galatians passage refers to baptism, not ordination. The parallel references in Rom 10:12, 1 Cor 12:13, and Col 3:11 provide the context. As in nearly all of his epistles, Paul sought to correct misunderstandings which had grown within Christian communities. In these four epistles, Paul corrected each of four communities which attempted to

¹⁰Jurgens, no. 300. Deacons normally baptize - unordained do so only in extreme circumstances.

¹¹K. Ware in Hopko, pp. 10-11. Tertullian's evidence is all the stronger since he wrote *On Veiling Virgins* after he became a Montanist, a sect which supported women's ordination.

¹²Jurgens, no 745f.

¹³Father William Most, *The Most Database*, Trinity Communications, <http://www.trincomm.org/most>, "Texts on Ordination of Women."

¹⁴Rossi, Mary Ann, "Priesthood, Precedent, and Prejudice. On Recovering the Women Priests of Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Spring 1991, 7:1 pp. 81-83.

deny universal salvation through their exclusion of certain groups. Paul told the Galatians that baptism, i.e., salvation, is open to women.

Modern minds influenced by the Enlightenment think justice results from identical roles, thus docility, submission, or dependency is unjust. Christ, however, asserts His dependency on the Father (John 5:19), His receptivity to the Father (John 16:15), and His obedience to the Father (John 14:31). Even His mission is given Him by the Father (John 8:42), yet Christ is equal to the Father in Divinity. The ancients knew equality in being did not imply equality in authority. Ambrosiaster (ca. 4th c.) wrote, "Just as the Son comes from the Father, so, too, woman comes from man, in order that authority from a single principle be observed."¹⁵ Christianity does not teach the inferiority of women, rather, the parallel relations Father-Son, man-woman, teach each person's incumbent duty to obey those to whom God gave authority. Authority, in turn, is not based in superiority of being, as the Darwinists suppose, and the early Christians martyrs who submitted to pagan tortures frequently demonstrated. Instead, true authority derives from service: a Christian has authority only insofar as s/he serves others. Christianity rests not on the Enlightenment, democracy and survival of the fittest, but on Divine Revelation, kingship and service in love.

St. Epiphanius (c. 374-377), writing in *Against Heresies*, sums it up well:

If women were ordained to be priests for God, or to do anything canonical in the church, it should rather have been given to Mary in the New Testament... But it was decided differently. She was not even entrusted with baptizing. [He lists a succession of apostles and priests] but nowhere was a woman established baptizing... nowhere was a woman established among them. There were four daughters of the evangelist Philip, who were prophetesses, but not priests... Although there is an order of deaconesses in the Church, yet they are not appointed to function as priests or for any administration of this kind, but so that provision may be made for the propriety of the female sex [at baptism]... Whence

¹⁵ Hauke, p. 422. Ambrose stressed God's creation is called "very good" only *after* the creation of woman. p. 430.

comes the recent myth? Whence comes the pride of women, or rather, the woman's insanity? (*Against Heresies*, 79:3-4)¹⁶

St. John Chrysostom, whose life was greatly influenced by educated and holy women, wrote *On Priesthood* at nearly the same time (ca. 381-385). He recognizes the equal stature of women, acknowledging their ability to provide pastoral care, yet concludes:

“Peter’, he said, ‘Feed my sheep.’ He could have addressed him thus: ‘If you love me, fast, sleep on the ground, stay awake at night, help those who are injured, be as a father to little ones and as a husband to their mother.’ But now, passing by all these things, what does he say: ‘Feed my sheep.’ For many of the subjects could easily do the things I have mentioned, not only men, but also women. But when there is question of the headship of the Church and of the care of souls to be entrusted to him, let the entire female sex go back, in fact, the greater part of the male sex.”¹⁷

Even vocal proponents of women's ordination admit none of the fathers of the Church knew of an orthodox female priest or priesthood.¹⁸ Nor can this lack be called misogyny. In 2 Cor 16:18, for instance, Paul changes 2 Sam 7:14 so as to explicitly include women in the liberty Jesus promised. The Gospel writers agree women, the first to see the risen Christ, function "as angels, messengers of the Resurrection... to the Apostles themselves!"¹⁹ All four Gospels assert this even though the Halakhah specifically denied women the ability to give testimony, and this denial was seen as explicitly Scriptural.²⁰

Finally, we must remember that only the Collyridians, the Marcionites, and the Montanists are known to have attempted female ordination. The Collyridians allowed it because they worshipped the Blessed Virgin Mary as goddess and knew the priest(ess) is supposed to

¹⁶Most, p. 3.

¹⁷ibid.

¹⁸Coyle, p. 100.

¹⁹Miceli, Vincent P. *Women Priests and Other Fantasies*. Christopher Publishing House, MA. 1985, p. 17.

²⁰Novak, David, "Women in the Rabbinate?", *Judaism*, Winter 1984, 33:39-49, p. 42.

image God. The Marcionites and Montanists, being Gnostic, saw sexuality, especially feminine, as a sign of evil. Further, they denied the Redeemer willed a difference between men and women. Indeed, the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas asserted that only a "woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven" (1:22), a sentiment which the Gospel of Mary echoed. In other words, Gnostic sects permitted female ordination because it allowed the woman to "make herself male" and thereby enter the kingdom of heaven; they ordained women precisely because women were unworthy of salvation - ordination "corrected" femininity.

Modern Magisterial statements continue to recognize that the Church simply doesn't ordain women. The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's (CDF) *Inter Insigniores*, points to the Church's constant tradition, Christ's choices, the practice of the Apostles, Scriptural typology and the need for proper substance for the sacramental consecration. Genesis 1:27 shows that "in human beings the difference of sex exercises an important influence, much deeper than, for example, ethnic differences: the latter do not affect the human person as intimately as the difference of sex, which is directly ordained both for the communion of persons and for the generation of human beings."²¹ Thus, Christ's Incarnation, his taking on of humanity, necessarily required the taking on of a sex. The maleness of Christ is an integral part of Christ, and must also be an integral part of the person who is mystically Christ for the assembly. It is integral precisely because of the Bride-Bridegroom relationship, the "nuptial mystery" which is the Christian faith.

In *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* Pope John Paul II re-iterates *Inter Insigniores*, and repeats Epiphanius' point concerning the Blessed Virgin at Pentecost. Re-affirming the central role and dignity of women in the Church, he declares the Church has no authority to ordain women, a judgment which is to be definitively held by all the faithful.

²¹*Inter Insigniores*, section 5, para. 7.

Ultimately, those who propose female ordination have an essentially flawed understanding of the Bride of Christ. Masculinity is exclusively expressed in Holy Orders, but femininity permeates the Church. The idea of sacrament is the nexus between the material and the spiritual - sacrament combines the two into one. Woman is the point and focus of that nexus, for within her womb the ultimate nexus of material and spiritual, body and soul, the immortal human person, takes on existence. For this reason, the Blessed Virgin was and is closer to Jesus than any of the Apostles were. The Incarnation works through the feminine principal; the material became Divine in accordance with the sacramental principle. The sacraments are born within the womb of the Church, through the seminal work of the male priest, who mystically is the Bridegroom. This is why Hans Urs von Balthasar can say that Mary encompasses Peter.²²

Creation is a reflection of Divinity. We are created male and female for a reason. Theoretically, we could have been created hermaphrodites, in reflection of the One God, and have no need of separate sexes. Alternatively, we could have been created with a trinity of sexes, to reflect the Triune Godhead. In fact, God created us male and female, knowing that He would descend and walk among us as either one or the other. Creation, salvation, might have been so constructed that God would walk among us as first female and then male, or as both simultaneously. That is not how He built either creation or salvation. Recognizing the myriad alternatives available to the Divine, and recognizing also that the solution He chose fully displays His own beauty, we must approach Divine revelation, incarnated in Jesus, formed into Scripture and the sacraments, with great humility and a deep knowledge of our own limitations in understanding. The mystery of our sexuality, its proper expression, its place in the order of creation and of salvation, is part of the mystery of our salvation.

²²Little, Joyce, "Women and Ordination," *Faith and Reason*, 3:266-82, 1987, p. 276-279.

From the beginning of Creation, there has been a great Conversation, a conversation between the man and the woman, the man formed first, but somehow incomplete until the woman, the height of creation, was formed from and for the man. This conversation continued in the Incarnation, in which the God-man who created the woman Himself took on created form only from and through the woman, bringing about a New Creation. This conversation reached its fullness on the Cross, where the woman and the man, loving each other with perfect love, together offered him to the Father, the man pre-eminent, offering Himself for her, and the woman supporting, assisting His offering of Himself as completely as she could and offering herself as well. The conversation does not cease, for it is continued in every Mass, as the Bride of Christ stands at the foot of the sacrificial table, joining with the man who continually offers Himself up for her on and at that same table.

God speaks to us through His sacraments. The priest is not only consecrated in his own right, but he is a type for the consecrated host, the Eucharist. Just as Scripture, the living word of God, is not Christ, but is venerated as the Body of Christ because it points us to the sacraments, so the priest is a living, walking sign who points us to the Eucharist. The sacramental forms have been established for a reason, as a part of the great conversation. In Christ, that conversation was elevated to include God, so that we do, finally, share real communion with our Creator. It is not meet to attempt an alteration of the work He has established.

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