

Comment

Women may never be recognized as leaders in the Catholic Church – the arguments against the ordination of women have such deep roots.

Of course arguments in theology rarely take the form of *proofs*. The ideal of proof is as barren in theology as it is in philosophy. Successful arguments on matters central to the subject involve change of perspective rather than apodictic demonstration. Those who go on resisting a particular conclusion are rarely without further resort.

The case against the ordination of women now rests on three arguments. It has never been done, and nineteen hundred years is a long time. Secondly, a man is required to take the part of Jesus in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Thirdly, women are so different from men, anthropologically and psychologically as well as biologically, that it would overthrow the whole course of Nature. Each of these arguments appears in various guises, but these are the bare bones of the case. The ramifications of these arguments touch on such profound matters that the case soon comes to seem beyond refutation.

For those who do not accept them these arguments seem so ridiculous as to make attempts at refutation superfluous. Plainly, there were no women among the Twelve – but then there were no Gentiles either. What more needs to be said on this point? When people reply by saying that, if he had intended there to be women priests, Our Lord would surely have ordained Our Lady, it becomes clear that the discussion has to be moved back several stages. Already, the argument has involved certain prior decisions on such classical controversies as Christ's consciousness and the place of Mary. Besides that, however, the very idea that nineteen hundred years is a decisively long time goes with a historical perspective which many people simply no longer share. How do you decide between those who think that the Catholic Church is hoary with age and those who think that, in terms of the past and the predicted future of the human race, Christianity is an innovation, with thousands of years of development to come?

The other two arguments soon run up against similar decisions, or preconceptions rather. They may be called 'prejudices' – but neither ridicule nor reason will be enough to dissipate them. How do you persuade somebody that nineteen hundred years is not a very long time? Or, anyway, that it is not a long time even in the history of the Church?

Leaders the Church has certainly always had. Paul and Barnabas, for example, "strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith", also "appointed elders for

them in every church” (Acts 14: 22 -23). Thus, in every congregation the disciples as a whole had the ministry of a body of *elders*. Whenever one of the disciples fell sick he was to summon “the elders of the church” to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord (James 5: 14). The Apostle Peter, as their “co-elder” (*sympresbyteros*), is made to exhort the “elders” (*presbyteroi*) in the churches to which he addresses himself (1 Peter 5: 1). For all the lacunae and the obscurities in the New Testament picture of the development of the ministry there can be no doubt that leadership was often, if not normally and normatively, exercised, within each constituted church, by a group of *elders*. One of these elders soon emerged as the leader – no doubt because he represented the congregation when they communicated with other congregations. The way to monarchical episcopacy and episcopal collegiality lay open from the outset. But, even if only vestigially, it is the bishop together with the clergy of the diocese who constitute the body of “elders”. The leadership of the diocese is most solemnly represented when the bishop, surrounded by the orders of the clergy, celebrates the eucharist in the cathedral.

Leadership, in the Catholic Church, takes “conciliar” forms. A single individual – like the bishop in his diocese or the Pope on his pilgrimages – may function as a peripatetic icon of Christ. Where two or three are gathered in his name, however, he is equally present. The norm of Catholic worship is a eucharist concelebrated with the people by the bishop and his *sympresbyteroi*. Leadership, in the Catholic Church, is as much like the soviet principle of collective leadership as it is like the monarchical principle of imperial absolutism.

Leadership, anyway, is the place to start. For St Thomas Aquinas, women could not be ordained simply because they could not be leaders – “mulier statum subjectionis habet” (*Sentences*, book 4, distinction 7, question 3). Of course it could then be argued that this “state of subjection”, being metaphysical, might be compatible with social and cultural changes which show women to be just as capable of leadership as men have ever been (which is not saying much). In any case, conciliar leadership and corporate ministry are deeply Catholic realities that need to be rediscovered. In any case, also, women are going to go on widening and deepening their prophetic and pastoral leadership in the Catholic Church. Perhaps it needs a man to play Christ’s part in the eucharist – according to *one* theology, anyway. It was a woman who was commissioned to “announce” to the disciples that Jesus had ascended (John 20: 17 -18). But then the famous deacons’ “wives” may just as plausibly have been women deacons (1 Tim 3: 11). And Phoebe, who was “deacon of the church in Cenchrea”, certainly seems to have been recognized as a leader – at least by St Paul (Romans 16: 1 - 2).