

WOMEN'S ORDINATION: CAN THE DEBATE BE REVIVED?

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After the initial furore provoked by the Vatican Declaration nearly two years ago the discussion of women's ordination in the Roman Catholic Church has come to a virtual standstill. The debate has stalled largely because both defence and criticism of the Declaration have not always been on target.

I

For one thing insufficient attention has been paid to the significant developments which this document embodied. For the first time the Catholic Church officially abandoned many of the standard theological arguments which had been used in the past to legitimate the traditional policy barring women from ordination. The Declaration conceded that the patristic and scholastic arguments, previously accorded such weight, were in large measure conditioned by prejudicial attitudes and beliefs about women's alleged innate deficiencies as compared with men or their inborn aptitudes for domestic and nurturing roles. The traditional policy thus came to be defended for wrong or inadequate reasons.

In the Declaration's central argument traditional claims about women's inferiority and subordination to men, or their alleged incapacity for pastoral responsibility played no part. Moreover claims about the direct bearing of gender-specific traits on female/male role differentiation in society and the church were used to highlight rather than to demonstrate the propriety of the traditional policy. Such claims were combined with ecclesiological doctrines to yield an argument for the complementary distribution of male and female roles in the church, and with christological doctrines to yield an argument for the necessity of maleness for the priesthood's representational function. But the Declaration carefully qualified the persuasive force to be accorded these arguments in its overall case by designating them as illustrative rather than demonstrative.

Yet the Roman Catholic debate has if anything been preoccupied with precisely the issues which the Declaration sought to downplay or lay to rest. Both its supporters and its critics have been inclined to focus on the contributory arguments (notably that concerning Christ's maleness) which the Declaration did not consider to be decisive, or even worse on traditional claims about

women's naturally inferior status which the Declaration explicitly rejected. Whatever explanation is to be given for this state of affairs, the fact remains that the Declaration's central argument has been neglected.

Even with the recent election of a new pope the debate is likely to remain stalemated unless the Declaration's endeavour to dissociate the traditional policy from its customary theological justification is acknowledged. The logical centre of the dispute between Roman Catholic proponents of women's ordination and church leaders is now occupied by a complex appeal to tradition in which the policy of limiting ordination to men is made logically (though presumably not genetically) independent of its standard theological legitimation. If it is to be fruitful, debate about the continued appropriateness of this policy will have to focus on the distinctive appeal to tradition which lies at the heart of the Declaration's central argument and on the resultantly altered setting of the other main issues in the discussion. Little theological headway will be made by efforts to discredit or defend claims upon which the Declaration places no particular reliance.

What is the Declaration's central argument? For the sake of discussion here it may be handily if somewhat technically summarised in the following way. To support its *conclusion* that only men can be admitted to ordination, the Declaration appeals to a two-fold set of *data*: (1) Christ did not choose women to be among the Twelve, and the apostles adhered to the injunction implied in this non-selection by declining to accord women an official status in the ministry of the early Christian community; and (2) an unbroken tradition attests to the church's constant adherence to this decision and its apostolic testimony. This appeal is itself supported by an implicit *warrant* that in essential matters the church must strive to adhere to the Lord's injunctions and their apostolic witness. The Declaration acknowledges (logically) that its data would be ruled out of court if it could be shown (1) that the injunction implied in Christ's non-selection of women and the apostolic adherence to it were intended to cover a particular set of circumstances which no longer obtain, or (2) that the matter in question comprises an area of legitimate potential development subject to the Church's initiative. The cogency of these two *conditions of rebuttal* is denied by the Declaration (1) because the nature of the evidence is such that it could never be established and moreover it seems unlikely that Christ and the apostles were motivated by circumstantial considerations, and (2) because the church is not authorised to tamper with the natural signification or constitutive reference of the sacraments.

As a contribution to a renewed debate about the Declaration I will suggest some considerations which would be pertinent to defending or to challenging this argument and to identify some

which would not be.

No debate would be possible, it should be noted, if the Declaration's unexpressed *warrant* is not granted, i.e. if it is not granted that the Lord's decisions in essential matters have been reliably transmitted to the Christian community. Suppose someone holds some version of the claim that the nature of the sources is such that accurate knowledge of the Lord's decision is simply inaccessible to the church. This complex claim is the subject of considerable dispute throughout the Christian churches as a result of the application of historical-critical methods to the study of the texts of the Scriptures. It implies that the church's attestations of fidelity to the Lord's injunctions are in many cases likely to prove historically unsupportable. Except to mention that counter-arguments to this claim are in order, I cannot begin to do justice to the issues involved in this dispute. The relevant point here is that a strong version of this claim logically precludes acceptance of the warrant implicit in the Declaration's central argument. Whether or not Christ's non-selection of women has been correctly interpreted in the church, if an appeal to his example is ruled out in principle, the Declaration's argument would lose its force and debate about it could not get under way.

II

The Declaration maintains that only men can be admitted to ordination in the Christian community. In support of this conclusion the Declaration offers as its *primary data* the example of Christ, who did not select women to be among the Twelve, and of the apostles, who adhered to the injunction implied in this non-selection by declining to accord to women an official status in the ministry of the early Christian community.

The Scriptures attest that Jesus did not choose any women to be among the Twelve Apostles. The Declaration contends that this non-selection represented not a concession to circumstances but an injunction with regard to future policy among his followers. The apostles possessed knowledge of this decision and adhered to it in their own practice. It is not known whether their knowledge included any information as to the reasons for Christ's decision, nor is it clear to what extent they attempted to speculate about his reasons or to formulate reasons of their own for this policy. The Declaration does not claim to possess any evidentiary or otherwise direct knowledge of Christ's decision or its motivations.

It claims only that on the basis of the evidence of the Scriptures it is clear that there were no women among the Twelve and that the significance of this non-selection is not accessible to a purely historical reading of the texts. Its significance can be grasped only when these texts are read precisely as Scripture, viz. when they are read in their divinely-willed capacity to nurture, guide and sustain the Spirit-filled Christian community. Construed in this way they

induce the conviction that Christ's non-selection of women entails a permanently valid injunction for the church. For this reading, in addition to the Spirit's guidance, the Declaration appeals to the cumulative impact of a set of converging indications which suggest that Christ's non-selection of women was more than a concession to circumstances and that the apostles adhered to Christ's injunction in their own governance of the Christian communities in their charge.

In support of this appeal to primary data it would be logically in order to argue that a purely historical exegesis is never sufficient, even when the meaning of the texts is fairly plain, to account for the complex ways in which the canon of Scripture functions to shape the policies, doctrines and theology of the Christian community. It is reasonable to assert that a reading of this sort has led the church in this instance to adhere to the implied injunction to limit priestly ordination to men. The Declaration contends that the Scriptures have been brought to bear correctly in the church's uninterrupted adherence to this Christ-willed policy.

It would not count against this appeal to primary data to point to the considerable fluidity of doctrine, practice, and theology which characterised ministry and orders in the first three centuries of Christian history. The Declaration's use of this data does not appear to involve or require the adoption of any particular theory about the early stages of the development of Christian church order. There is no endorsement of any theory about a specific or clear-cut connection between the concepts of "membership in the Twelve" and subsequent concepts of "laying on of hands" or "ordination". The success or failure of this appeal depends solely on the presumed existence of a general connection, which would be exceedingly hard to disprove, between the leadership roles exercised by the Twelve and leadership roles subsequently associated with the positions, however they came to be denominated in the various communities, held by the apostles' designated successors or their official assistants.

A logically appropriate challenge to this appeal to data might fasten on the Declaration's inability to adduce any explanatory reasons transmitted along with the injunction alleged to be embedded in Christ's non-selection of women for membership in the Twelve. Likewise no extensive justification accompanies the putative apostolic fidelity to the Lord's injunction. As a result, it could be argued, an impression of arbitrariness comes to envelop the traditional policy and the church's adherence to it.

Note that the Declaration makes no explicit use of any christological doctrines (such as those concerning Christ's divinity or foreknowledge) to which appeals are occasionally made in the course of arguments about the relevance of Christ's actions and decisions for the question of women's ordination.

III

The Declaration combines its appeal to the type of ministry enjoined by Christ and maintained by the apostles with an appeal to the church's uninterrupted adherence to this policy: an unbroken tradition attests to the church's constant adherence to the Lord's injunction and its apostolic witness. In effect the point of this appeal is that the record shows that the church in its official teaching and universal practice has never manifested the slightest inclination to doubt that the policy of admitting only men to priestly ordination derived from Christ and the apostles. The Declaration grants, as we have seen, the weakness and falsity of some of the arguments which were employed in the justification of this policy but insists that this is a case of the right thing being defended for the wrong reasons.

The use of this *secondary data* is difficult to appraise because at first sight it appears to involve a barefaced appeal to "the way we've always done things" to justify a major church policy. The matter is rather more complex than this, as anyone who has ever struggled with the logic of appeals to tradition in theological arguments will readily admit. In support of the Declaration's appeal to tradition at this point, it would be logically appropriate to develop an argument from the sociology and anthropology of cultural systems, and the self-perpetuating character of the central beliefs and policies of social institutions.

Advocates of a change in church policy would be logically entitled to ask whether the tradition would have been open to the admission of women to the official ministry had cultural circumstances been otherwise or had claims about women's innate deficiencies or gender-specific aptitudes been less influential in the development of doctrine, theology and policy. Feminist issues logically re-enter the field of argument at this point.

Another logically appropriate challenge is suggested by historical research which seeks to uncover exceptions to the alleged constancy of the traditional exclusion of women from Holy Orders. In view of the overall tenor of the history of the place of women in Christianity, this line of attack is likely to produce less than convincing results. The Official Commentary on the Declaration discounts as an exception proving the rule the frequently cited evidence of medieval abbesses who possessed ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Nevertheless it is perfectly reasonable to challenge the appeal to the allegedly "unbroken" tradition by citing some breaks in the form of counter-examples.

One such counter-example, the pre-Reformation evidence of lay-preaching movements would have to be used with care. As a result of the sectarianism of some Reformation movements, most mainstream Reformation churches came to share the Roman Catholic reluctance to separate the preaching function from ordination.

Indeed insistence on the connection between the preaching function and the official ministry was strongest in churches which tended to stress the ministry of the Word over the ministry of the Sacraments. The appeal to evidence of lay preachers to strengthen the case for ordination of women or the extension of the preaching function to non-ordained women (and men for that matter) in the contemporary church needs to be made with special sensitivity to the peculiarly post-Reformation and ecumenical dimensions of the issue.

By reserving discussion of the evidence of deaconesses to another time and setting, the Vatican Declaration itself acknowledges a highly significant counter-example. Joseph Komonchak has offered an illuminating clarification of the logic of the appeal to the evidence of deaconesses in the early church in proposals advocating the ordination of women in the contemporary church. He notes that in the early church reception into one of the three main orders of the official ministry (diaconate, presbyterate and episcopacy) did not involve entitlement to membership in another. Only in the medieval doctrine of orders, where the three orders were viewed as hierarchical grades of the single priesthood, was it possible in principle for an individual to advance from one order to the next. Thus, ironically, it is only on the basis of the central assumption of the medieval doctrine of orders, where the systematic attempt to justify the exclusion of women reached its most fully developed form, that the evidence of the existence of deaconesses in the early church could serve to support an argument for the admission of women to the presbyterate and episcopacy in the contemporary or future church.

The practice of other Christian churches suggests another range of considerations pertinent to appraising the Declaration's appeal to "constant tradition" to support the exclusion of women from Holy Orders. In defending this appeal to tradition it would be appropriate to cite the determined adherence of the various branches of the Orthodox Church to the standard policy.

But in most other Christian churches, it might be argued, there has developed a consensus that there are no conclusive arguments in favour of the exclusion of women from ordination. In the wake of this consensus all the major Christian denominations now admit women to the ordained ministry. The growing support for the ordination of women in the Anglican Communion is likely to be acknowledged as an important trend in view of the strong Anglican doctrine of Orders.

Appeal to the ecumenical consensus tends to be discounted in the Declaration and the Official Commentary because of the fundamental differences which are thought to exist between the Reformation and the Roman Catholic doctrines of Orders and ministry. The implication that the Reformation churches, by admitting

women to ordination, have been unfaithful to the example of the Lord and the apostles is thus mitigated by the citation of the comparative weakness of their doctrines of Orders. An appropriate challenge to the Roman Catholic adherence to the traditional policy might point to the growing consensus concerning the doctrine of Orders which is recounted in the published results of various official ecumenical consultations.

IV

In considering the first *condition for rebuttal* it is crucial to note that the Declaration's pattern of argument concedes that the relevance of the data drawn from the example of Christ and the apostles depends upon its being more than a response to particular circumstances.

There is less danger of muddle at this point if one speaks of the possibly "circumstantial" rather than of the "culturally conditioned" character of the supposed injunction of Christ. All beliefs and policies are inescapably culturally conditioned. To make this point is merely to state an important fact; it is not tantamount to a sweeping refutation of any and all beliefs and policies. It is possible to give expression to what one supposes to be permanently valid claims and to be prepared to offer arguments for them and to entertain counter-arguments while at the same time recognising that one's utterances are conditioned by a host of factors like culture, personal history, the weather, and so on. Clearly it is not the kind of *formulation* given to a particular policy that is at issue in the discussion about women's ordination (all sides admitting that no formulation of the policy has been transmitted to us) but whether the implied injunction of Christ and the apostles' adherence to it were a culturally conditioned prescription of permanent validity for the Church.

The Declaration concedes that the evidence as it stands does not deliver any information about the reasons for Jesus' non-selection of women and precious little information about the apostles' reasons for declining to accord official status to the participation of women in the ministry in presumed obedience to Christ's injunction. It is perfectly legitimate, the Declaration contends, to suppose that the actions of Christ and the apostles were the result of a deliberate decision to exclude women from positions of official leadership not only in their own times but for as long as the Christian community endured, and to suppose that there were good reasons for doing so even though these reasons may never be known. The Declaration notes that insofar as any reasons for this policy are offered in the Scriptures, they appear to be of a theological rather than of a circumstantial sort (e.g. in St Paul).

The Declaration goes on to argue that it is unlikely either that Christ was influenced by prejudicial views concerning women current in his day or that he was reluctant to contravene such views

although he did not share them. As evidence the Declaration adduces Christ's markedly non-conformist dealings with women. This evidence is taken to indicate both that Jesus did not share and very likely rejected the common views about women in his culture and that he would have been quite ready to invite them into leadership roles, even at the risk of dismaying his fellow Jews, except that for unknown but presumably good reasons he did not choose to do so.

As to the apostles, the Declaration contends that it is unlikely that they were influenced by personal attitudes or by sensitivity to the views and attitudes prevalent in their own culture with regard to women. Their personal attitudes towards women appear to have been exceptionally positive. Moreover Hellenistic society had a fairly advanced attitude towards women (by Palestinian Jewish standards) and would have welcomed women in roles of leadership in the Christian community.

Two lines of objection could be posed to the Declaration's handling of these issues, suggesting that in the cases of both Christ and his disciples circumstantial considerations were primary in contributing to their exclusion of women from official roles in the ministry. With regard to Christ's attitude it would be appropriate to object, as we have seen, that it is unreasonable to assume that in so important a matter no explanations would have been transmitted along with the policy he is alleged to have enjoined. With regard to his disciples, it could be objected that their reluctance to place women in roles of leadership might well have been inspired by their concern to differentiate the Christian message from the numerous pagan cults which employed sexually promiscuous priestesses in worship. Thus, it might be urged, early Christianity's high moral tone, coupled with its struggle to maintain its distinctiveness, prevailed against the apostles' otherwise high regard for women in establishing their policy of barring women from official roles in the ministry.

The second *condition of rebuttal* which the Declaration recognises may be considered more briefly. The Declaration denies its cogency by contending that women's ordination is not an instance in which the Church is free to exercise its initiative. Considerations drawn from the history of sacramental practice would be appropriate both to support and to challenge the Declaration's position on this point. In defence, for example, the basically conservative character of the liturgy might be adduced. Although there has been rich development in the doctrine and celebration of the sacraments, the Church has never considered itself authorised to tamper with the range of primary symbols upon which the sacraments draw.

A logical challenge to this contention would be that the Church's initiative in sacramental development, especially in rec-

ent times, has been considerably more vigorous and far-reaching than the Declaration seems willing to admit. This line of objection, to be cogent, would have to focus on modifications relating to the sacramental recipient since the debate over women's ordination concerns the designation of apt recipients of a sacrament. Plausible examples might be the change in the required age of the recipient which followed upon the separation of confirmation from baptism, or the change in the status of the recipient which followed upon the requirement of celibacy for ordination in the western discipline. Examples of this sort might supply the basis for plausible arguments advocating a change in the practice of restricting Holy Orders to men.

V

Like most disagreements about the appropriateness of particular policies, the Roman Catholic debate over women's ordination involves among other things the influence of basic attitudes, appeals to specific beliefs and assessments of relevant circumstances. There are attitudes about mutual relationships between men and women shaped by lifetimes of experience, beliefs involving a wide range of ethical, religious and metaphysical claims, and circumstances arising from the internal state and external relations of the Roman Catholic Church at this moment in its history. The kind of reasoning exemplified by the Vatican Declaration's central argument plays an admittedly specialised but still important role in the lively discussion generated by the intersection of all these factors.

This reasoning is intended to contribute to the specifically theological inquiry about the appropriateness of the traditional policy. No significant theological developments are likely to occur if the force of this reasoning, whatever its merits, is obscured by extraneous considerations. The possession of any particular set of attitudes on the part of the authors of the Declaration, though a matter of concern, is not pertinent to an appraisal of the force of its central argument. Likewise the question of what circumstances are relevant to evaluating the correctness of the traditional policy is distinct from the question of appraising the Declaration's defence of this policy.

Thus, for example, a set of circumstances which would require assessment would be the projected impact of a change in the traditional policy. Churches which have admitted women to the official ministry have experienced some strain at first. The emergence in the USA of an organisation of dissident Episcopalians who oppose women's ordination is likely to confirm Roman Catholic suspicions of the church-divisive potential of the ordination issue. Equally relevant, however, would be the impact of continued lack

of change on women who experience what they believe to be a call to ordination and on women who regard the traditional policy as an affront to human dignity. Disaffection on the part of women (as well as the men who share their concern) is likely to be as serious and regrettable as the projected impact of a change in policy on more conservative elements in the Church.

But a clearly distinct range of considerations applies to assessing such circumstances than would apply to appraising the Declaration's main argument. Debate about women's ordination is bound to become stalled when these strands of issues are not kept distinct and when the Declaration's argument is obscured by other concerns. I have sought to identify this argument's major supporting claims and to suggest some lines along which fruitful theological inquiry would have to proceed. Both sides in a renewed debate would have to accept the state of the question as it has been redefined by the Declaration: Does the appeal to tradition, to which the Declaration accords an unprecedented prominence, constitute a sufficient justification for the policy of limiting ordination to men in the Church?

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these) but the point at which the Church began to take itself seriously as the community of the dispossessed. It is surely of the first importance that this Pope has lived most of his life under a socialist regime, is old enough to measure its achievements against what preceded it and close enough to it to analyse its failures, especially its failure to be socialist. For him the socialist peoples' republics will be neither heaven nor hell but simply the real world of the future, needing to be lived in and challenged from within, not in the name of western liberal capitalism but in the name of Christ's poor. It looks as though we may have this time a Pope for the next world.

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