

Women, Theology and the Eucharist

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Is Brian McNeil serious (new Blackfriars Oct 1976) or is he casting his bread upon the waters in the hope of seeding a good argument? When someone suggests that theological insight or clarification can be made through an examination of symbols and their legitimation, the sociologist in me immediately pricks up his ears. Mr McNeil's argument on the place (or rather the lack of place) of women in the eucharistic liturgy provokes the ambiguous reaction of mild sympathy followed by profound disagreement.

I agree with him that the fact that there were no women included among the Apostles indicates little in the way of church structures and how the ministry should be organised. I agree with him that the symbolism of sacramental action should be grounded (or "earthed" as he puts it) in our own experience as human beings. I also agree, somewhat off the main subject, that the practice of concelebration adds little to, and indeed probably detracts from, the symbolic communication of the eucharist. It seems little more than a clerical pageant more designed to emphasise the separation of the ordained ministry from the ordinary faithful and to imply a minimisation of the priesthood of the people of God (one president of the eucharist is enough): the other ordained ministers should be identified with the assembled people. However, I profoundly disagree with his conclusions, be they never so tentative, and indeed with his overall argument.

Mr McNeil concludes that women, though possibly eligible for other forms of ministry, have no place presiding over the eucharistic liturgy. He arrives at this position through the application of two principles of legitimation for the sacramental symbols employed in the eucharist. First a legitimation by the symbols being grounded in our own experience and secondly, a legitimation of the symbols by them being grounded in the

“contingency of the Incarnation”. From the first principle he concludes that women will not do in the role of president of the eucharist because they have not normally (or ever) been seen acting in this role and so presumably are outside our experience. Secondly, he concludes that as Christ was a man and it was he who instituted the sacrament by his presiding over the last supper, then to represent this event with a woman as president does not fulfil what might be called a true reincarnation of the event and so renders its symbolic representation defective.

I would like to examine the theological value of these two principles. The first principle I find myself in immediate sympathy with. To a sociologist who dabbles in theology, the importance of symbol, rite and myth and their centrality to the analysis of religious consciousness and practice are profoundly apparent. However, such a principle poses complex theological problems and is far from being neatly tied. Mr McNeil mentions, as an example of this principle, the old and new methods of receiving holy communion. The traditional method of receiving in only one kind and that from the tabernacle rather than from the table is, he says, “bizarre” and renders the symbolism “dangerously defective”. He follows this with a caveat that one cannot assume from this that a worshipper who receives communion in the traditional manner receives less from the sacrament than if he received in the new manner. I could not agree with this more, yet if his idea of the legitimation of sacramental symbols being grounded in our experience is to have any strength at all, these two statements simply cannot be made and remain coherent. If the concept of *sign* is to mean anything at all in sacramental theology, and not just an indication of change in style or aesthetic appropriateness, then there *is* a difference in the effect on the participant of the two forms of rite. This is not to say that I would hold that the new rite is sacramentally more effective than the older form (a kind of inverted Tridentinism) but that the theological implications here are far from clear. Indeed I think a good deal of work needs to be done theologically to tease out the significance of the dramaturgical action of the sacramental rites and their effects on the participants, spiritually, psychologically and sociologically. Either the symbols are “dangerously defective” and thus affect the rite at its basic levels, i.e. in the meditation of revealed knowledge and the grace of God, or they are merely incidental and do not render the various forms of rite less effective. There seems to be a real theological dilemma here. To use such an ambivalent principle to clear up the problem of the place of women in the eucharistic liturgy seems to defeat

the very purpose of the enterprise.

The second principle of legitimation seems a little stronger at least in the first instance. Mr McNeil suggests that the fact that only bread and wine are used in the eucharist and that the use of any other food or drink certainly prevents the rite from being a eucharist, is because bread and wine were used at the last supper and this is seen as the archetypical event for the institution of the eucharist. Thus he says, since Christ was a man, a man is the appropriate symbolic representation in the contemporary celebration of the eucharist. The celebrant is acting *in Persona Christi* and thus to be grounded in the “contingency of the Incarnation”, it is necessary for the rite to be presided over by a man. This approach seems to imply so many difficult lines of enquiry that it ends up as a form of theological obfuscation rather than any help in clarifying the theology of women in the ministry.

To begin with one could reduce the principle to absurdity by using it to demand that the presiding minister at a eucharist be a Jew as Jesus was, that he be a Semite, speak in Hebrew, wear the clothes of the time and so on. One could also make the observation, in passing, that since only men were present, apparently, at the last supper, then women should not only be excluded from the presidency of the eucharist but from the eucharist itself!

Secondly, the principle seems to raise the problem once described by Don Cupitt as that of the “One Jesus and the many Christs”. Jesus, as a man and an historical figure, had by that very token to exist within certain limits. These mundane facts about Jesus are important, indeed they must be part of any consideration which tries to ground the teaching of Jesus in the experience we all share, of being human. But Jesus as the Christ is for *all* men, meaning men and women (would that the English language had a separate word for the Human species!). Women, no less than men, are urged to follow Christ, to imitate him, to listen to his teaching and to participate in the sacraments he instituted. The fact of Christ being a man seems to be no bar to all of this. The liturgy is a dramatic representation using actors and artifacts which participate in the sacramental action. But just as women can be legitimately urged to “put on Christ” so it seems to me that a woman can just as legitimately be urged to take on the role of Christ (to act *in Persona Christi*) for the celebration of the eucharist. Christ is, in his sacramental presence, for all men. He is no longer “Jew or Gentile, slave or free-man, male or female”, (to paraphrase Galatians 3:27) but that person through whom we all come to full humanity and to God.

One could ask, using the principle put before us, if the symbolism of the eucharist is dangerously defective when presided over by a negro *man* or a Chinese *man*. Neither share the form colour, culture, thought processes or even the perception of the world that Christ had while on earth. But this is obviously absurd. One just cannot take the limitations of Jesus' humanity and use them as a basis for the correct legitimation of symbolism in the liturgy. The "contingency of the Incarnation" is reflected in the fact that the artifacts and actors in the celebration of the eucharist are human not masculine. To accept any other view is to be reduced to saying, as was said at a national conference of the Episcopalian Church in America two years ago when discussing women in the ministry, "no penis, no priest!".

Two further things can be said as addenda to these criticisms. Firstly, it is true that the principle of masculine potency is quite common in early primitive and historic religions. The concepts of power, grace and influence in such social groups are often tied up with political, religious and sexual referents, either because the simple nature of the world view conflates these various elements or because the cosmology uses them as analogies of one another or symbolic of one another as mutually supporting pillars of a coherent cosmos. In such religions the priesthood and political leadership are often reserved for men (though this is not necessarily the case) and the symbols of Life and Power are conceived in a masculine mode. Sociologically it can be seen that such social groups frequently develop a central cult of priests who are men, or a religion from which women are excluded, and a peripheral cult where women can participate and which often assumes the form of ecstatic or charismatic religion.¹ Now it seems to me that though it is apparent that the Church has not entirely shrugged off such attitudes or the remnants of them in its present cultural form, the logic of the pristine Christian message is that all humans are equal in God's sight and are all taken up in Christ through his death and resurrection. The distinction, if any, is between those who accept Christ and those who reject him, not whether they are male or female. Thus a theology that excludes women from the possibility, at least, of full eucharistic ministry is a deviant one.

Secondly, Mr McNeil's example of the bread and wine as the authentic symbols of the eucharist seems to be different in kind to that of the legitimate symbolism of the presidency of the rite, though obviously connected. The use of bread and

¹Cf "Ecstatic Religion" I.M.Lewis, Penguin, 1971

wine has long been seen as the archetypical form of the meal in the celebration of the eucharist and, of course, the Body and Blood of Christ. However, apart from the legitimation by tradition there seems to be some place in theological thinking for a consideration of the desirability of using other species of food and drink in the eucharist. But this is far from being a pressing point. Bread and wine are, as near as makes no difference, universally seen as food and drink and are available. For those people who have no access to any form of wine or bread there is a genuine problem of inaccessibility of the eucharist and such a problem should concern sacramental theologians as and when it arises. Apart from these few exceptions and the minister who wants to use coca-cola as a truer symbol of drink (and this, I think most would agree, is trivial and gimmicky) there is no problem, theologically, pastorally or materially with the use of bread and wine.

The case of women and their admittance to the presidency of the eucharist is somewhat different. There is a need for something stronger than tradition when half of those participating in a religion that proclaims the equality of all in Christ, are forbidden by the very fact of their nature from exercising certain aspects of the ministry of that religion. It is not good enough to say that the argument that bases its claim for the priesthood for women on the changed social position of women is a form of the "man come of age" fallacy, as Mr McNeil does. Indeed, some efforts at changing the place of women in society smack more of a regression into an early childhood that demands that everything be the same for everyone. But this is not the issue. The issue is that women's place in society has changed in a very radical way and is still changing. The possibilities inherent in being both human and female have never been so widely shared or acted on as they are today. This is not to say that all such developments are good; not at all. All social forms carry with them the seeds of good and evil, of wisdom and stupidity, as they have always done. But the demand by some women to be allowed the fuller participation in their religion must be taken seriously and discussed with an attitude of openness to the possibilities in such a demand, both for women and for the ministry. Vague and confused theology on the sacraments is far from helpful. Indeed the problems of sacramental theology may well receive renewed and clarifying attention by this very demand.

All the above should not convince anyone that I am straightforwardly in favour of seeing women in the priesthood and that

immediately. There are many problems associated with such a move both for the ministry itself and for those ministered to, as well as for the women who may feel called to take up such a vocation. The present conceptions about the priesthood, the way the ministry as an institution in the Church is arranged and prepared for, suggest to me that the women who become part of such an institution might well develop a species of clericalism (such as that seen in some new married deacons) that many of us would find it difficult to live with. The women who joined the ministry as it is at present exercised might find themselves profoundly changed by it rather than the reverse. We could well end up with women successfully imitating the male of the species in the ministry and what a waste that would be! The other problems involve that of acceptance. Mr McNeil is right, sociologically, to say that the normally accepted symbols have an effect. A good deal of re-education will be needed before a full acceptance of the priestly role exercised by a woman is not only widely accepted, but accepted enough for her to exercise her ministry effectively. Religion, we are told *ad nauseam*, is a highly emotional subject. The acceptance of women as bus drivers, miners or even as leaders of political parties does not entail an easy acceptance of women as priests.

All the above problems could legitimately be raised as valid sociological, psychological and pastoral problems connected with opening the role of priest to women. However, none of these problems has any theological bite at all. It seems to me that Mr McNeil has presented us not with a theological justification for the exclusion of women from the ministry (and specifically the presidency of the eucharist) but with a theological mystification of an area that could do well without it. In reaching his conclusions he has succeeded, in a subject where there is more heat than light, only in raising the temperature.