

## Ordained People In The Church

There is a certain amount of confusion in the Catholic Church these days about the exact value of ordained ministry. For centuries the Church has undoubtedly reserved areas of its life exclusively to the clergy which rightly belong to the people as a whole: most conspicuously, the responsibility for leadership.

When a society does this, it damages itself by losing the valuable contribution the majority have to make to the health and flourishing of its leadership. The only remedy is the openness of the reserved group – in our case, the clergy – to entrants from every part of the body as a whole. In the Catholic Church this proviso has been largely fulfilled, if the entrants happened to be male, and largely unfulfilled if they happened to be female. This situation has been questioned very forcibly in our times, and the question will not go away until it has been answered, not only from above (from the male leadership, naturally committed to the *status quo*) but from the body as a whole. It seems to me that it is a test of the propriety of the *status quo* that this should be seen to be done in a way which respects the feeling of every member.

The history of the matter is obviously tremendously important. What aggravates the situation, I feel, is that many clergy in the past uncritically accepted the rôle of an élite group, and at every level reinforced a rule which suppressed the influence of those excluded from their ranks: usually tacitly and unconsciously, but sometimes on purpose. This favoured the quiet modification of the whole outlook of the community, and all kinds of wrong perspectives were facilitated. This past history is not behind us, even though there are few in the Church who are unalerted to it, or who do not feel it as a painful and shameful legacy.

The solution that occurs to many people as simple and obvious - to widen the recruitment of the clergy to include women - does not appear at all obvious to the Pope. The cast of his loyalty to Christ and the Church as a divinely-led institution will not let him believe that Jesus was *culturally prevented* from assuring women the same place in the Church as men. For John Paul II, the notion that God was waiting for the wisdom of the twenty-first century for so radical a shift seems a vain idea. He finds his obedience to the historical Jesus, and Jesus' historical choice of twelve men, infinitely more important than bowing to what he sees as a cultural shift in one area of history. This is no trivial argument: the Church belongs to Christ, whose word is in the Scriptures.

Those who disagree can point, cogently, to the Pauline notion of *no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female: but all of you are one in Christ Jesus*. Having said that, I don't imagine Paul would have been impressed by the complaint that there were no women among the Apostles: tokenism isn't the point. He would probably think of the rôle of women in a far more culturally determined way, and see them among the ranks of the various ministries within the Body of Christ; we know some of the names of the women on whom he relied. Still, the fact that he would probably not share the modern unease with the situation does not blunt the question which newly arises; such questions, I repeat, do not simply go away. I believe that the ordained ministry is vital to the Church; we do not need anything – from either side of this debate - which vitiates its efficacy.

Theologically (a word no-one seems to expect to see in this debate) it would be good to know if a critical attitude to (say) the sayings of Paul, in terms of cultural conditioning, would have any greater legitimacy than the suggested critique of the

mind of Jesus which the official Church is rejecting; in other words, when we leave behind the Pauline attitude to slavery, telling slaves that God wants them to be obedient slaves, we are certainly advancing from the mindset of a first-century apostle, expressed in Scripture, to a position almost diametrically opposed to his. The American Civil War took this to justify the taking of life.

What we know of the mind of Jesus could similarly be subjected to critical analysis, leading to a situation where we ascribed his thoughts and even principles to cultural influence. Where would such questioning find its boundaries, and how would we safeguard it from the age-old tendency to evade the demands of the Gospel in favour of our personal taste? If Jesus had a cultural blind spot about women – and instead it seems to us that he already differed profoundly from his culture in his treatment and relationship with them – might he not have had a blind spot about marriage? About pacifism? About the Cross?

It is clear that obedience to Christ (the Lord) must needs involve the acceptance of his thinking in place of our own: Paul says: *But we are those who have the mind of Christ*. I would be profoundly unhappy to accept *the letter of the Gospel* as the determining factor of my religion; but I do feel constrained to come to know the Christ who is proclaimed there, and to grow in obedience, and if I can likeness, to him in all things. I have the greatest unease about the making of distinctions, exceptions, and extensions on the way.