

THE FIRST THING

The Ordination of Women

Here's the first question for the first Thing of the new year: *Why do I feel that this particular field is such a hot potato - and getting hotter?* Women have always seemed to me to be the true keepers of the faith (St Peter notwithstanding). In every parish, and in most families, there is a marked tradition that, in religious matters, the women are the ones who set the pace.

Question: *Is this founded in any psychological or religious truth about gender differences?*

The clergy find themselves not only very used to this situation, but reinforcing it consciously or unconsciously every day. Women have *traditionally* been reliable members of weekday congregations: this is partly because they have *traditionally* been at home on weekdays, whilst their husbands have been at work; and the attendance at 9 am masses to this day is made up largely of the retired ladies who used to live in that world, before wives working outside the home became almost the norm. Again, priests used to spend the greater part of their day visiting the parish; in effect this meant visiting women parishioners. There have been attempts, of varying success, to involve the male half of the Church in other ways: *traditionally* the SVP, the Catenians/KSC, and (perhaps significantly) the servers, have operated in male preserves. Presiding over all of these realities is the cardinal fact that *only men are ordained*, so that the official Church does seem to set a particular value on gender. This must rank as one of the most eloquent present-day witnesses to the amazing self-confidence which has marked the Roman Church throughout its history. One could hardly claim that the Church has felt itself obliged to defend its practice in this matter, though some little flurry of activity on the subject has lately been verified. Not least is the assertion of Pope John Paul II that the Church will never be empowered to ordain women "*for fundamental reasons*". The only reasons quoted with any force are that Jesus did not number women among his *apostles* - though many women were among his *disciples*, and were thus available to be so numbered - and that the Church has shown constant obedience to this precedent down 2,000 years. This assertion was backed up by the statement of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (28 x 95) that this view was to be regarded as "*part of the deposit of the faith*" - that is, an irreformable part of what God wants of his Church.

Question: *How does this statement relate to our thinking about the use of people's gifts in the Church?*

There is a movement of opposition in the Church, located significantly in America, but present in Europe as well, based on the principle that the modern re-evaluation of the rôle of women in society has brought about unprecedented conditions: rather than seeing the 2,000-years of exclusively male priesthood as a consistent obedience to Christ, this movement sees it as part of an historico-sociological blinkering of the Church, from which God wants us to be delivered (at last). This reading of history sees the male priesthood as an obedience to historical conditioning.

Just as epoch-making decisions have opened up the professional and political world to women in a new way, the Church too - however belatedly - ought to put its house in order. The Vatican, predictably, sees this as dangerous obedience to the spirit of the age rather than to the Spirit of God. Could a Church guided by the Holy Spirit, the Vatican asks, have erred in so great a matter for so long?

The church documents in this case bring forward two points: firstly, that Jesus displayed remarkable willingness to disobey the custom of his day towards women (witness his treatment of the woman at the well of Samaria, and the woman taken in adultery, and the group of women

from Galilee who follow them to Jerusalem). If he had willed to appoint women to the leadership of the Church and its teaching authority, the argument runs, he would have done so himself *in the teeth of the sociological conditions*. It can be pointed out that Jesus was not afraid to innovate radically (for instance, his declaration that divorce - a commonly-accepted course of action in the Judaic world of his day - was by his followers to be treated as adultery). We can add to this the gospel tradition's universal acceptance that *the first person to meet the risen Lord* is not an apostle, or any man, but Mary of Magdala; there is no suggestion that this was somehow an improper downgrading of the dignity of the apostles.

The second point, advanced by Pope John Paul II, is that if the Lord had wanted women priests, he would certainly have extended such a function to his mother, Mary. Despite the fact that she is defined as the mediatrix of all graces, however, she is never a priestly figure as such.

Despite these arguments, the questions refuse to go away. There is a fairly widespread feeling that in restricting the priesthood to men the Church is losing an awful lot of pastoral talent. Protagonists further suggest that the question of ordaining women has *not* been answered by tradition, for the simple reason that it has never seriously been posed until now. Such people are very ready to accept Jesus as a culturally-determined human being who would not, in the first century, have thought of women in leadership rôles. We could discuss the question of the mind of Jesus of Nazareth: how far was he *culturally determined*, and thus open to "updating"? When Paul says: *Let the mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*, did he mean us to adopt Jesus' understanding of medicine or astrophysics? Some people, of course, would attribute a divine omniscience to Jesus of Nazareth, and would claim that he had such knowledge (and much more that we have yet to discover). Most theologians would not hold this view.

Another factor in the discussion is the view of the priesthood lying behind the various positions. Many protagonists of women's orders have a certain view of the priesthood as a privilege, as a power-position. The exclusion of women thus becomes of a piece with all male oppression of women, and the cause becomes a feminist crusade against a "bastion of male privilege". This would not relate to most priests' understanding and experience of their life of service. The priesthood is in no sense a personal possession or achievement, and any discussion about who should be ordained must relate to the good of the Church, not to anyone's ambition.

There is an argument rooted in the incarnation itself, considered as an act of divine will: Jesus was a man, and it was in that way that God took human form. To meditate on this fact in its fulness takes people into the realm of image, where, by the first commandment, the Hebrew was forbidden to go. Because of Jesus of Nazareth, for the first time it is not a fiction to think of God's face or hands or personality. When people are seeking to imagine Jesus, they think of a man; so that in the Eucharist it has been seen as appropriate that a man should fill the rôle of Jesus. At first this seems to be merely an emotional or cultural factor; but if the incarnation was of eternal significance, then ought not each of its details to be considered as significant, of divine ordinance, laden with *determinative* meaning? We are used to finding meaning in the character of Jesus, his spiritual quality; we are not used to any attempt to exclude it on the grounds that he was obliged to have *some* sort of character, and his *happened* to be brave, or compassionate, or truthful; rather we say that in his qualities the life of God is revealed. Why should we say that he was obliged to have one or other gender, and his *happened* to be male? Is the Church wrong to give such weight to *the way Jesus was* in history?