

CONTROVERSIAL QUESTION: THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

A current controversial media question is Catholic teaching on the ordination of women to the priesthood. This is associated with the reported allegation by a university lecturer that Archbishop Hickey was not consistent in speaking out about the need for women's dignity to be recognised, and remaining faithful to the Church's teaching on this question.

So far the Church's teaching has not itself been reported, but many other confusing ideas have been. I am concerned about women and men being hurt by inaccurate statements about Catholic teaching – such as the Church 'banning' women's ordination. This suggests that the Church has made an anti-women decision, which is untrue.

This article attempts to present briefly what the Church does teach. I then outline questions I have been asked from time to time related to the matter.

The basic Catholic teaching

The best way to understand Catholic teaching on this issue is to start with the practical.

Suppose I conducted a priestly ordination ceremony with women as the candidates. The ceremony could be conducted with great music and much publicity. However, there would be a basic problem. This is that the women concerned would be no different after the ceremony than before. Such an attempted ordination would be invalid (as well as against the law of the Church).

Thus bread and wine would not become the Body and Blood of Christ if they celebrated the Ritual of the Mass. Sins could not be forgiven through the Sacrament of Reconciliation – and so on.

People ask: ‘Why is this so?’ The answer is that neither I, nor any Pope or Bishop, have the spiritual power from Christ to ordain women. This is what Pope John Paul II meant when he said that the Church ‘has no authority’ to ordain women.

Why would the Church say this?

People today often are not clear about the difference between *Church law* and what *Christ’s intention* for his Church. *Christ’s intention* is the ultimate ‘Law’ for the Church.

Christ gave his Church the authority to make to *Church laws* related to fulfilling the mission he gave it [eg Matthew 16:19]. Priestly celibacy is one example. The Church also can change any of *its own* laws – the old law regarding not eating meat on Friday is an example of this.

Christ’s intention, however, is quite another matter. Christ gave his Church no authority to change his intention for his Church. Hence, in Catholic belief, the Church can *only* teach and do what Christ clearly intends. It is not a free agent. Nor does the Church have any spiritual authority or power other than that given it by Christ.

The ordination of women question relates to *Christ’s intention* for his Church. It is not a question of *Church law* – something the Church itself could change.

How does the Church know what Christ intends?

The foundations for determining Christ’s intention for his Church are the Scriptures and Tradition. ‘Tradition’ here comprises those essential means for experiencing Christ personally that he gave the Church community of his followers. This is different from ‘traditions’ such as the rosary or the Stations of the Cross.

The means that make up Tradition allow his followers of every generation to come to know Christ personally. They also enable the Church to be the Church Christ intends us to be. The Eucharist is an obvious example [Corinthians 11:23]. We cannot be the Church without it.

Jesus instituted the ordained priesthood during the Last Supper when he told the twelve Apostles to 'do this in memory of me'. He also taught that their role in the Church was to serve the rest of his community in his name [Luke 22: 19-20; John 13: 6-16].

Other Christian communities do not agree with this Catholic belief in both the Scriptures and Tradition as the sources for determining Christ's intentions. Some believe that social trends and attitudes should be determining considerations. Catholics respect that others sincerely hold beliefs different from their own and hope that others will do the same.

So the reason why the Church teaches that neither I, nor any Pope or other Bishop, have the spiritual authority and power to ordain women is that this cannot be established as Christ's intention in Scripture or Tradition. The Church therefore has not 'banned' women from being priests, or decided not to ordain women. It simply has no power to do so.

Does this suggest that Christ did not see women as equal to men?

I have been asked this question many times. The answer is that Christ saw all people as equal irrespective of any condition, including gender. But what did he see as the criterion for equal dignity?

As Son of God, Jesus saw the basis for the equality of women and men being that they were both created in the 'image and likeness' of God, as taught in the first of the two Creation Stories in the Bible [Genesis 1: 26-27]. Their calling, then, is to reflect God, but in complementary ways.

Hence, males alone cannot reflect God completely. Nor can females. They were created to reflect God *together* but in distinctive ways. It is in their creative and life-giving communion that men and women *together* image God.

The second of the Genesis Creation Stories taught the equal dignity of women and men even more clearly. It begins with the man and the beasts being created by God

from the soil. The man was different, however, because life was breathed into him by the sacred breath of God.

Then the woman was created from the man's rib – not from the soil – for, unlike all other living creatures, she shared the same nature as the man. Nor did God separately breathe life into her.

Instead her life came from the same sacred breath God had already breathed into the man. Culturally speaking, the fact that she shared the same sacred breath of God meant that God created her equal to the man.

Finally, the Creation Stories are followed by the Story of the Fall. This teaches that human failure to respect the equal dignity of women is the result of sin [Genesis 3:16].

The Creation Stories and the Story of the Fall were developed at a time when few could read. God's revelations were preserved in carefully crafted story details people could easily remember.

For Australians, especially Australian media, equality tends to be judged by materialistic and individualistic criteria. Equality tends to mean everyone having the same opportunity to do whatever they wish. Where women cannot 'do' the same as men, they are seen to be discriminated against. This is a different from the criteria revealed by the Creator of human nature.

Nor do all in our society agree that males and females have been created to reflect God equally, but in complementary ways. Examples include those who argue for same-sex marriages and the adoption of children by same sex couples.

To suggest that Jesus might have thought of men as superior to women, when instituting the ordained priesthood, is like suggesting that God might have thought women superior to men when creating them capable of bearing children.

Distinctiveness in the Scriptures does not mean inequality. Equality is based on who human beings are - not what they can or cannot do.

The question for people of faith is: ‘which criteria do I use when thinking of human equality – those revealed by the Creator or those media and a non-religious society tend to adopt?’ Our *feelings* on the women’s ordination issue may give us a clue.

Could Christ have instituted a male priesthood for cultural reasons?

This is another question I have been asked. The answer is clear from how Jesus went about his ministry.

First, Jesus was crucified because he went against, not just the culture, but the very foundations of the culture of his time. In a society built upon a religion, he constantly challenged key elements of that religion, seeking to perfect and purify it. Many of his contemporaries could not accept this.

Jewish society was founded upon the Covenant God made with Israel at Mt Sinai. Jesus was very clear about founding ‘a new covenant’ to bring God’s plan to fulfilment [eg Luke 22:20].

Second, Jesus did not follow the culture of his time in many of his practices. For example, a rabbi in his day usually had five disciples. Jesus very deliberately chose twelve. This was another way in which he indicated his mission to fulfil and perfect God’s covenant that was the foundation of Jewish faith, built as it was on the Twelve tribes of Israel.

Third, Jesus included women among his followers in a culture that did not believe women should be educated. And the gospels report that the first ones charged to tell of his Resurrection were women [eg Mark 16:1].

Furthermore, the perfect model of Christian discipleship was Mary, the mother of Jesus - not an Apostle or any other male. And the best examples presented in the gospels of Christian attitudes were women and the poor – not the Apostles.

Finally, the Passover Meal was attended normally by males and females, young and old. Jesus, however, according to the testimony of the gospels, chose only his Apostles at the Last Supper when he instituted the Eucharist and the ordained priesthood.

Given all this, it is hard for anyone to argue that Jesus felt culturally bound to institute a male-only ordained priesthood. Some of what he did was far more culturally radical.

Are women and men equal in the Church?

This is another question people have asked when discussing the ordination question. The answer is that men and women are equal in the Church because God has created them so. Further, Jesus died for all.

In the Church, all who have been baptised are equal for a further reason. Christ dwells within each. As St Paul wrote, in Christ [Galatians 3:28]

*There can be neither Jew nor Greek....slave nor free man....
male nor female – for you are all one in Christ Jesus*

Unfortunately, in the history of the Church, there are many examples of Church members, including members of the hierarchy, failing to recognise this principle in their behaviour towards women. . All too often, people followed social and cultural attitudes rather than Christ's teachings.

Jesus instituted his Church for sinners who seek salvation [Mark 2:17]. Examples of the unjust treatment of women in the Church are examples of sinfulness - but the basic Catholic teaching that all are equal in Christ remains.

All followers of Christ need to keep striving to live this teaching. The challenge remains for the Church to continue to find ways, in accordance with the will of Christ, for all its members, women and men, to cooperate together in building up the Body of Christ.

Should not women have the right to become priests?

This is another question I have been asked. The answer is that no one has *a right* to be ordained as a priest – male or female. The Church ordains only those it believes have been called by Christ. He is the Head of the Church. The Church, then, can only discern the genuineness of a vocation according to criteria it believes it has received from Christ.

This is why many who enter seminaries eventually leave without being ordained. Either they or those responsible for their formation have realised that these men were not called by Christ.

Women cannot become priests because of the misuse of power by a male 'patriarchy'

The problem with this criticism is that it questions the integrity of the Pope and Bishops of the Church. It is hard to dialogue where personal sincerity is not accepted. The criticism implies also that the Pope and Bishops have a choice in the matter. The fact is, however, that the Church believes itself to be bound by the will of Christ, not its own or majority will.

People have to make their own judgements about my sincerity in this matter, along with that of the Pope and the other Bishops. Please remember, however, that we know that we will have to account for our lives and ministries to Christ when we face him for personal judgement after we die. Surely, anyone who would want to face Christ after trying to thwart his intention on any issue, including the question of women's ordination, would have to be insane!

Conclusion

In summary, Catholic teachings on questions related to the ordination of women are as follows:

- the Church has no authority or spiritual power other than that given it by Christ
- Jesus instituted the ordained priesthood during his Last Supper with the twelve Apostles
- no Pope or Bishop has the authority or spiritual power from Christ to ordain women
- men and women were created equal in every way by God: behaviour that fails to reflect this is the result of human sinfulness
- male and female were created to reflect God in complementary ways
- the Church 'does not discriminate against women', or 'ban' them from ordination to the priesthood because it has no choice or spiritual power from Christ to do otherwise.

In a society and media, in which so many do not believe in God or in the above Christian teachings, the women's ordination question will always be debated. The same is true of those who do not believe men and women have been created to reflect God in equal, but complementary ways.

+GJH

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