

ANGLICANS AND ROMAN CATHOLICS ON THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

AN AMERICAN REPORT

The purpose of this narrative is to report various actions and reactions by Roman Catholics and Anglicans in the United States concerning the ordination of women. To keep the report brief I shall limit its compass to events of the last few years. Primary attention will be given to statements by officials or official bodies of the churches since it would be impossible to give an adequate summary of the wide-ranging material that has been produced by individual theologians and statements of concern issued by various other groups or individuals. My hope is that this report provides a fairly reliable glimpse of the actual state of affairs in America today.

The first statement to come from the Catholic bishops of America concerning the ordination of women appeared in December 1972. It came in the form of a report from their Committee on Pastoral Research and Practices. (Cf. Attachment A) The report reviewed seven reasons customarily advanced against the ordination of women. It gave a brief evaluation of each of these. The position reached in this report is perhaps encapsulated in the sentence which reads "The well-founded present discipline will continue to have and to hold the entire field unless and until a contrary theological development takes place, leading ultimately to a clarifying statement from the Magisterium." With respect to the future, the Committee indicated it did not anticipate a reversal of the present discipline in the Roman Catholic Church saying "Beyond the question of theological possibility is the further consideration of what is pastorally prudent. For the present...we can see from theology only a continuation of the established discipline."

We should not omit to mention that a different point of view was held by at least some in the American Roman Catholic community. In April 1973 the National Coalition of American Nuns published their criticisms of this report. They termed the report self-defeating as well as retrogressive, anti-ecumenical, devoid of pastoral concern, and revealing of (perhaps unconscious) sexism in our tradition. (Cf. Attachment B)

These Catholic actions and reactions came shortly after the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church (in 1972) voted by a narrow majority to favor the eligibility of women for the orders of the episcopate and presbyterate. A more detailed account of events in the Episcopal Church can be found in a recent article by William A. Norgren, associate ecumenical officer of the church. (Cf. "Ecumenical Relations and the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood in the Episcopal Church"-- Attachment C)

In 1973 there was a meeting between Archbishop William W. Baum, chairman of the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Bishop John H. Burt, chairman of the Joint Commission on Ecumenical Relations of the Episcopal Church. These two bodies co-sponsor the Anglican/Roman Catholic

Consultation in the United States (ARC). They recommended that the ARC take up the ordination of women as issue for dialogue on its agenda.

ARC proceeded to this task by inviting a group of scholars with particular expertise and interest in this subject to meet. They produced a report of their discussions in June 1975. (Cf. Attachment D) Then the regular members of ARC met to review the findings of the special group and issue its own further comments on the subject. This second report was published in October 1975. (Cf. Attachment E) During these ARC discussions the members were aware of the fact that the Anglican Church of Canada had already decided in favor of the eligibility of women for ordination to the priesthood. They anticipated that the general convention of the Episcopal Church to be held in 1976 would also come to a decision on this matter. ARC did not seek to exert influence in favor of a single viewpoint as the Episcopal Church approached a decision according to its constitutional processes. In its report, ARC did stress that "there is a particular urgency for mutual consultation before important decisions are taken by either of the two churches which already share so much in common and which intend to persevere in seeking together that unity for which Christ prayed." It added, "This process of mutual consultation, however, must not interfere with the interacting roles of prophecy and authority within either church." ARC stressed that the question put before it for study represented an issue that was indeed new to the life of the church. "...whether a change is advocated or a tradition affirmed, adequate theological reflection is necessary on the part of all concerned, because a decision of either sort would involve a response to a question never before raised in this way."

In October 1975 Archbishop Joseph L. Bernardin, President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, issued a statement opposing the ordination of women. (Cf. Attachment F) His statement took the position that, "It is not correct to say that no serious theological obstacle stands in the way of ordaining women to the priesthood and that the fact that women have not been ordained up to now can be explained simply by culturally conditioned notions of male superiority." He said his statement was prompted by the requirement "that church leaders not seem to encourage unreasonable hopes and expectations, even by their silence." The following November, the Archbishop issued a further press comment in which he pointed out that it was not his intention nor that of the Catholic bishops to rule out all further theological scrutiny of the issue. (Cf. Attachment G)

Again in September 1976 the Archbishop reaffirmed his earlier statement that the Catholic priesthood is not open to females. "My view of the matter remains as I expressed it in the statement of October 1975 in which I said that honesty and concern for the Catholic community, including those of its members who advocate the ordination of women, require that church leaders not seem to encourage unreasonable hopes and expectations even by their silence. Therefore, I am obliged to restate the church's teaching that women are not to be ordained to the priesthood."

In October 1976 1,340 delegates representing 152 dioceses and 92 national Catholic organizations met at a national convocation in Detroit, Michigan. This "Call to Action" conference was convened on the initiative

of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Two resolutions were enacted with respect to the ordination of women.

One proposed "That the NCCB offer leadership and justice to the universal church by providing a process which facilitates the formation of a more fully developed position on the ordination of women to sacred orders.

"To be credible this position must evolve from an open exploration of the rights and needs of persons of the Christian community, the action of the Holy Spirit of the Church, and a collative and interpretative study of the human sciences, of the experiences of other Christian churches, of contemporary biblical exegesis and theological insights as well as of pontifical and episcopal statements. This study should involve appropriate organizations and scholars, lay and religious women, especially women who believe themselves called to the priesthood."

It was also resolved "that the NCCB initiate dialogue with Rome to change the present discipline in the western rite of the Roman Catholic Church to allow women to be ordained to the diaconate and priesthood."

While the delegates who enacted these resolutions were chosen and sent by their dioceses and national organizations, some questioned whether their viewpoints were 'truly representative' of American Catholic opinion in general. It was recognized that by far the majority of the delegates were individuals deeply engaged in the ministry and work of the church. At least on the question of ordaining women it appears their view was that of a minority of American Catholics. National surveys of American Catholic opinion indicate that the majority of American Catholics at the present time do not support the ordination of women. (Only one tier of that population -- Irish American Catholic males over 40 -- show a majority in support of the ordination of women to the priesthood.) At the same time it should be observed that an increasing number of American Catholic women serve in non-ordained ministries: as extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, as members of pastoral teams along with parish priests, as hospital and campus chaplains, etc.

The "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood" issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, though dated this same month (October 1976) did not become public until the following February.

One cannot speak of a single reaction among American Catholics to the Declaration. A critical reaction of note was that written by the faculty of the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California. They addressed their comments to the Apostolic Delegation in the United States on March 16, 1977. They wrote "It is our judgment that the conclusion of the declaration is not sustained by the evidence and the arguments alleged in its support, and that it could sanction within the church a practice of serious injustice." (Cf. Attachment H)

It was first reported in August 1977 that two shadow dioceses had been created out of parishes seceding from the Episcopal Church. One was called the Diocese of the Holy Trinity, the other the Diocese of

San Francisco. In the same month authorities of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles deposed five clergymen and sued their parishes for the return of property following a confrontation over recent liberalization of church practices. The five priests and their parishes were reported to have become affiliated with the Diocese of the Holy Trinity, which also included parishes in Denver, Boulder City, Nevada and Mountain Home, Arkansas. Father George Clendenin, one of the five deposed, said the breakaway groups are not closed to Roman Catholicism and that some 'low' Episcopalians are equally disturbed with changes in their church. He predicted that within several years his group should have a minimum of 500,000 Episcopalians.

In September of the same year approximately 1,750 Episcopalians from the United States and Canada met in St. Louis and called upon sympathetic Episcopal bishops to call a constituting convention at the earliest appropriate time to form a new Anglican community. Their statement, entitled "The Affirmation of St. Louis," was drafted by the leaders of the Fellowship of Concerned Churchmen who sponsored the three-day convention. Bishop Albert A. Chambers, retired bishop of Springfield, Massachusetts, said he would be willing to institute a new church without question or hesitation if two bishops would join him. The Executive Council of the Episcopal Church expressed deep regret at this action taken by the St. Louis meeting.

Also in the same month (September 1977) Episcopal priests from the Diocese of the Holy Trinity visited the Apostolic Delegate in the United States, Archbishop Jean Jadot. They also met with a representative of Archbishop Bernardin. Later the priests said "Exploratory meetings have taken place to set the groundwork for formal conversations." Father John Barker, spokesman for the diocese, which by this time consisted of 25 priests and about 5,000 people, said that he was optimistic. Canon Albert H. DuBois of St. Matthias Church, Los Angeles, said "We hope the Roman hierarchy will accept us as a remnant." At that time a member of Archbishop Jadot's staff confirmed that the priests had met with the Archbishop, who "simply listened to them and...informed the Holy See." Father Maurice Freemeyer of Mountain Home, Arkansas, was one of the priests who met with Archbishop Jadot. He said that he believed a few Episcopalian bishops have privately approached Roman Catholic authorities about being unified personally with Rome.

Near the end of the month (September 26, 1977) the Women's Ordination Conference wrote to Archbishop Jadot expressing their opposition to the entrance into the Roman Catholic Church of the dissident provisional body now calling itself the Anglican Church of North America. (Cf. Attachment I)

At the same time (September 30) the press reported it has questioned Bishop Bernard Law, Chairman of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, concerning these meetings between Episcopalian priests and Roman Catholic authorities. He said "I have no information I can pass on to you." He added "We are in dialogue with the official Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S., but I am not saying we couldn't be or wouldn't be talking to the breakaway church in the future down the pike, if they become a recognized entity it's a possibility."

During this same period (September-October 1977) the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church met at Port St. Lucy, Florida. Presiding Bishop John M. Allin addressed the House, saying "To date I am remained unconvinced that women can be priests. If it is determined by prayerful authority that this limitation prevents one from serving as the presiding bishop of this Church I am willing to resign the office." (The presiding bishop had served four years of the twelve-year term.) For some months after the general convention in Minneapolis Bishop Allin had not spoken on the subject of the ordination of women. Later he referred to the ordination of a homosexual woman in New York as "a mistake." Later on a trip to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1977 he prompted a controversy by referring to the ordination of women as "an experiment."

At this meeting the House of Bishops adopted a 'conscience clause' that would exempt from compliance those bishops or priests who in conscience disagree with the church's decision to ordain women. The House of Bishops also adopted a theological statement that condemns homosexuality as unbiblical, bars ordination of homosexuals to the priesthood and forbids priests of the church from blessing homosexual marriages. However, they declined to censure Bishop Paul Moore, Jr. for ordaining a homosexual woman in January 1977. At this same meeting the House of Bishops decried and repudiated the actions of Bishop Albert Chambers who had been exercising episcopal functions, ordaining and confirming in various dioceses against the express wishes of their residential bishops.

By the close of 1977, the Episcopal Church had ordained 90 women to the priesthood.

In January 1978 the Diocese of the Holy Trinity, largest of five dioceses expected to make up the new Anglican Church in North America, held a meeting of its Standing Committee in Kansas City. They voted overwhelming disapproval of the consecration of any bishops for the new church. The spokesman for the Standing Committee said "The position of the Diocese of the Holy Trinity ever since it was founded is that we do not intend to become another denomination. We are looking for inter-communion with one of the major patriarchal sees within the Catholic tradition." He added that the group "had gotten encouragement from several of the bodies" declining to be more specific. Formal membership in the Diocese of the Holy Trinity was reported to include "probably 21 or 22 parishes," although it was acknowledged that some of these probably have left Holy Trinity to link up with newer geographically based dioceses in the midwest and southern states of the country, and that some of the parishes would be quite small, perhaps numbering no more than ten members. An ordination had been scheduled to take place in Denver that same month. Reverend James Mote, one of the priests to be ordained, said the ordination would proceed as scheduled. Reverend Albert Chambers would be one of the consecrators. Two other bishops (Ernest F. Boynton, formerly of New York and Korean Bishop Mark Pae) who earlier had agreed to participate, more recently withdrew. In fact the ordination did take place, Bishop Francisco Pagtakhan of the Philippine Independent Church joining Bishop Chambers as co-consecrator. Four bishops were ordained in Denver on January 28.

On February 6, 1978 the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church issued a letter expressing disappointment over this ceremony. He also reported that he and the Archbishop of Canterbury were in agreement "that the new ecclesiastical body is not in communion with the see of Canterbury nor in communion with this Province of the Anglican Communion." (Cf. Attachment J)

Also at the beginning of February Bishop Bernard Law confirmed that individual Episcopal priests, groups of priests and some Episcopal congregations had approached the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Vatican "seeking full communion with the Church of Rome." Bishop Law said that the priests are married and ultimately their request would have to be decided by the Holy See. He said the point which motivated them to make such contact was not so much the fact that women were being ordained priests but the manner in which this decision was taken by the Episcopal Church. The willingness of the Episcopal Church to go ahead and act, in a sense unilaterally, reflected to these priests a view of the church which made more distant and remote their hope of full communion between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Bishop Law added that these clergymen have no great difficulty with the change authorizing ordination of women in itself. "They are persons without rancor toward the Episcopal Church. Their hope continues to be not a faction of Christendom, but a fuller expression of ecclesial communion."

This narrative, I trust, presents a fairly accurate record of events as they have unfolded to date in the United States. It is quite evidently a tale the telling of which cannot yet be concluded.

--- John F. Hotchkin