

IN CONTEXT

WILL WOMEN BE ORDAINED?

Last December the U.S. Catholic bishops' Committee on Pastoral Research and Practices released its report entitled, "Theological Reflections on the Ordination of Women" (see "Origins," Vol. II, p. 437). In April, the National Coalition of American Nuns scored the report as self-defeating, retrogressive and "devoid of pastoral concern, either for the women who seek ordination or the persons whom they might help as priests." A study paper prepared by Sister Ann Gillen, Executive Director of the 1800-member sisters' group, says the report contains only arguments against the ordination of women. A tradition developed in the Church, says Sister Ann, which "has been consistently bad news for women." For American bishops who really want honest dialogue, Sister Ann had a number of recommendations, among them: that the bishops invite women theologians to speak at the bishops' annual meetings; that they initiate "consciousness-raising" sessions for clerics; and that they authorize a woman to teach the theology of woman in local seminaries. The text of the NCAN study paper, prepared by Sister Ann, follows.

I. INTRODUCTION:

The report published by the American bishops' Committee on Pastoral Research and Practices contains a number of perplexing paradoxes and indicates very little pastoral concern, unless the latter is interpreted as "concern for pastors." The latter need have no fears of change.

It affirms as purpose "to encourage further study and discussion" but this is counter-balanced by a focus which is, in the name of honesty, confined almost exclusively to a negative perspective.

It claims the authors are "conscious of the deep love for the Church which underlies the growing interest of many women in the possibility of ordination" and further indicates appreciation of the "indispensable contribution to the life of the Church" made by women. However, there is no stirring of any hunger and thirst for justice, no holy impatience because there are flocks without shepherds--or shepherdesses.

It makes a distinction between "sociological trends" and "developments in the Church" as if there were no relation between sociology and theology, or as if the "divine plan" dropped from heaven from some philosopher's paradise where justice always exists in the abstract, or as if revelation were the result of divine dictation.

However, the document does admit some "development," both in the scriptures and in the modern understanding of the Pauline texts which were formerly sufficient sanction to silence women in the Church and to keep them veiled for centuries. One might say it opens a small window of hope for women; possibly the spirit of Pope John is not at rest fully for the work he called for is far from complete--the ridding of every blemish from the image of the Church.

Accepting the document at its face value, then, NCAN makes the following criticisms and recommendations as a contribution to this honest dialogue.

II. CRITICISMS:

1. The report is self-defeating. On the one hand, its purpose is stated "to encourage further study," but the other hand focuses the male perspective of the report negatively identifying "the major questions" as seven arguments against ordination of women. Evidently the past, patriarchal and patristic, producing the male perspective called tradition, which NCAN calls "the male monologue," is expected to have the adequate answer for the questions asked by women or about women today.

NCAN asks: who has determined the major questions? What chance has woman when man has been the "sacred scribe" who monopolized the opportunities for scholarship, composing the scriptures in ancient times, interpreting them in later days, canonizing them as man's record of revelation for man.

Two bibliographies on the question of women in the Church have appeared in past issues of "Origins." They were in Vol. I on pp. 606 and 805. A limited number of copies of those bibliographies are still available.

See also in "Origins" (Vol. II, p. 257f) the text by Sr. Margaret Brennan, President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. She was commenting on the recent motu proprio of Pope Paul reforming minor orders and establishing the formal ministries of lector and acolyte. The motu proprio did not allow for the formal installation of women in the ministries of acolyte and lector--though U.S. Church officials explained at the time that women could serve as lectors and extraordinary ministers of communion. Sr. Brennan's text explored positive aspects of the motu proprio as well as some of the challenging questions they held. And she had some recommendations, among them: "That the Holy See take seriously the timely recommendation made by Cardinal George B. Flahiff of Canada at the synod, namely, 'the immediate establishment of a mixed commission (that is, composed of bishops, priests, laymen and laywomen, religious men and religious women), to study in depth the question of the ministries of women in the church.'"

The address delivered at the 1971 Synod of Bishops in Rome by Cardinal George B. Flahiff of Winnipeg, Canada, asking whether ministries in the Church must be limited to men, appeared in "Origins," Vol. I, on p. 295.

NCAN affirms that this masculine view of "the major questions" is myopic. The most important question of all is this: the distortion of truth inherent in all the 7 "major questions" as a result of an exclusively male perspective. As Poulain de la Barre wrote in the 17th century: "All that has been written about women by men should be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit."

2. The report is *retrogressive*, anti-ecumenical in substance if not in tone as well. The question "has not yet been thoroughly researched for Catholic theology." In 1958, when the Swedish Lutheran Church researched the question, 48 of the 168 member churches of the World Council already allowed ordination of women. By 1970 the number had increased to 70. Still the report calls for "exhaustive study" and expresses the hope that its reflections "will be helpful" to other churches engaged in similar research.

NCAN predicts that Catholic women will become increasingly alienated by the rejection they experience in the Roman Church; they will enroll in Protestant seminaries and seek ordination in other Christian churches or else simply evoke their own unique priesthood as their right and duty if they are to be true to the call of the Spirit inviting them.

3. The report is devoid of pastoral concern, either for the women who seek ordination or the persons whom they might help as priests. It opens and closes with the same note of unconcern:

- A. "A thorough study is required not because of sociological trends." Are the authors completely out of touch with their times?
- B. According to Ida Gorres, "The Catholic priesthood is a unique phenomenon, springing not from the religious needs of the Catholic people, certainly not from any principles or theories concerning the rights of men and women..."

NCAN condemns such unconcern, whether it is exercised in the name of scholarship or supposed objectivity. Jesus would multiply loaves and fishes to fulfill the physical hunger of men and women. He would be the first to reject the "great male" tradition which distorts the meaning of the incarnation. He took on the weakness of humanity. NCAN deplores the obsession of male tradition concerning maleness as tantamount to idolatry.

4. The report reveals, perhaps unconsciously, the sexism of tradition: "The well-founded present discipline will continue *to have and to hold* (italics ours) the entire field unless and until a contrary theological development takes place..." The overtones of some mystical marriage pledge are obvious. It should be remembered that any argument from analogy is far from the full expression of the truth.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Jesus chose a woman to bring the first good news to men. The men, his followers, had to go see for themselves. Since then, they have continued in their lack of trust for women. The tradition they have developed has been consistently bad news for women. NCAN recognizes the tradition of Jesus and urges women to collaborate in the development of the full human perspective of the faith.

2. It seems fairly obvious that women will have to speak as prophets before they -- or other women -- are accepted as priests. Men will never find the full truth alone. No man is adequate to speak for the religious experience of a woman. Humanity is impoverished because women have been deprived of the opportunity to respond freely to the call of the Spirit. The men who made those decisions limiting women are responsible for massive injustice. In former days, men may have been less culpable because there was less cultural awareness. Today men who prolong such injustice are guilty of grave injustice. Women must make men see this clearly.

- 3. If the American bishops really want honest dialogue, let them:
 - A. Give careful attention to the works of American women scholars, rather than going to a German to find words which support their own views.
 - B. Fund competent American men and women scholars who *favor* the ordination of women so that the much neglected other side of the argument might be more fully developed. Think of the sums invested in seminary training for males which reinforces the male view of the priesthood and tradition.
 - C. Invite women theologians to speak to them at their annual meeting to change the image of the Church hierarchy as the most exclusive male club on earth. One teaches by example, and one encourages study and dialogue by providing a right climate of Christian acceptance.
 - D. Initiate "consciousness-raising" sessions for clerics to enable them to overcome anti-feminist attitudes.
 - E. Authorize a woman to teach "theology of woman" in the local seminaries.

Conclusion: Now is the time for all good women to come to the aid of their sex.†