

The Ordination of women
to the Priesthood

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We have been asked what we think about the ordination of women. We feel that the ministry of the Church and woman's position in the order of creation have very positive values in themselves, and that the approach to the question which often speaks in terms of "a profession open to women" and "equality of the sexes" is using terms which are not really relevant.

The ordained ministry is not a profession arising out of the needs of the Church which anyone is free to adopt, but an institution of Christ for his Church, to be continued according to his will by those to whom he gives this vocation. In the New Testament accounts, he chose only men to celebrate the Eucharist, to bind and to loose, to be shepherds of his flock, although he could conceivably have chosen from among the women who followed him during his itinerant ministry, and even to the foot of the cross. The Church has so interpreted his mind from the earliest times onward. This makes a weight of authority and tradition (as distinct from social convention) which cannot lightly be set aside.

The term "equality" so often seems to be used in a spirit of rivalry and self-defence, as if it meant an identity of functions, and that women must, so to speak, prove her equality by doing everything that a man is entitled to do. But in the divine economy while there is perfect equality there is distinction of persons and of function. In the Trinity the Father is always Father, the Source, and he sends the Son who is always Son and has his own work of redemption to fulfil, while the Spirit remains Spirit with his distinct Person and activity. While men and women are undoubtedly equal in that both have been created and redeemed by God, and destined for union and eternal life with him,

he has, from before the Fall, created mankind both male and female, a distinction which affects the whole character, gifts and functions of each: and God saw that it was very good. Thus it seems to be inherent in our nature that we are not self-sufficient individually but created to find our fulfilment in complementarity, society and unity. A distinction of functions does not imply inferiority and woman will be most truly herself in living out her own nature in this complementarity which God has willed.

We are repeatedly brought back to the Biblical presentation of the nature of men and women, to the fact that the man is the head of the natural family unit, and to the Christological parallels drawn by St. Paul. At the Eucharist the celebrant is in some measure the representative of the congregation before God, the representative of Christ to the congregation, and the intermediary of God of whom Christ always spoke as Father: therefore it seems most fitting that a man should fulfil this position.

Our experience, both within the community and with our guests, shows that there can be a deep level of spiritual relationship and counselling without the giving of absolution, with which would go the silent bearing of the knowledge of the perhaps grave sins of others, which could be a heavy burden to a woman's sensitive mind. Indeed, by the objectivity of a man's mind, by his freedom from the physical and psychological variations to which a woman is subject, and also from the primary duty in the case of a married woman to spend many years in bringing up children, he seems more suited by nature for the calling of a priest. There are many other ways by which a woman can lead a dedicated and fruitful life of service, particularly as a deaconess, without the introduction of so controversial a measure as the ordination of women which could be a divisive factor at a time when Christians are striving for unity.

Our prayers will certainly be with you in your work upon this question which is of such importance to the Church.