

HEYTHROP DAY CONFERENCE

THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN IN THE CONTEXT OF
FORMAL ANGLICAN-ROMAN CATHOLIC DIALOGUE:
ROMAN CATHOLIC-ANGLICAN DAY CONFERENCE,
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My paper this morning will relate to the ordination of women in the context of the official dialogue between the Churches of the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church. I stress official- because that is what I know a little about and because we can all become the victims of personal theological opinions - whether for or against the ordination of women. In the Church of England we have suffered rather too much from protagonists or antagonists quoting their tame Roman Catholic theologians. And in any change of official relationship between our two Communion we have, in the end, to take the Churches as they officially are, as well as working for closer unity and convergence. I will also be confining myself to the world level, as this is for the foreseeable future the only level at which one can speak of an official

Roman Catholic viewpoint on such an issue. I will begin by tracing the modest official discussion between the two Churches.

In July 1975 Archbishop Donald Coggan wrote to Pope Paul VI. The Archbishop informed the Pope of "the slow but steady growth of a consensus of opinion within the Anglican Communion that there are no fundamental objections in principle to the ordination of women to the priesthood". Four months later the Pope told the Archbishop that the Catholic Church "holds that it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood for very fundamental reasons". The reasons included a male apostolate, the consistent practice of the Church, and the "living teaching authority which has consequently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his Church".

The correspondence was continued by the Archbishop of Canterbury in February 1976.

Archbishop Coggan said "We believe....unity will be manifested within a diversity of legitimate traditions because the Holy Spirit has never ceased to be active within the local Churches throughout the world. Sometimes what seems to one tradition to be a genuine expression of such a diversity in unity will appear to another tradition to go beyond the bounds of legitimacy". The Pope, in his reply, recognized the strong likelihood of ordination to the priesthood in some parts of the Communion. A realistic recognition as this indeed happened shortly afterwards in the USA and Canada. But Paul VI again spoke of "so grave a new obstacle and threat" to reconciliation.

Between these two exchanges there had been what have come to be called 'informal talks' between staff of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and Anglicans responsible for the dialogue between the two Communions at the international level.

The meeting in November 1975 recommended that a small Joint Consultation should consider:

"To what extent and in what ways churches with women priests and churches without women priests can be reconciled in sacramental fellowship".

The so-called Versailles Consultation was to meet only at the end of February 1978, the idea of some consultation having been accepted by the Plenary Meeting of the Secretariat for Unity in Rome and the Standing Committee of the Anglican Consultative Council.

In the meantime the official Roman Catholic position had received clearer expression in the Declaration of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: Inter Insigniores of October 1976. Alongside the Declaration a commentary was also published. This, however, was unsigned and its status is far from clear: the commentary, nevertheless, does explicitly set the Declaration in the context of developments within the Anglican Communion and cites the correspondence between Paul VI and Donald

Coggan.

The Declaration itself is well known, but I would want to emphasize that a careful reading of Inter Insigniores reveals important lines of argument. The first reason given for rejecting women's ordination is the Church's constant tradition. I would only comment for the moment that the Declaration also acknowledges that the Magisterium had not felt the need to intervene until the present debate. The Tradition is not therefore quite the same here as a tradition which includes the conscious decision of councils or popes. This is the first official statement on the subject- it is unlikely to be the last. The second reason given is the attitude of Christ: that is to say an exclusively male apostolate. It is well known that the Pontifical Biblical Commission came to a slightly different conclusion and declared that the New Testament

evidence was not itself decisive either for or against the ordination of women. The third reason is the teaching of the apostles - especially Paul. The Declaration then looks at the permanent value of the attitude of Jesus and the Apostles. This is summarised and there is again a stress on Tradition: "it is a question of an unbroken tradition throughout the history of the Church, universal in the East and in the West". This norm is "considered to conform to God's plan for his Church". Here we have the identical words of Paul VI to Archbishop Coggan. It is interesting to speculate which were drafted first. It is only after all this that we have the rather complicated handling of ministerial priesthood, and sacramental and biblical symbolism. And all of this argument is only claimed to be illustrative: "it seems useful and opportune to illustrate this norm by showing the profound fittingness that theological reflection discovers.. It is not a question here of bringing forward a demonstrative argument but of clarifying this teaching by the

analogy of faith". (Emphases mine). This is heavily coded but the message is clear. It is the unbroken tradition which is the prime argument. The Declaration does not claim the sacramental argument does more than show the appropriateness of maintaining the tradition.

I have already mentioned the origins of the Versailles Conversation. This was the first serious attempt to confront the question of the ordination of women at the level of the Anglican Communion and the world-wide Catholic Church. But it attempted this from the standpoint of a very specific question: could there be a sacramental relationship between Churches which did and did not ordain women to the priesthood. This may have been too restrictive but I believe that the work done at Versailles was not without value. I will quote the key paragraph as the document is not well known:

"Two things may be seen as ground for hope. First there is the fact that those Anglican churches which have proceeded to ordain

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women to the presbyterate have done so in the conviction that they have not departed from the traditional understanding of apostolic ministry (expressed for example in the Canterbury Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission). In the second place there is the fact that the recent Roman Catholic Declaration does not affirm explicitly that this matter is de jure divino. These facts would seem not to exclude the possibility of future developments."

I would underscore two things: Anglican provinces and individuals who have proceeded to the ordination of women have consistently stressed their action is a development of Tradition, not a disjunction. The present Archbishop of Canterbury at the recent debate in the General Synod put it this way:

"We also owe it to the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches to take our decision on grounds of catholic order. If this decision is to be made it must not be made on the basis of a change in the character of priesthood but as an expansion of eligibility to the priesthood.

My second point is that the Versailles conversationalists did not lightly make the claim that Inter Insigniores did not go as far as to say that the exclusion of women from the priesthood was de jure divino. There were those on the Roman side who knew the precise history of the drafting of Inter Insigniores and they persuasively argued that this omission was significant. So grounds for hope were recognised.

Most unfortunately the final sentence of that crucial paragraph was ambiguous: mention of the "possibility of future developments" was not, I believe, intended to suggest that the Roman Catholic Church was about to change its practice. But the wording was read that way in Rome and so, later in the year, at the 1978 Lambeth Conference, the Official Roman Catholic delegation was obliged to soft-pedal the Report of the Versailles Consultation. An official statement was made to the Conference to the effect that the official position of the Roman Catholic Church on this matter "was not destined to change". But the ineligibility of women as not de jure divino was not disowned. This still seems to me to be of significance for the future. I shall return to this when I reach the work of ARCIC-II.

The following year, 1979, saw the publication of the Elucidations of ARCIC-I to the earlier Agreed Statements on Eucharist and Ministry. The Commission rightly or

wrongly avoided a major discussion of the issue, but recognized that there had been rapid developments with regard to the ordination of women since the completion of its work on ministry in 1973. ARCIC also noted that those Anglican Provinces which have ordained women to the presbyterate believe that their action implies no departure from the traditional doctrine of the ordained ministry. It contented itself with adding that the ordination of women did not affect its doctrinal agreement because the Commission was concerned with the origin and nature of ordained ministry not with who can or cannot be ordained. While ARCIC-I was right to stress that objections to the ordination of women are of a different kind from past Roman Catholic objections to the validity of Anglican Orders, it is not difficult to see why some Anglican supporters of the ordination of women felt ARCIC had ducked the problem. Yet it is interesting that ARCIC-I cannot have seen the ordination of women as over-turning the nature of ministerial priesthood.

Its silence was important.

When we look at the present Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission it is clear that the ordination of women is a central issue. This was implicit in the mandate of ARCIC-II, the Common Declaration of Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Robert Runcie in Canterbury in 1982. They spoke of the agenda as including "all that hinders the mutual recognition of the ministries of our Communion". This necessarily involves the old question of Apostolicae Curae and the new question of the ordination of women.

The correspondence between Archbishop Runcie and both Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Willebrands now makes what was implicit explicit. In the exchange of letters with Cardinal Willebrands important issues are focussed. The Archbishop notes his own cautions but speaks in the name of a Communion which includes Provinces which do ordain women. He argues for the ordination of women on catholic grounds:

namely, that the priest indeed represents Christ to the Church, especially in eucharistic presidency, but that it is the Risen and Ascended High Priesthood of Jesus which is thus represented. And at the Ascension Christ takes the whole of humanity with him into heaven, female as well as male. The basis of the argument is the patristic conviction that the incarnation is about the taking of the whole of humanity into the heavenly realms. The argument is not that an exclusively male priesthood cannot represent Christ's Ascended High Priesthood but that an inclusive priesthood would now do so more appropriately. The Cardinal of course agrees that one of the functions of the priesthood is to stand in persona Christi but argues that Christ's male identity is "an inherent feature of the economy of salvation" and that the sacramental ordination of men takes on force and significance because of "the symbolic and iconic role of those who represent (Jesus Christ) in the eucharist". There is also argument

from the responsive female imagery of the Church in Scripture. But once again it is interesting to see that the first reasons against the ordination of women given in the Cardinal's letter are related to Tradition: "The ordination only of men to the presbyterate and episcopate is the unbroken Tradition of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Neither Church understands itself to be competent to alter this Tradition". The Cardinal goes on to add that the principal reason put forward in Inter Insigniores for resisting the ordination of women is indeed this tradition. I therefore see the symbolic and iconic arguments as essentially corroborative rather than demonstrative.

What does ARCIC-II do with all this. It has not yet definitely decided how to approach the ecumenical problem of the ordination of women. One way which has been proposed would be to look at what is required for communion. If indeed the ordination of women is contrary to catholic faith - I emphasize faith - there can

be no communion or degrees of communion with a Church which either ordains women as a whole or in some of its provinces. But if it is not quite de fide that women cannot be ordained then there could - all other things being equal - be some degree of communion. Not I think full communion which would presuppose a ^{full and} ~~the~~ ^{mutual interchange} ~~of~~ ^{ability} ministries, but some degree of communion between traditions which do and do not ordain women. This is no easy solution. It would raise very difficult questions for Anglicans favourable to the ordination of women - could they accept a degree of communion which would not give women priests recognition alongside men. But how could Rome recognize Anglican women priests while not allowing priestly vocation to her own daughters. One advantage of looking at the question from a koinonia framework is that it is realistic. I see no prospect of a change of practice in Rome in regard to the ordination of women in the foreseeable future. I do, however, see the theological question becoming more open. I

have already spoken of a reticence to put the non-ordination of women at the level of faith.

Another important advantage of a koinonia framework is of a different order. The purpose of ecclesiastical communion is to be a sign to wider humanity of the communion God intends for the whole of creation. The Community of the whole of humanity is - amongst other things - a community of women and men, to use the WCC jargon. In this perspective women's ordination can be seen as something positive - a sign of God's Kingdom.

Others in ARCIC-II have expressed the view that the Commission should examine the question in itself and not be content with simply asking whether there can be any sacramental relationship between traditions which differ on this issue. Perhaps what we have here are not alternatives but short and long-term objectives for the dialogue between our Communion. In any case we need the humility to recognize that we are in the middle of a debate which may not be settled for some time. We need the humility

to recognize that the 'reception' of change and development in the Church is necessarily slow and cannot be wholly identified with magisteriums or synods. Rome will need to recognize that this issue will not fade away. So also Anglicans who are opposed. Those in favour, Catholics and Anglicans, will also need the humility to recognize the development may be wrong. / Reception is very much the Gamaliel principle: if a thing is of men (or women) it will fail, but if it is of God it will not be overthrown.

I said a moment ago that I hoped the issue would gradually become more open theologically at the official level with the Roman Catholic Church. I don't think this is simply professional ecumenical optimism. The Roman Catholic Church already has a great experience of the ministry of women in the Church. Anglicans need to be rather humble about this. The contribution of women religious to mission, Catholic education and pastoral care is incalculable. The Roman

Catholic Church also has a way of equipping the laity Anglicans need to pay regard to. It is not I believe without significance that women are now very extensively used as extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist throughout the Roman Catholic Church. This, incidentally, makes the row about female servers faintly ridiculous - if women can administer Holy Communion, they can do lesser tasks too. With the news of the first female diaconal wedding fresh this week, I note the new Roman Catholic code of Canon Law allows dispensation to lay persons to conduct weddings in the absence of a priest. The Code also allows lay persons to become diocesan chancellors. There are women chancellors in both our Churches in this country today. A chancellor shares a real Jurisdiction with the bishop of the diocese. Its potestas. These are pointers to the fact that the debate and the experience are not static.

I must now begin to conclude. It is also time I slid a little off the fence - always a painful process. My personal conviction is

that there are good theological reasons for advocating the ordination of women to the priesthood. I do not therefore think the ordination of women is plainly contrary to Catholic faith. But I do not believe in private judgement. My personal convictions must be submitted to the Church. Now while I recognize a deep loyalty to my mother church and to Anglicanism, in the end I believe in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, rather than any one province or denomination. So what the rest of the Church does is important for me.

While I do not unchurch those traditions which have a uniform ministry I recognize a special affinity on this issue with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches because I believe we share the same ministry of bishops, priests and deacons. So the official rejection of the ordination of women by the Roman Catholic Church is more than ^{simply} an ecumenical problem because the verdict of the Roman Catholic Church is part of my evidence for deciding whether this is or

is not a right development. While the Roman Catholic Church is officially against, I have hesitations about a too swift Anglican advance. I can only advance in a tentative manner with an open view of reception which might mean the wider acceptance of the ordination of women or the reverse. When I look at how the great decisions of history were made I accept the argument that ecumenical councils were not called before local change but to give or withhold Catholic endorsement to local development. I would plead for this tentativeness on the part of both protagonists and antagonists of women's ordination. Without such tentativeness we shall not easily discover whether the ordination of women is indeed in accordance with catholic faith or contrary to it.

Such a tentativeness will not be easy for those who believe strongly in their own or others' vocation. I recognise this. Nor will it be easy for those who have a deep conviction of the wrongness of the ordination of women.

Such tentativeness is appropriate because if I try to answer today's question: is the ordination of women contrary to Catholic faith, the official Roman Catholic answer seems to be: we don't yet know with assurance whether it is in accordance or whether it is contrary to Catholic faith. The Roman Catholic Church is not about to change its practice because of the universal tradition: while theological reasons can be used to illustrate the appropriateness of maintaining the tradition of a male priesthood - some of which later speakers will be critically examining - the theological reasoning does not seem to be the main reason for opposing this development. The diaconate for women does not appear to be a problem - and a major reason for this is the Byzantine tradition of a real women's diaconal ministry within the history of the Church. So we come at the end to questions of authority and the processes of change. A subject which will also be addressed later. Does the Church of God make changes only after completely conscious

dogmatic reasoning. Or do changes intuitively happen which are then judged by the organs of the Church and the sensus fidelium?

And the final question is what and where is the Church. If, ~~at least~~ historically, change happens locally and is then judged universally, what counts as local experience? The Anglican Churches seem to be moving slowly towards the ordination of women - not without deep misgivings and hesitations on the part of some. Is this experience part of the evidence of the living Tradition of the Church - the community of the Holy Spirit. Does the experience of Churches not in communion with Rome count? Including the Churches of the Anglican Communion, which the Second Vatican Council declared to include essential Catholic "structures".

Nothing in Catholic theology or practice suggests the ossification of tradition - the view that because something has never happened before it can never ever happen. But the

ministry and sacraments are essential for the cohesion of the Body of Christ. They should not be changed lightly. In the end we come down to how the instincts, ~~and~~ experience, and theology of part of the Christian community are discerned by those who have authority in the Church and how both that experience and discernment are received by the whole Church. All this in a divided Christianity in which the organs of authority are necessarily impaired by schism - neither Anglicans nor Roman Catholics would claim that either Roman magisterium or synodical government are perfect models and examples of authority. So you will see why my priorities are still ecumenical, because in the end I think the problem is one of tradition, authority and where you find the Church. Because my imperative remains the search for the wholeness of Christian unity, those of you who are committed to the ordination of women will have to try to understand my 'reticence'. For me 'catholic faith' cannot be known with assurance outside

the unity of the whole Church. I recognize the experience of those Anglican Churches which ordain women. But while Christian opinion remains divided, I cannot yet say the ordination of women is in accordance with Catholic faith - ~~but~~ nor am I saying it is against. We are still in the middle of a long process of discernment. All of us, whether for or against, have to live with this tension until the mind of the whole Church is clear.

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