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ECUMENICAL RELATIONS AND ORDINATION OF WOMEN TO THE PRIESTHOOD IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

WILLIAM A. NORGREN

Debate about the ordination of women has sometimes appeared to be a "dialogue of the deaf." Speakers on both sides explain their position, but their voices pass one another by. The debate will continue for a long time and has become exceedingly complex. Positions of churches and also positions within churches have been clarified, however, and matters seem to have come to the point where understanding between divergent positions can grow. Future discussion and even the tensions may help to clarify other questions and light up new areas.

These reflections are written just nine months after the Episcopal Church's General Convention decided to remove canonical obstacles to the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate, and must therefore be somewhat tentative and exploratory. Episcopalians owe to Christians of other communions an explanation of the present position in the Episcopal Church before they can ask for their understanding. We shall not focus here on the issue itself, but rather on ecumenical relations after the decision.

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The Decision

We must be accurate. What actually happened in September, 1976 at the General Convention in Minneapolis? Action on the issue was initiated in the House of Bishops with the introduction of the following resolution calling for a canonical (not constitutional) change:

> Resolved, the House of Deputies concurring, that a new section 11 of Title II, Canon 9, be adopted, with renumbering of the present Section 1 and following, the said Section 1 to read as follows:
>
> Section 1. The provisions of these Canons for the admission of Candidates, and for the Ordination to the three Orders; Bishops, Priests, and Deacons shall be equally applicable to men and women.

The Rev. William A. Norgren is The Associate Ecumenical Officer of the Episcopal Church.

Following lengthy debate, the Bishops adopted the resolution by a vote of 95 in favor, 61 against, with 2 abstaining.

After the results of the vote were made known, the Bishop of Eau Claire read the following statement and invited other bishops to sign:

> We stand committed to the Episcopal Church, and we are determined to live and work within it. We cannot accept with a good conscience the action of this House. We believe that to do so would violate our ordination vows to be faithful to and to defend the Word of God in Holy Scripture.
>
> Furthermore, we cannot acknowledge the authority of this General Convention to decide unilaterally and in the face of the expressed disapproval of our Roman, Old Catholic and Orthodox brethren, a question which ought to be decided by an ecumenical consensus.
>
> The ordination and consecration of women priests and bishops will raise for us the gravest of questions—that is, how far this Church can accept such ministrations without fatally compromising its position as a Catholic and Apostolic Body. We ask our brothers in this House to take to heart our resolution. We ask the whole Church to take note of our unshaken loyalty to the Episcopal Church, its teachings, its spirituality, its priesthood and its sacraments.

The next day, the House of Deputies, after lengthy discussion, voted by dioceses and orders to concur with the House of Bishops' action. In the Clerical Order 114 diocesan votes were cast. With 58 needed, there were 60 in the affirmative, 39 in the negative, and 15 dioceses were divided. In the Lay Order 113 diocesan votes were cast. With 57 needed, there were 64 in the affirmative, 36 in the negative, and 13 dioceses were divided.

After the vote a deputy from Milwaukee read a statement similar to that which had been made in the House of Bishops. Deputies were invited to sign it, indicating their conscientious inability to accept the results.

Near the close of General Convention a statement of pastoral concern was drawn up by the Bishop of Central Florida and signed by thirty-two bishops on the minority side expressing the view that the anomaly the Convention had made permissible did not mean the Episcopal Church had abandoned its catholic and apostolic heritage:

> As bishops of the Church deeply committed to the unity of the Church, we would give a word of reassurance and hope to the

many clergy and laity who are deeply disturbed by the action of this 65th General Convention to authorize the ordination of women to episcopacy and priesthood.

We find it most difficult to accept this action. We believe that the consequences of it will introduce an anomaly into the ministry of the Church. However, anomalies have existed in the Church at other times in its history. One such anomaly similar to this one occurred during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries when great numbers of non-espicopally ordained ministers functioned in the Church of England. As was true then, so now, we are confident that anomalies do not destroy the Church. They in fact exist in every branch of Christendom. The authority of a convention or other council of the Church depends upon more than a majority decision on church legislation. In matters of Faith and Order it is generally accepted that *consensus* and not just majority agreement is necessary. Furthermore, that consensus must come from acceptance amongst the faithful throughout the Church before its authority is established. An election is not the final decision.

In this particular case there was not a consensus of the Church but a division of the Church. Less than a two-thirds majority in the House of Bishops, and a *bare* majority in the House of Deputies is no consensus. Therefore we would have to say that this action is not a clear manifestation of the mind of the Church. We would also point out that it is not irreversible.

There are many who will have a deep problem of conscience about receiving the Sacrament at a Eucharist at which the celebrant is a woman. This problem does not arise from anger or rancor, nor does it imply withdrawal from the Episcopal Church, but from a serious question as to the authenticity of episcopacy or priesthood conferred upon women as a result of the action of this Convention.

We send our assurance to anxious members of our Church. While living with this anomaly, we wait in confidence upon the leading of the Holy Spirit. We would remind one and all that our Orders as Bishops in the Church of God have *not* been invalidated; Catholic and Apostolic life can and shall continue in the Episcopal Church. We pledge to work within the Church for the re-establishment of our historic and Apostolic Faith and Order, while waiting upon the Lord. The Bishops and Priests of our Church must continue to celebrate the Sacraments, preach the Gospel, and pastorally support those who have been shaken by this crisis in ministry. Pray, beloved in Christ, for the unity of the Church.

This brief account of what happened in Minneapolis clearly shows that the Episcopal Church has decided through its canonical legislature that women can be ordained to the priesthood and episcopate and that they may be so ordained. At the same time, it clearly shows that a consensus on such ordination has not emerged among leaders of the Episcopal Church. So far, up to 100 women have been ordained to the priesthood out of a total of 11,900 priests.

Background of the Decision

The question of women in ministry was first discussed in General Convention in 1871, and in 1889 it was decided to admit women to the order of deaconess. Deaconesses often served in places where there were no priests and began to preside over the assembly for Morning and Evening Prayer. Gradually the canon on deaconesses was made less restrictive, male diaconate was restored as a permanent order and not merely a step to the priesthood, and the General Convention of 1970 decided that deaconesses were true deacons.

The Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops took up in 1920 the broad question of women in ministry in the encyclical letter which included the following important statement of principle on the customs (not dogmas) of the Church: "We feel bound to respect the customs of the Church, not as an iron law, but as results and records of the Spirit's guidance. In such customs, there is much which obviously was dictated by reasonable regard to contemporary social conventions. As these differ from age to age and country to country, the use which the Church makes of the service of women will also differ."

In the Episcopal Church, articles in theological journals, statements by theological faculties, and books on the theological issues and on human sexuality, have indicated that a sizable majority of the theological community believes that the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate is now theologically acceptable, though a significant minority is not so persuaded.

The Lambeth Conference in 1968 expressed the opinion that Biblical and theological considerations were not decisive either for or against ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate. All parts of the Anglican Communion were asked to study the matter and report back to the Anglican Consultative Council. The Council then discussed the question at two successive meetings, when various churches reported their findings and were supported by the Council in further action.

The House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church in 1972 voted an expression of opinion by a narrow majority in favor of the eligibility

of women for these orders. When the question came before the House of Bishops again in 1974, the same subject was approved by an overwhelming majority.

A careful review of the question was undertaken by Roman Catholic and Anglican scholars in the U.S., leading to a statement by the Anglican-Roman Catholic Consultation in 1975.[1] Its conclusion was that each church must decide the issue for itself.

The Anglican-Orthodox Theological Consultation in the U.S. met in 1973 and in 1976 to consider the effect of a decision to ordain women. Its 1976 statement was in two parts.[2] The Orthodox held that the question involves not only church discipline but also the Christian faith as expressed in the Church's ministries. God created mankind as male and female, establishing a diversity of function and gifts which are complementary but not all are interchangeable. Approval would have a decisively negative effect on the issue of the recognition of Anglican orders and would call for a reassessment of the goals of the dialogue. The Anglicans held that dealing with this question required both a willingness to be led into a new perception of the truth and fidelity to the basic tradition of the faith. Orthodox and Anglicans agreed that there can be no inferiority of women in the eyes of God. The question is whether withholding from women the sacrament of ordination violates the common status of all Chrisitans imparted in Baptism. Orthodox say no to this question and some Anglicans agree with them; others see a contradiction.

The international Anglican-Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Discussions issued in 1976 a communique noting the many difficulties which remain to be overcome, among which ordination of women will figure prominently. The Orthodox delegates stated it would create "a very serious obstacle to the development of our relations in the future."[3]

A consultation in 1976 with the Polish National Catholic Church, which shares with the Episcopal Church a concordat and intercommunion, concluded that the PNCC would continue to support the agreement of intercommunion with the understanding that if women were ordained they would not function in any sacramental acts involving PNCC members or priests.[4]

1. "Christian Unity and Women's Ordination," *Ecumenical Bulletin* (Episcopal Church), No. 15, 1976, p. 25.

2. "Statement on the Ordination of Women," *Ecumenical Bulletin*, No. 16, 1976, p. 26.

3. "Anglican-Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Discussions: Communique," *Ecumenical Bulletin*, No. 19, 1976, p. 17.

4. "Polish National Catholic Policy," *Ecumenical Bulletin*, No. 18, 1976, p. 26.

A consultation in 1976 with representatives of the Consultation on Church Union discussed a growing sense of authenticity of priestly experience among ordained men and women in Protestant communities, the problems which women in ordained ministry meet and raise in the churches and the wider society, and an affirmation by COCU representatives and some of the Anglicans of a priesthood which in its female and male membership symbolizes wholeness for the Church and points toward a richer imaging of the presence of God among his people.[5]

The Episcopal Church after the Decision

Reactions in the Episcopal Church to the Minneapolis decision have been somewhat muted, but it is clear that the question of women's ordination is far from settled. Most people hold some opinion, but it is important to be aware that, despite the publicity given to polarization in the Episcopal Church, there are various shades of opinion between out-and-out advocates and opponents. Many people are neither deeply thrilled nor greatly scandalized by the implementation of what has been discussed for so long.

Opposition to women's ordination comes from a sizable bloc of leaders, though it is hazardous to assess the numbers involved. In some dioceses opposition is a small minority while in others it is the great majority among clergy and laity. In perhaps twenty-five per cent of the dioceses no ordinations of women to the priesthood will take place.

The grounds on which the opposition is based are being carefully stated by leaders: Jesus commissioned only men; the priest, representing Christ to the people, has always participated in His "maleness;" the General Convention had no authority to change this rule of catholic order by amending either the canons or the constitution without an ecumenical consensus.

Advocates of the ordination of women argue that women and men are created together in the image and likeness of God; being in Christ is to be capable of representing Jesus Christ in the world, and why not in the Eucharist; classic statements of the reason for excluding women from the priesthood depend on their inferior status.

Dissent has taken certain institutional forms. The more moderate approach, taken at a Chicago meeting sponsored by the Coalition for the Apostolic Ministry, is to remain in and support the Episcopal Church but to refuse to accept women priests in any way. Fourteen bishops and more than two hundred clergy and lay leaders signed there an Evangelical and Catholic Covenant stating that "the

5. "Consultation on Church Union," *Ecumenical Bulletin*, No. 18, 1976, p. 29.

ordination of women to the episcopate and priesthood provides no assurance of apostolic authority, consecration, ordination, absolution and blessing. Therefore we will not accept sacramental acts of this new ministry." What is envisaged is a coalition, similar to a missionary society, providing educational and theological guidance, materials on liturgy and spirituality, and procedures and strategies to make sure they are heard in dioceses. The aim is not simply to oppose priesthood for women, but rather to give shape and definition to a movement of positive witness to catholic truth as seen in the coalition.

It is illuminating to take note at this point of the meaning of "dissent" as understood in a Letter to the Apostolic Delegate from the faculty of the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California, opposing the Vatican declaration against the ordination of women (see below):

> The whole purpose of our writing will be vitiated beyond repair if the nature of our dissent is misunderstood. Public disagreement and frankness of response can often be taken in other cultures or read by unfriendly eyes as schism or as insult or as disobedience to lawful authority.
>
> Precisely the opposite is the case. We dissent not because we disassociate ourselves in any way from the Catholic Church or from the Roman pontiff, but because we feel ourselves very much united with both. Dissent in our culture is the protest of those who belong. It is the loyal opposition of those who feel that their very identification is leading them into a situation in which they seem to acquiesce in what is evil.[6]

The American Church Union, long-time association of Anglo-Catholics, also rejected the Minneapolis decision. A third organization, Anglicans United, founded by Albert J. Du Bois, former executive of the American Church Union, has been disowned by the ACU council. Canon Du Bois is planning a "continuing Anglican" diocese for North America, saying that he knows of at least fifty parishes that would join. In words reminiscent of the 19th century schism which resulted in the Reformed Episcopal Church, though for opposite reasons, Canon Du Bois has said, "We are not founding a new church; we are not leaving the Episcopal Church as constitutionally established in the USA; we represent the loyal remnant. The others have left us."[7] He has expressed confidence

6. "Letter to the Apostolic Delegate," *Origins, NC Documentary Service*, Vol. 6, p. 661.

7. Diocesan Press Service, Executive Council of the Episcopal Church, January 6, 1977.

that a parallel Episcopal jurisdiction could be established. A fourth organization, the Fellowship of Concerned Churchmen, while vigorously opposed to the Minneapolis decision, also disassociated itself from Anglicans United.

The majority favoring priesthood for women has understandably not formed new institutions, but organizations such as the Episcopal Women's Caucus may move into the area of deployment of women priests. A Task Force on Women set up through the lay ministries office of the Episcopal Church is expected to work in the broad field of ministries for women, lay and ordained.

As it touches the sacramental life of the Episcopal Church, we sadly record the announcement of the Prime Bishop of the Polish National Catholic Church that "the relationship of sacramental intercommunion between our two churches is terminated until a determination is made by our General Synod." Intercommunion between the two churches was in force for thirty years. The future is unclear because the International Old Catholic Bishops Conference, to which the PNCC belongs, rejected the ordination of women to the priesthood, but deliberately refrained from precipitate action and called for joint discussion on the subject.[8] Thus the Episcopal Church remains in communion with the Old Catholic Churches in Europe, if not with the PNCC.

Anger and hurt have been widely experienced in the Episcopal Church over the last nine months and, of course, in the years before Minneapolis. The fact allows us to describe the Episcopal Church as a "suffering church." When in the Body one suffers, all suffer. The Church cannot, of course, be built on anger and hurt, but the pain of suffering may be part of the growth. We hope for an assisting response within our Anglican communion and our sister churches beyond in the one Body.

The Presiding Bishop, John M. Allin, has spoken to this pastoral situation and to the need to strengthen the existing communion and fellowship within the body of the Episcopal Church, which now becomes more diverse. There is no better summary of our present position.

> The only pure and perfect expression of ministry and priesthood we can know is Jesus Christ our Lord. At best all other expressions among us are 'becoming.' None is 'perfect' . . .
>
> The diversity of this Church was again demonstrated in the Minnesota General Convention. In the face of long tradition, many held the conviction women should be ordained priests.

8. "A Disclaimer from the Bishop of Haarlem," *Church Times*, January 14, 1977.

Many maintained the conviction they should not. Arguments produced no consensus. Nor did legislative resolution spread any faith or result in any conversions. A resolution did receive sufficient positive votes, however, to allow the Church opportunity to learn by experience.

Those favoring the ordination of women requested respect for their convictions and permission to provide for the ordination of qualified women. Those not believing in the ordination of women likewise requested their convictions be respected and recognition provided for their inability to accept women's ordination to the priesthood. Some on both sides reacted in fear. Many on both sides continued to respond in faith, witnessing to the belief that the Holy Spirit, when obeyed, is the unity (who produces community) amid our diversity.

The Episcopal Church is a 'becoming' community as the members of this Church are 'becoming' Christians. Any member is free to abandon this 'becoming' community. One abandonment, however, causes all to suffer some loss of diversity and unity. Ecumenism suffers within and without whenever we cease to seek truth together. Respecting one another's faith and convictions, we can search for the truth of God's will together . . .

The Presiding Bishop prays for the development of our whole ministry and for greater understanding of the particular rule for each of us. May each offer ministry in the Spirit of love, remembering we cannot all demand the acceptance of our offering. May the priesthood of Christ become increasingly the central reality in our community by each learning to serve Him.[9]

Ecumenical Relations after the Decision

Turning to the Episcopal Church's relations with other communions after the decision, we hope to show that relations within the Episcopal Church inevitably have parallels with her relations without.

We must acknowledge first that the ecumenical impact of the decision was greater than many of us had perhaps anticipated. Surely this is a sign of greatly increased awareness among Christians that they belong to one another, despite everything. What the Episcopal Church does has an effect beyond its borders, and

9. "On Becoming the Whole Church," *Episcopalian*, May, 1977, p. 5.

Episcopalians need to be more sensitive to such effects. Christian believers and their leaders discern the unity through the diversities. Let us not pass over this gift lightly, but reflect about it, thank God for it, and see what new burdens of love this gift lays upon us.

Second, we must discern beyond all the debate about priesthood for women that an ecumenical consensus exists about the equality of women and men in the Church. Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Anglicans alike are little by little becoming aware of their lack of concern and imagination for the ministry which women can and should wield in the Church. Support for the multiplication of ministries for men and women and their recognition by the Church is growing. We can hope that the energy of the debate about ordination to the priesthood will be channeled into a revised consciousness of lay ministry. There is also a revival of interest in the diaconate for women and men.

Third, the question of ordination of women not only divides Christians within and between churches, but also produces new coalitions within and between churches. It is not a case simply of this church being for and that being against priesthood for women. Let us look at developments within Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox Churches that need to be taken into account as this question is discussed further.

1. *Protestant Churches*

The response to the Minneapolis decision from Protestant Churches has been far less vocal than that from the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. We may speculate on reasons for this, that many Protestant Churches (though by no means all) already ordain women, and that discussions of priesthood do not engage churches having other forms and concepts of ordained ministry.

It may be thought that the Minneapolis decision removed an obstacle to unity between the Episcopal church and certain Protestant Churches, but the absence of consensus in the Episcopal Church on the question makes *rapprochement* of the Episcopal Church with any other group unlikely. On the Protestant side the situation is complicated by the fact that churches which ordain women experience difficulties in acceptance of women's ministry. On the other hand, women ordained in ministries of Protestant Churches may offer women priests insight into the difficulties and opportunities ordained ministry holds for women.

2. *Roman Catholic Church*

The debate on women's ordination is fairly recent in the Roman Catholic Church. The question will be studied, but priestly or-

dination of women will not be approved in the foreseeable future. Present signs indicate that the Roman Catholic Church would seek action only through the Holy Catholic Church as a whole, including the Orthodox Church.

The position is summed up by the issuance and response to the "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood" from the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which concludes that "The Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination."[10] The declaration settles on two controverted reasons adduced by opponents, the argument from tradition and the argument based on the symbolic role of the priest as representative of Christ.

The declaration is authoritative but neither infallible nor irrevocable. In effect, this means that the Vatican considers the matter officially closed, while discussion of the issue continues in the Church. An example of such discussion is a letter of dissent addressed to the Apostolic Delegate from the faculty of the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California, which says the conclusion of the declaration is "not sustained by the evidence and the arguments alleged in its support."[11] The letter does not question the opportuneness of the negative decision, but says the declaration erred in arguing the case on the basis of dogmatic impossibility. "To say that we have never ordained women in the past and therefore, cannot do so now, is to ignore the fact that the issue has never arisen in precisely these contemporary terms and within the new realization of women's place in the world."

The declaration itself concedes that its conclusion is "not theologically demonstrable," though it also says that reasons for changing the Church's long-standing practice are not persuasive. It is difficult to see how the question might be resolved in the long run unless the Church issues a dogmatic statement on the sacrament of order and its relationship to human sexuality, an unpopular course of action in this day which would, in any case, involve extensive and lengthy study and discussion.

The declaration appears in the midst of a widespread re-examination of the role of women in the Roman Catholic Church. The need to identify, formally authenticate, and expand ministries performed by women is widely recognized. Authority and its exercise are the issue here, for they have traditionally been associated with

10. "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood," *Origins*, Vol. 6, p. 517.

11. "Letter to the Apostolic Delegate," *Origins*, Vol. 6, p. 661.

the sacrament of order. The conjunction has meant the exclusion of women from positions of responsibility and decision-making in the hierarchical structure of the Church (though not in religious orders). The declaration welcomes the possibilities of a fuller participation by women in the life of the Church, presumably to include leadership. The declaration may also clear the way for women in the order of deacon. It is difficult to see how ordination of women to the priesthood can be contemplated without prior experience of women in the diaconate.

Nevertheless, the official attitudes of the Roman Catholic and some Anglian Churches are at variance with each other on women's ordination to the priesthood. In correspondence in 1975 and 1976, Pope Paul VI made clear his opposition to such a change, and warned the Archbishop of Canterbury that approval by the Anglican Church would introduce "an element of grave difficulty" into the ecumenical dialogue between the two churches, but acknowledged that "obstacles do not destroy mutual commitment to a search for reconciliation."[12]

In 1975, at informal talks of Anglican and Roman Catholic delegates at the Secretariat for Christian Unity, participants addressed a note to their respective authorities suggesting the following:

> Given that member Churches of the Anglican Communion are almost certain to ordain women priests in the next few years, we recommend a consultation between Anglicans and Roman Catholics not to discuss whether or not it is right to ordain women, but to try to find to what extent and in what ways Churches with women priests and Churches without can be reconciled in sacramental fellowship.
>
> We are however aware of the difficulty that this issue may pose for the Orthodox Church, and we also recommend that the ordination of women be considered by the Anglican/Orthodox Commission.[13]

The Agreed Statement on Authority in the Church, published by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission in 1977,[14] is a new but mostly untested element in the situation, em-

12. "Letters Exchanged by Pope and Anglican Leader," *Ecumenical Bulletin*, No. 19, 1976.

13. *Information Service*, Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, Vatican, No. 33, p. 20.

14. "An Agreed Statement on Authority in the Church," Venice, 1976. Publications Office, U.S. Catholic Conference, 1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

bodying a substantial agreement on how the Church maintains its continuity with Christ and the apostles. While the churches may disagree on particular decisions, each can understand how the other makes those decisions because they emerge from a similar process.

3. *The Orthodox Church*

The question of the call of women to the ordained ministry has not yet occurred in the Orthodox Church. The issue has not been discussed and some believe that it should not be. In a show of rare unanimity, Orthodox leaders disapproved of the Minneapolis decision. In the U.S. the reaction was one of dismay. No one expected the Orthodox to agree with ordaining women to the priesthood, but Anglicans were surprised by the strength of the reaction, and by some extreme statements.[15]

It soon appeared that misunderstanding played some part. Assuming an Anglican stance within catholic tradition, Orthodox saw Anglicans attempting to decide on behalf of the whole church. Anglicans did not intend the Minneapolis decision to include any implicit judgment on any other church or its ministry, still less to claim universal authority, but did not say so. The effect of the decision was to make it clear to Anglicans that the "special relationship" with the Orthodox, which had existed for a very long time, had life in it still. Those who had been special seemed more distant. People are always disturbed by an alteration in traditional practice which disrupts established group relationships, and a strong response is likely to ensue. This was as true for Anglicans interested in the Orthodox as it was for Orthodox interested in Anglicans.

The deeper reason for this reaction is the Orthodox view of the Church, which has been stated in this connection by the Roman Catholic theologian Herve-Marie Legrand:

> . . . the ancient understanding of what was reception: that is, that in the Church of God the Faith and the formulations of faith, tradition and ministries are the object of a reciprocal reception among the local churches. No Church is believed to make decisions about it unilaterally without seeking the approval of the others.
>
> The essence of reception is that it is based on relationship of reciprocity among sister churches: even in the case where a Church was not disposed to receive a decision, and even more when a Church had refused to receive a decision, nevertheless, it would always feel itself called into question by the decision of a sister-Church. Such would be the challenge already made by the Reformed Churches to the Catholic Church. Now that the challenge has been made by the Anglican Communion, it cannot be ignored . . .
>
> Finally, however, I would think personally that it is not so much the answer in its materiality (i.e. yes/no) which is important, as the ecclesiological structure of how it is arrived at. If a basic discussion could be organized sometime in which questions and solutions could be shared, I believe that the question of the ordination of women, far from being a cause of crisis, would be rather an occasion of progress along the road toward unity . . . this question is part of a concatenation of other theological questions which the ecumenical movement has led us to reconsider together.[16]

Did interested Orthodox feel themselves called into question by the Minneapolis decision? This may well account for the dismay, for example, in the reaction of Alexander Schmemann:

> We are now tremendously unhappy about the whole thing. We don't want to be pushed into the corner of 'against' simply.
>
> We are forced right now into the position of saying, 'Are you for? No, we are against.' And it is a horrible thing to define oneself as 'being against.' . . . It was another example, for us at least, of Western self-sufficiency.
>
> The way the questions have been formulated, raised, debated and theologically and canonically resolved are certainly not the way the Orthodox Church would consider the normal way for an issue of such tremendous importance and decisiveness.[17]

Anglicans appear to owe the Orthodox an explanation of the "ecclesiological structure" of the decision, if we ask for their understanding.

Soon after Minneapolis, the Anglican-Orthodox Theological Consultation postponed its regular meeting and the delegations met separately to assess the situation. The Anglicans sent a message to the Orthodox urging that the Consultation look at the underlying issues, pointing out that the departure from traditional practice did

15. *See Orthodox Observer*, October 13, 1976) *The Orthodox Church*, November, 1976.

16. "Views of the Ordination of Women," *Ecumenical Bulletin*, No. 22, 1977, p. 20.

17. *The Orthodox Observer*, November, 1976, p. 1.

not create a new ground of division but was rather an expression of more fundamental differences deriving from the long separation of the two churches.[18]

The Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of America, perhaps the only synodical response to Minneapolis of an Orthodox Church, stated that the decision "is contrary to the true understanding of Christianity as expressed in Orthodox tradition and cannot ever be considered by the Orthodox Church."[19]

The Archbishop of Canterbury's visit to the Ecumenical Patricarchate this year was the occasion of clarifying statements. The Agreed Statement issued after the meeting said:

> The most specific difficulty during the meeting was the ordination of women, which the Ecumenical Patriarchate officially declared to be unacceptable to the Orthodox Church.
>
> The answer of the Archbishop of Canterbury was that the Anglican Church was not seeking the agreement of the Orthodox Church on this subject, but was hoping for understanding of it.
>
> The two leaders agreed that the official dialogue between the Anglicans and Orthodox should continue, as being one of the most promising ways of resolving the problems which divide the two churches. . .[20]

The Archbishop of Canterbury emphasized, "We do not seek to impose this on any part of the Church of Christ; nor do we ask your Church to accept it, but we hold that those who see this action as being right should be free to do so. It is our duty within the Anglican Church to live in love and peace with those who take this action."[21]

Is There a Way Ahead?

In the Church we do not all hold exactly the same beliefs and agree completely with one another. We are always to strive for this goal, recognizing that in any community of human beings, even in the body of Christ, it can never be fully achieved. There is a danger that we will confuse what *ought* to be with what *is*.

18. "Message to the Orthodox Members of the Consultation," *Ecumenical Bulletin*, No. 21, 1977, p. 22.

19. *The Orthodox Observer*, December, 1976, p. 8.

20. "Agreed Statement Signed in Istanbul on May 1, 1977 by the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Archbishop of Canterbury," *Ecumenical Bulletin*, No. 24, 1977, p. 11.

21. *Pilgrim for Unity*, London: SPCK, 1977. Reply to the Welcome of the Ecumenical Patriarch, May 1, 1977.

We are one body in Jesus Christ. He keeps us bound together, but our nature, which we cannot deny, gives rise to disagreement and conflict. As in the book of Acts, the Church discovers again and again that the Spirit brings, not only signs and wonders, but also doctrinal headaches and arguments, cultural impasses, personality clashes, and the stunned realization that not everybody is going to agree. Believers learn that complexity, pain, and change are part of life in the Spirit.

To believe that we are bound together in one Body makes an important difference in the way we deal with varying positions. That difference is seen in treating opinons as potentially clarifying rather than harmful, for God often speaks through small groups or even individuals. It is also seen in the belief—stubbornly maintained by the Church through the centuries—that no conflict is irreconcilable in Jesus Christ. When disagreements can be approached from the standpoint of the one Body, unity can be a reality. Even in the context of extraordinary diversity, unity can be maintained and established. David Jenkins has written about this:

> What is the goal of the ecumenical movement and our various activities within it in the years which lie immediatley ahead? Is it the rapid production of a consensus in the various areas of our work and the hope of a steady enjoyment of reconciliation? Or is it the task rather to find, under God, ways of ***holding together*** men and women who, in their particular situations and experiences are bound to disagree, will sometimes quarrel and will sometimes wonder why they bother to stay together? Can we discover the transcendentally uniting power of Jesus Christ in the midst of the full mutual facing of our differences, our enmities, our fears of one another? Can we allow one another to be authentically human as we are now, in all our variety, mutual strangeness and particular forms of sinfulness, so that God can move us to a human consensus and human reconciliation which is also divine?[22]

Neither Episcopalians nor the Christian world is obliged to assume that, because General Convention took a decision on ordination of women, it has the automatic ratification of the Holy Spirit. Even the Council of Nicea was not accorded the status of an ecumenical council until many years later. General Convention has a humbler role, that of doing the best it can as an assembly of human beings in making decisions that affect the life of the church.

22. *The Humanum Studies* 1969-1975, David Jenkins, ed. World Council of Churches, 1975, p. 39.

There have been false starts and wrong turnings as well as developments which have made headway in the Church and been accepted. We are faced with a new question. History cannot help us beyond a certain point. We may trust the Body. Decisions may prove to be entirely right or entirely wrong, or more probably they will be sifted through in the years to come. We are still seeking God's guidance. What the General Convention did becomes part of the process by which the whole Church will eventually reach a decision.

Those who believe women's ordination is right intend to ordain women to the ancient historic order of the priesthood and no other. They have no intention of creating a new or different ministry. They believe that by this action the life of the Church will be enriched and that we will discover new dimensions of priesthood. Anyone knows that such a venture involves a risk. Whether all Christians agree or not that Convention should have done this, we are bound to recognize that the intent of this venture is to enhance, not destroy the priesthood. Those who hold these views need to be respected and listened to as fellow Christians who have something to contribute to the dialogue. By the same token, those who hold the opposite view that priesthood for women is incompatible with apostolic faith and practice, should be respected and listened to as Christians who have something to contribute.

Is there an ecumenical impasse on women's ordination, within and between churches, or is there a way ahead? The appeal to Scripture is unavailing, the appeal to tradition is doubtful, theologians disagree. The option is to appeal to a council. The question has never been decided by the whole Church because it has not been raised before in the way it is being raised today. No council of the undivided Church and no Pope has made a pronouncement on the maleness of priests as a matter of faith. It is part of the custom, practice, and tradition of the Church until now, but it is not a defined dogma.

Granted that the Episcopal Church is understanding tradition in a new way; if Convention had excluded women this would also have been a new understanding of tradition because the question has never been raised before in the way it is being raised today. Any decision, for or against the ordination of women, will in fact require a church to explain or develop its tradition in an unprecedented way.

What, then, is the way ahead for the Episcopal Church ecumenically on this debate? We offer five suggestions. First, the Episcopal Church could recognize publicly that a decision to ordain women to the priesthood has implications for the whole Church and for the whole society, that it is not simply an "internal affair" of the Episcopal Church or the Anglican Communion. Our priesthood is the priesthood of the one Church of God in Christ Jesus and is

therefore linked, however imperfectly in practice, to the priesthood of other churches. Our witness to the faith through the ordained ministry implicates other churches, however imperfectly in practice, whether we (or they) like it or not. This is the ecumenical significance of what has happened in the last nine months.

Second, the Episcopal Church could publicly state that we do not seek to impose our decision on any part of the Church of Christ, nor do we ask any other church to accept it, nor do we wish to imply that churches which disagree with our decision are wrong. At the same time, the Episcopal Church could state its responsibility to study and to act upon the question, while consulting with other churches, in a more than theoretic way. In the divided situation of the churches, separate processes will be required in the separate churches. They cannot share responsibility for decisions.

Before the Minneapolis decision the Episcopal Church consulted with Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Catholic, and Protestant Churches. That process can continue after the decision, and may become part of the remote preparation for a council in the distant future. Third, the Episcopal Church could welcome other churches to observe and evaluate our experience with women's ordination. We will learn if this change in ministry is of the Holy Spirit by the testing of experience.

Fourth, the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion could invite other churches, particularly the Orthodox and Roman Catholic, to a renewed examination with us of the issues which lie behind the question of women's ordination. In the last analysis these are not denominational issues, but differences between the Eastern Patriarchates and the Western Patriarchate, centering around the understanding and explication of the catholic and apostolic tradition. The differences are profound, more so than the differences posed by the Western Reformation. Fr. Legrand points to this compelling task:

> Our most urgent task is to understand each other as profoundly as possible. So that, whatever our official or personal attitudes may be, we are willing to carry each other's burdens, and so accomplish the will of Christ. By each of us exploring the other's difficulties, we open the way to a better understanding of each other, and be better equipped to remove from the middle of the path an obstacle which we can only ignore at the risk of slowing down our progress toward unity; perhaps, on the contrary, at the end of this encounter we might widen the road.[23]

23. "Views on the Ordination of Women," *Ecumenical Bulletin*, No. 22, 1977, p. 20.

Fifth, Episcopalians need to remind themselves that they joined with the Orthodox, Old Catholic, and Protestant Churches in condemning the Church of Rome for its unilateral actions in 1870 and 1950. For similar reasons, the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches might wish to condemn the Episcopal Church for its unilateral action in 1976. Does it make a difference that we are in a different epoch? The churches are in dialogue, seeking the truth as it is in Jesus. Is the new movement of consultation and communication between them not the fragile beginning of conciliar fellowship?