

Women's Ordination: Barriers and Boundaries

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Introduction: I've been asked to say something about why, in spite of consistent opposition from the official church, I continue to work for women's ordination in the Catholic Church. The last time I was able to be at an AFTF AGM, the speaker was Elaine Wainwright — and to follow her is an awesome prospect. This is much more rambling, more unfocused; a sort of work in progress: I guess my reasons for acting are always 'in progress'.

1. My faith and feminist theology/ies

I take it that you are familiar with the Vatican's stance on women's ordination in the catholic church. It has become the marker of orthodoxy — which in itself might be enough reason to challenge it.

For all its troubles, I remain a card-carrying member of the Catholic Church - however much I question or reject many Vatican pronouncements. To remain a person of faith, I need to remain in community. My faith depends on the faith of others; I believe we go to God in community. And the community needs, for me, to be a community of like and unlike and not a cosy and comfortable group.

The community into which I was born was christian/catholic, my heritage is judeo-christian, my understanding of God comes from and through this community. If I'd grown up in another faith community, I've no doubt I'd be Jewish, or Hindu, or Buddhist.

Regardless of how difficult I find it at times to remain within this community, I hold to what I see to be the principal tenets of my Christian faith: that God is in some way relational (and not a lonely monad); a God who desires closeness, intimacy, relationships; who chooses to be present in the finality and frailty of human beings and enters into their sufferings and life experiences. I believe we've barely begun to understand incarnation or to consider its deep theological implications.

It needs no demonstration here that much traditional theological interpretations and structures built on our judeo-christian heritage are gravely hostile to health and well-being. You don't need convincing by me that feminist theology/ies are desperately needed. I liked the recent article by Lucy Tatman¹ in which she says that 'theologies are a vital, necessary part of 'life abundant': that life is somehow not whole without a

sacred dimension' and it's the job of the theologian to 'try to put the sacred momentarily into words'. It is a sacred charge.

And I agree with her that theologies should 'not become displaced or silenced in favour of tales of individual spiritualities', which concentrate on the personal and the private at the expense of the public (and I'll return to this division later). Our work (scholars and activists) is to continue trying to remake the world. And I see remaking the churches a fundamental part of that remaking: whether we want it or no, churches are a large part of that world, and affect the lives, thoughts, world-views of many people.

2. why work for women's ordination

If that's roughly why I stay, and why feminist theolog/ies fascinate me, I'll consider why, in staying, I choose to work for women's ordination. After all, not all Catholics deeply troubled by the Vatican's position and longing for a church of equals deem this a sensible thing to do. Some, particularly I think many of the Religious, reject it, usually declaring they are 'beyond it'. Some insist the church is too hopelessly patriarchal for them to want to see women aspiring to leadership roles: for them the church must change first. But if we stay outside an organisation because it's deemed too patriarchal, we must absent ourselves from most professional activities.

Others see no need for any ordinations, whether of women or of men. Many of these have been celebrating small home eucharists without aid of the ordained for years. (as an aside, I find it fascinating that the hierarchy have never publicly challenged this; we're the ones they go for.) Now I don't deny the patriarchal nature of the church and I've no objections to small home eucharists or rituals of other types. I'm concerned with limiting community worship to private liturgies even when those are led by women. However liberating these liturgies are for the group concerned, I think that the church is fundamentally a public place (even if Rawls etc put it in a third category between public and private).

A traditional argument against women's ordination has always been that women don't belong in the public world. Nineteenth and twentieth century feminists struggled to achieve a world in which women take their rightful public leadership roles. I have delighted in Marilyn Lake's *Getting Equal*² with its story of feisty Australian women and their battles for equality. Hence I believe women must have access to church leadership roles and be able to celebrate public liturgy with a public community. Retreating to the private world is a backwards step. Indeed I believe that such private eucharists are unwittingly supporting the present structures and upholding hierarchy — and I suggest the silence of the bishops confirms this. Moreover, the Report on the

participation of women in the church shows that calls for women's ordination are coming from committed catholics all round the country.

Now the fascinating issue is how the vatican can continue to recite its 'mantra' about how the church doesn't have the authority to ordain women, quoting bits of scripture in support, in spite of about 30 years in which scripture scholars and theologians round the world have said, over and over again, you can't argue like that. Yet not one move has been made to meet the scholarly objections. Only power and authority are used.

In the absence of logic, the puzzled faithful start to look for underlying reasons and subconscious attitudes which form the Vatican's position. Perhaps the question should be: of what is it afraid? Does a woman as priest challenge Rome's understanding of the nature of women; would she threaten the meaning of priesthood; or would an ordained woman weaken the separation of the catholic church from other churches and from the world?

3. the work to be done:

So I think our work in OCW is two-fold:

(a) first we need to remain active in the public sphere, visible signs of our refusal to accept their un scholarly teachings on this issue; visible signs, if you will, of our refusal to obey, a challenge in this way too to their ever more repeated claim as to the virtuous nature of obedience (perhaps closer to one of the seven deadly sins).

We need, too, to make it plain that we are part of a world-wide movement — Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW) has allied groups in Europe, North America, South Africa, India, Japan, (South American links are being formed, Elfriede Harth comes from Colombia), New Zealand, and of course Australia. Actions go round the world. For instance, this week Elfriede and Ida Raming for WOW put out a press release in response to the recent Papal statement to german bishops in which he called the prohibition 'infallible'. And I was able to ensure that Sydney Morning Herald got it the same day.

Actions have to be rapid, colourful, and prayerful. Symbols such as the purple stole, recently introduced from Europe and taken up by OCW at our recent Canberra conference fits the bill: it is simple, cheap, and challenging; and turns the priestly symbol around.

With this pope, and with the next and probably the one after, we need to keep acting — in the wonderful phrase that Heather gave us at our recent conference — with SHEER HOLY BOLDNESS. And I have great hope.

(b) Second, we need to continue to search for the psychological and theological bases for their position, and continue to try to have open conversations about this. We have to present alternatives to the present hierarchical system, the Father-Son system on which their whole theology seems to be founded; and for which I like, whether I'm using it correctly or not, the phrase of Lacan's, the Law of the Father. Clearly we depend on professional theologians to lead the way.

This work requires — and this is no news to any of you here — challenging the present symbolic world, placing women at the centre of the symbolic system: I guess Irigaray's 'feminine divine' is one way to express it. The resistance to this are enormous, as those of you who have been working at it for many years are aware. I suspect feminist theologians will still be struggling with this many years from now.

4. some considerations - priesthood, sacrifice and boundaries.

We are stuck in Father Law and Father/Son theology — and the church fathers and civic fathers hold fast to it. Where is the mother-daughter relationship? Irigaray says that in order to “re-establish elementary social justice ... we must restore this missing pillar of our culture: the mother -daughter relationship. ... This will require changes to symbolic codes, especially language, law and religion.”³ I'm not suggesting that much work has not already been done, especially by such fine theologians as Elisabeth Johnson and many others.

I'm particularly interested in the powerful symbols of priesthood and sacrifice, and the placing of boundaries; and I think these are all connected with one another and with the prohibition on women's ordination. Which is why I think confronting the prohibition on women's ordination is central to trying to change the whole symbolic system.

And I've found a few other people who seem to have arrived at the same place. First is sociologist Nancy Jay and her classic work on sacrifice⁴; second William Beers, working with a psychoanalytical approach⁵; also Mary Condren who started as activist working for ordination⁶; and finally and closest to home a PhD student at U of Sydney, Damien Casey, who flying around in the philosophy of Irigaray found himself having an intellectual conversion re women's ordination — and has sent me draft of thesis chapter on Sacrifice and Sacramentality⁷.

I'm stumbling around here. I want to know the extent to which seeing the eucharist as an expiatory sacrifice is central to objections to women's ordination. Mind you, this is never mentioned. No one says women can't be ordained because they can't offer sacrifice.

But Nancy Jay's sociological analyses of sacrifice and priesthood revealed that women are not allowed to offer sacrifice in cultures in which sacrifices have a hegemonic function. Moreover, in all sorts of societies, 'sacrificing produces and reproduces forms of inter-generational continuity generated by males, transmitted through males, and transcending continuity through women'⁸. Which sounds just like apostolic succession. In his study, William Beers considered sacrifice from a psychoanalytical perspective and concluded that fear of women and of their generational power lies behind the determination of men in most religions to limit sacrificial priesthood to men.

Now, as I understand it, psychoanalytic orthodoxy considers that the primary function of sacrifice, both communion ones and expiatory ones to use Nancy Jay's terms, is to constitute identity and community through integration and separation. It creates culture; its logic founded upon the binary logic of A/not-A. It is a social creation supported by nothing in nature. This means it requires continual maintenance. Moreover, Casey says that 'The maintenance of masculine identity, and the symbolic order as isomorphic with that identity, requires that it is women that need to be overcome and their power appropriated and controlled'.

Its universality moreover, tells us that simply repudiating it is not enough; we need to understand why humans cry out for this mode of commerce with the divine; only then can we be free from it - and I would hope understand how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, 'who refused to sacrifice individuals to the universal claims of the Law', can help us transform our symbolic system.

In the world of the early church, sacrifice was a principal means of communicating with the divine and Christians were suspected of atheism because they did not offer sacrifice as those around them understood it. 'Sacrifice' in the New Testament is primarily noncultic — the whole community called priestly. In any case, presiding over the Eucharist in the early church was certainly no priestly activity, at least not in the cultic and hierarchical sense.

So perhaps it is not surprising to note how an understanding of Eucharist as sacrifice paralleled the exclusion of women from leadership in the early church. Casey contends 'that so long as the religious authority of women was affirmed, Christianity would maintain some immunity to the logic of sacrifice. ... [a] relationship between the presence of women in leadership positions within the Church and the non-

sacrificial orientation of that Church. The presence of women at the altar or even at Calvary, may have been enough psychologically to circumvent the logic of sacrifice'.

But with the ascent of Constantine and the acceptance of the Church as official public religion, the Eucharist began to function as official state sacrifice — and women were excluded from leadership. 'The Eucharist in the maintenance of the Empire is conscripted to construct and maintain boundaries'.

Which brings me to upholding boundaries and women's ordination. Is this what it is all about?⁹

The Catholic Church by its stance on women's ordination is demonstrably separating itself from many other Christian denominations by insisting that women may be in the image of God but cannot be, sacramentally, in the image of Christ. Both Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II have reminded the Anglican communion that ordaining women raises obstacles to church unity.

Mark Chaves has suggested that more than interdenominational boundaries are at stake. He suggests that the real reason for the Vatican's stance might lie in a determination to uphold the boundaries between the sacred and the secular. He suggests that the Catholic Church is again fighting the anti-modernist battles of the nineteenth century. If battles over the separation of Church and State and Darwinian evolutionary theory are lost, a new stand can be made on the issue of gender equality.

In thus upholding gender inequality the Vatican 'continues the long-term effort to mark a boundary between a sacramental world and the liberal world'¹⁰, between the sacred church and the dangerous secular society.

The importance to Rome of boundaries can be seen in the very metaphors they choose to describe God and church. Increasingly, this Vatican is returning to asymmetric gendered images, with a male, father, God and a dependent, female people; Mother Church and the Bride of Christ. And, as Mary Douglas work demonstrates, such body images are boundary images. The first boundary delineated is that between Christian denominations, and the ability to receive communion marks this boundary (the body of Christ as a boundary marker). The second boundary is the church and the world.

What marks the boundaries are the bodies of women. The idealized abstractions of women which are used as metaphors for Church are creations of men, products of the male gaze. One wonders to what extent they reflect the longings and aspirations of their creators; they certainly fail to reflect the truth about women. Meanwhile, the bodies of real women endure real suffering. They bear the brunt of abuse and rape by fathers; of genital mutilation; of bearing and nurturing more children than their bodies or spirits can nourish; while the official church, silent on so much of this, thunders

about the wickedness of contraception and abortion, which have become, along with the ordination question, boundary questions separating the church from secular society.

Both Curial documents, the *Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest* and the recent *Statement of Conclusions* directed at the Australian church, would seem to confirm this. Both call for a return to structures and practices which distinguish Catholics from the rest of the world. They call for the setting up and reinforcing of boundaries, for demarcating and separating what the Vatican sees as essential differences between the ordained and the lay; the sacred and the secular; the church and the world. The Vatican defines and patrols the boundaries; the local bishops are enrolled as subsidiary guards. Moreover, this emphasis on boundaries of lay-priestly differentiation is usually accompanied by a greater emphasis on the Eucharist as a sacrifice.

And in the statement to the Australian bishops, once again women are portrayed as a danger. Feminist theologians are accused of challenging traditional Christology and anthropology. The boundaries are drawn to exclude and silence women, who are seen as out of their kitchens, out of their convents, out of control. Women are again (or still) the tempters. Now the temptations to lead others astray are theological rather than sexual — Eve is a feminist theologian.

6. conclusion:

Which brings me back to OCW and why we continue. There are multiple reasons, of course. Some of the women are energised by their own sense of call to ordination, a call they cannot ignore. Supporting them is an essential part of OCW's work. Others are driven by a sense of justice; they seek the clear and unequivocal recognition of the true equality of women and men in the church. Others emphasise the enormous problems they have with the all-male image of God which the all-male priesthood and present liturgies uphold, and hence see women's ordination as an liberating act. Others long to see the gifts of all the people of God being used in the Church's ministry.

I believe we must have women at the heart of the symbolic system: going for priesthood is going for the centre of that tradition. Casey notes that Irigaray sees Eucharist as 'a concrete site for the transformation of the Symbolic order'.

To me the present papal 'no' is not firmly founded on Scripture or Tradition, nor based on proper, widespread consultation with the whole church; it is harming relationships with other Christian churches and with the wider world; and, above all,

is causing deep hurt and great distress to the people of God. I am tired of the pain. But I believe we need to continue to work for a church in which all ministries are open to women and to men, to single, married, celibate, divorced; to people chosen from their communities for leadership regardless of sex, gender, race or class.

For me, this means public action as well as it means theoretical considerations. We work for transformation and we join with you all in struggling to envisage what those transformations might be. Logos becomes dialogue.

References

¹ Lucy Tatman, 'Thoughts and Hopes on the Future of Feminist Theology/ies', *Feminist Theology*, 22, 93-100, 1999.

² Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal : The History of Australian Feminism*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1999.

³ Luce Irigaray in *The Forgotten Mystery of Female Ancestry Thinking the difference for a peaceful Revolution*, New York, Routledge, 1994, 112.

⁴ Jay, Nancy, *Through Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992, p32.

⁵ Beers, William, *Women and Sacrifice: Male Narcissism and the Psychology of Religion*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1992.

⁶ Mary Condren 'Mercy Not Sacrifice: Toward a Celtic Theology', *Feminist Theology* 15, 31-54, 1997.

⁷ Damien Casey, personal communication.

⁸ Jay op cit. p32.

⁹ I've considered this in more detail in Uhr, Marie Louise, 'Fixing the Boundaries: Traditional Asymmetric Gender Imagery of Church and its impact on women' in *Developing an Australian theology*, Peter Malone ed, St Pauls Publications, Strathfield, 1999, pp 149-164.

¹⁰ Chaves, op cit. p126.