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Women's ordination, the Church and the Media

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Each year, the Vatican declares a Sunday in May as World Communications Day. This year the Pope's theme is 'The Media: a modern forum for promoting the role of women in society'. The Pope's choice of theme was hailed by the president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Archbishop John Foley, as 'further proof of the Holy Father's interest and determination in defining the role of women in society and in the church, already expressed in his 1995 *Letter to Women*'.

In this talk I am concerned with the considerable efforts the Pope has already made to define us and limit our role in the Church.

I speak as national convener of *Ordination of Catholic Women* (OCW), a group of women and men who advocate the ordination of women into a renewed priestly ministry in the Catholic Church; who believe that an ordained ministry of both women and men will make the church spiritually richer, more open to the lives of women and men, and more able to bring God's love to a wounded world.

Clearly the Vatican does not agree with us.

Two experiences stand out for the contribution they made to my becoming founder and first national convener of OCW.

The first was in Brighton, England, in 1984. The local parish church was clinging to pre-Vatican II practices as much as possible. At first it seemed quaint, amusing even. The critical moment came one day at Mass when, just before communion, the altar boys walked down and closed the gates of the altar rails. The sacred was within the gates, and the profane was without. And I was always without: impure, female, laity. No doubt many moments of feeling excluded or rejected were crystallized for me in that one moment, but I would never be the same. I was overwhelmed by the destructive power of the sacred/profane split which has divided us and has kept women on the side of the so-called profane.

The second event was a much happier one. It was being present at my first Eucharist celebrated by an ordained woman. The celebrant was Alison Cheek, an Australian-born woman, ordained into the Episcopal church, one of the Philadelphia eleven, and a tower of strength to MOW during the struggle for women's ordination here. I shall never forget the power of her presence, the quiet dignity, the gentle and loving way she led us. And I shall never forget the ordinariness; simply a Eucharist at which the celebrant was a woman. Nothing could convince me that Jesus was not present at that Eucharist. Nothing, after that, was likely to convince me that Jesus prohibited the ordination of women. I knew I must work for women's ordination in the Catholic church.

Eventually in 1993, I decided that continuing to talk of changing structures, doing away with hierarchy, creating a society of equals was not enough. Rather, as Vaclav Havel learned in occupied Czechoslovakia, it is necessary to work for 'specific concrete things' and not indulge in 'vague

ideological debates'. And as MOW found in working for change in the Anglican Church, the ordination of women is such a 'specific concrete thing'. It is not the be-all and end-all of changes needed. But it acts as a focus for many of the issues of equality of opportunity, justice, ministry, God and us. Moreover, the very passion with which the case against women's ordination is argued by the Vatican indicates to me at least that they understand its importance very well.

For over twenty years, the Vatican has been insisting, with increasing force, that it cannot ordain women. With concern over women's ordination growing after Vatican II, Pope Paul VI asked the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to set out Catholic teaching on the issue. The Congregation produced its *Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood* in 1976, in which the Congregation concluded that the church did not have the authority to ordain women.

As this statement did not stop calls for women's ordination, in 1994 Pope John Paul II issued the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* to resolve uncertainty and to foster unity. He restated the Congregation's conclusion and declared that it was to be held 'definitively' by all the faithful.

Nonetheless, discussion and calls for women's ordination have continued. So in late 1995, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a *responsum* to a question or *dubium* in which they said that not only was this teaching part of the deposit of faith but added that it was taught infallibly.

The Vatican gives two main reasons for why it claims - with great force and determination - that the church does not have the authority to ordain women. One is from scripture and one from tradition. OCW has recently released a pamphlet '*Ordination of women in the Catholic Church - a gospel to be proclaimed*' in which we discuss these interpretations of scripture and tradition.

In summary, the Vatican insists that the institution of an all-male priesthood is founded on the words and actions of Jesus recorded in the Gospels which, it claims, show that Jesus called a group of men known as 'the twelve' to be the founders of an all-male priesthood. Moreover, it believes that this interpretation is upheld by 2000 years of tradition.

This reading of scripture is challenged by scholars on a number of grounds. For instance, the gospels do not record Jesus ordaining anyone, male or female, to the priesthood as it is understood today; the 'twelve' can be understood as representing a re-establishment of the twelve tribes of Israel as sign of the reign of God which Jesus proclaimed; nowhere in scripture are 'the twelve' seen as leading the Eucharist; and there is little evidence of their leadership after the resurrection.

In fact, when the Vatican commissioned the Pontifical Biblical Commission to examine the question, the Commission concluded (a conclusion ignored by the Congregation in writing its 1976 Declaration), as did the American Catholic Biblical Association in 1979 and the Catholic Biblical Association of Australia in 1995, that there is no biblical evidence to support the exclusion of women from the priesthood.

The second argument used by the Vatican is that from tradition - which is to say that the church has never ordained women. And therefore never should. This conclusion too can be strongly challenged. The biblical

evidence for women's leadership in early Christian communities, along with increasing historical evidence for women's ordained leadership in Christian communities over the first six centuries, makes the blanket statement that women have never been ordained difficult to substantiate. Moreover, women such as Ludmilla Javorova assert that she and other women were ordained in the clandestine church in post-war Czechoslovakia (The Tablet, November 1995 1453). The official church responds to Javorova's claim of her ordination by insisting that since women cannot be ordained, any such ordination would have been not only illegal but invalid. Since women's ordination cannot happen, it has not happened, and therefore has never occurred. Around we go.

Even if all such ordinations are ignored, there still remains the question of the general attitudes to women held by church leaders throughout the last 2000 years. The writings of notable Patristic churchmen are replete with descriptions of women in terms such as the devil's gateway (Tertullian), as so inferior to men that the only reason for their creation was procreation (Augustine), as made in the image of man and not of God (Ambrosiaster). In the Middle Ages, Aquinas' writings both encapsulated contemporary understandings and shaped Catholic teachings for the next eight centuries. The Supplement to the Summa Theologiae states that women cannot be ordained because 'women's state of subjection makes it impossible for the female sex to signify any eminence of rank' (Summa Theologiae Supp q.xxxix; 1c). A 1957 seminary text book proclaims in like vein: 'The reason why a woman cannot receive holy orders is because the clerical state demands a certain superiority since it involves ruling the faithful; whereas a woman by her very nature is inferior to man and subject to him...' (Noldin 1957 vol III n465 31st ed, prepared by G Heinzel SJ).

The Vatican today does not put forward this long-standing argument about the subordination of women to support its claim that women cannot be ordained. Climate has changed. Now the same conclusion (No to women's ordination) is being asserted but for different reasons. Since the Vatican's reasons are so easily interchanged, we need to turn from reasons as such, to look more closely at the reasoning that lies behind the Vatican's ban. I suggest that attitudes to women are critical to the reasoning of the Vatican.

2. The Pope's attitudes to women:

The Pope is not shy of making pronouncements on the nature of woman. In fact, like a man on an inner journey trying to make sense of us, he seems driven to release statements on who and what we are. And his overall conclusions, which we are not invited to discuss with him, are that women are complementary to men and here to help them.

In his Papal letter of 1995, he thanks us for our 'dignity'; says the church wants to contribute to upholding our civil rights; admires those who have fought for basic social, economic and political rights - even when that was considered to be a sin; and deplores obstacles which prevent women from being fully integrated into civil life. He apologises IF (my emphasis) church members have, in the past, treated women unfairly; but makes no apology for today's church and today's subordinations, and promises no restitution.

Overall, I suggest, he sees us not so much as human beings, but as beings fulfilling a series of 'roles' the first and most important of which is

that of mother. Women are made to give help to men. 'For in giving themselves to others each day women fulfil their deepest vocation.' (Papal letter June 29 1995)

He stresses the complementary natures of men and women. There are good reasons for women to have a healthy suspicion of the notion of complementarity. Historically, complementarity has been invoked whenever social theories stress the equality of women and men. For example, emphasis on the difference in male and female nature emerged after the Greek aristocratic period with the introduction of Athenian democracy when State political and legal structures were excluding freeborn women from citizenship.

Complementarity became a popular theory again in the eighteenth century, a time of powerful political moves for democracy and equality (of all men). In *The Mind Has No Sex?* Londa Schiebinger wittily analyses this reemergence of theories of complementarity based on contemporary research into the comparative anatomy of men and women (Schiebinger 1989). Schiebinger argues that, while concern for women's health partly motivated the work, the real driving force for the search for sex differences was political. Analyses of idealized male and female skeletons (that is, skeletons chosen or constructed to fit with eighteenth century concepts of the shapes of perfect women and men) provided the necessary data for enlightenment thinkers, such as Rousseau, to reconcile the subordination of women with the axiom that all men are by nature equal. Schiebinger demonstrates that skeletons representing 'the male' and 'the female' 'exaggerated almost to the point of caricature those parts of the body emerging as sites of political debate: the skull as mark of intelligence' (smaller of course in the woman), 'the pelvis as measure of womanliness' (Schiebinger 1989 196,7). Based on these distortions of the differences of actual women and men, the philosophers could establish to their satisfaction natural differences in male and female natures which allowed the exclusion of women from the polis.

The eighteenth century brand of complementarity provided a solution to threats men felt to traditional power and privilege. The Pope's late 20th century brand of complementarity is used as a bulwark against demands from women from all over the world for equal participation in the church.

3. The right to debate.

The present Vatican tells us who we are, thanks us for our 'femininity', bids us take part in civil life, and then not only declares that women cannot be ordained but forbids us to discuss the very question. We cannot discuss it with the Vatican. Nor can we discuss it with the Australian Conference of Bishops, who replied to our request by stating that such a meeting 'would be quite inappropriate'; and that 'an essential factor in the whole question is the proper role and authority of the Pope' (letter to OCW from Fr W.J. Wright, Acting Secretary replying for Cardinal Clancy, October 10, 1995). Banning open discussion is a strange way to reach the truth. Particularly as, at the same time, the official church proclaims the rights of all people to free and open discussion of civil matters.

This tension between what the official church encourages in civil society and secular press and what it forbids in Church and church publications is highlighted by the ordination question. A classic example of the force with which discussion is stifled occurred recently here in Canberra. A

Canadian delegation of the recent assembly of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations, had put forward a resolution that women's groups continue to debate women's ordination. On the opening day of the assembly the Pro-Nuncio Archbishop Brambilla told the president general that the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Sodano, insisted that the resolution was inadmissible. If it was not dropped, the Union would jeopardise its recognition by the Vatican as an official Catholic organisation. The resolution was withdrawn.

Although this caused great tension at the conference, the official Sydney archdiocesan paper 'The Catholic Weekly', which had previously declared that it would print no letters or discussion on women's ordination, ignored the incident. They excused this omission of any reference to something about which many Catholics were talking by referring both to their previous ban and to their Good News policy.

When bishops decide that their local paper will not print letters on an issue, the people of the church are officially prevented from taking part in public, in-house discussion. This banning of correspondence is an oppressive act and must be named as such. In addition, when the Catholic Weekly supports such a ban with the statement that 'The Catholic Weekly, as an archdiocesan newspaper reflecting the attitudes of the church' (The Catholic Weekly June 5 1994) it is clear that, at least in its view, the voice of the Vatican is the voice of the church.

Cardinal Clancy seems clearly opposed to public discussion. After the recent use of the word 'infallibly', he was reported in the Sydney Morning Herald as insisting that if debate would not stop, then any further discussion should be limited to professional theologians writing in learned journals and not in the public press (SMH Dec 15). Such attempts by members of the hierarchy to block people expressing their thoughts ignores the fact that the people are also church and have a right to be heard. Moreover, it also ignores that it is the laity who are principally concerned about this issue, and seems to assume that the laity have nothing of value to contribute to debate. Bishop Ullathorne's query 'Who are the laity?' received from John Henry Newman the sharp rejoinder 'the Church would look foolish without them'. It still would.

One immediate effect of Catholic press bans is that groups such as OCW receive greatly increased publicity in the secular media. For this media coverage we are grateful, even while we remain cautious about how we and the issue are represented, not wishing either our cause or the wider church we love to become objects of ridicule. I should like here to express my thanks to the Australian secular press for the coverage of the ordination issue: we have received a very fair and honest reporting, which has allowed us to speak openly in this community. We cannot speak openly in official church circles or in the official Catholic press.

The rights of Catholics to discuss religious matters are included in the official documents of Vatican II (in Gaudium et Spes n62), affirmed by the 1971 Synod of Bishops which spoke of 'legitimate diversity within the church' (para 41), and enshrined in the 1983 code of Canon Law (212,3). Nevertheless, at present, what can be discussed is severely limited to what fits the present Vatican's definition of 'objective truth'. Although the present pontiff, when Archbishop of Krakow, insisted on freedom for political dissidents to dissent, under his pontificate, outspoken dissidents or people questioning Vatican policy are not being given that freedom. Under this pontificate, bishops have been stood down from their

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dioceses; theologians have been silenced and removed from their posts; editors of Catholic papers have been sacked by the Vatican. It is not surprising then, that most people employed by the Catholic church, bishops and journalists and teachers, are afraid to write or speak their minds. We live in a terrible climate of fear.

The Vatican insists that it alone knows the mind of God on questions that many committed Catholics see as outside the central credal deposit of faith. It is convinced, too, that it has the God-given authority to make rulings on these questions, without open discussion, for all people and for all time. Women, coeliacs, recovering alcoholics have all recently been barred from ordination. Divorced and remarried are barred from Eucharist. The emphasis is on excluding, on controlling. Such emphases on power and control, on who can and who can't celebrate the Eucharist, on who can and who can't receive the Eucharist, hardly seem compatible with the open Jesus of the Gospels, who called all to himself, who insisted that we have no fear, and who came to set us free.

Too often the church is preaching a gospel message of justice, equality, human rights and freedom of conscience, while at the same time equality, conscientious dissent and due process are being denied its own members. The double standard produces a serious problem of credibility.

The Vatican is using papal authority and power to block discussion and theological debate on women's ordination. This blatant use of power leaves supporters such as OCW members feeling battered, but unbowed. Invoking the will of God in this way to stop dialogue among committed members of the church is like domestic violence in god's household.

It is very tempting to respond to this use of power by becoming silent - and this is no doubt what is wanted. Yet, to acquiesce in demands for silence in God's household would be as unhelpful for women in the church as it is for those subject to domestic violence. Experience has shown that silence and passivity and 'obedience' do nothing to protect the battered spouse and do not cure the dysfunctional family. We must continue to speak, remembering Newman's toast to 'conscience first, and ... the Pope afterwards.'

4. Our response to the Vatican and the climate of fear:

Over its 2000 year history, the official church has pronounced with authority, and often in error, on 'matters as global and major as official anti-Semitism, usury, the Inquisition, slavery, the nature of the universe, and meat on Fridays' (to use Joan Chittister's lovely list), so it is hard to believe that our concern for the full humanity of all people can be seen as an error of faith.

By baptism women join the priesthood of all believers, as priests, prophets and pastors. Those who feel impelled to work for the ordination of Catholic women are being called to live now, I believe, above all as prophets, to awaken the church to its present limitations which prevent it from bringing Christ to the world. Our prophetic work is, in Walter Brueggemann's words, to 'nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us' (Brueggemann 1978 13).

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First, to give prophetic witness to a renewed church we have to refuse to be silenced. I borrow from Joan Chittister again (Chittister 1986 61). This is a time for speaking. It is not a time for Nicodemus, coming by night, for being disciples in secret; it is not the time for the silent, the stealthy, the safe. It is a time for speaking for there is, to quote Brueggemann again, an 'integral connection between speech and hope! It is only speech that makes hope possible, and when the royal consciousness ... stops serious speech it precludes hope' (Brueggemann 1978 123).

It is the time for a Hannah speaking boldly in the Temple; the time for an Esther, determined to go to the king and speak - 'even if it kills me'; the time for the Syro-Phoenician woman, refusing to be silenced by the male disciples trying to protect Jesus from the troublesome woman. 'But', she said; 'But', we must keep saying.

We must speak - and speak boldly. We are working to incorporate women into a non-hierarchical ministry of women and men, to create a church in which all are equally able to express their varied gifts; therefore we have to confront the power and control of a hierarchy with its androcentric dualisms of clergy/laity, of sacred/profane, of male/female which are used to hold us in subordination. We have to articulate the anguish, the numbness and the despair of the present, as well as the hope and joy of the future. Calling for the ordination of women is speaking a new language. It is proclaiming women as images of God and images of Christ. Upholding women as images of God in this way is a powerful iconoclastic act which shatters not only the image of the all-male priesthood but also the image of the all-male god.

Second, it is a time to act. Therefore, we must take strength from the courageous actions of our biblical foremothers; like the woman anointing Jesus before his death, going into the house where he was surrounded by those trying to drive her away, to carry out the political action of anointing him as king; like the woman who spoke with Jesus at the well and then proclaimed him to the whole village. We have to stand in the streets, stand outside our churches when men are being ordained, stand outside when only male priests are celebrating their priesthood, stand up in spite of the insults that may be levelled, in spite of the hurt that may ensue.

We may feel marginalised, unwelcome and unwanted. But, even if we feel peripheral, we need to recall Leonardo Boff's words (Boff 1986 62) that:

'The new church, as in all renewal movements, first appears on the periphery. Given the power structure at the center, the periphery is the only place where true creativity and freedom is possible.'

Around the edges of the church, marginal people, resident aliens, are creating new life. The Vatican may prohibit women from celebrating Eucharist in official church liturgies, but, as many of us have experienced, women gather in small circles to break bread together in memory of Jesus. And many women are leading whole communities in liturgical thanksgiving. After struggling with such 'paraliturgical' celebrations with her community in the Andes, Josephite sister Irene McCormack wrote:

'as we in our little Christian communities, high up in the Andes, gather in memory of Jesus, there is no power or authority on earth that can convince me that Jesus is not personally present.'

Women have always brought and will continue to bring Christ into the world. No power on earth can stop this. The Holy Spirit is not constrained by official actions of the official church. So we can acclaim and celebrate

the women who are already deacons and priests among us, even while we await their public ordination.

I hope that we don't have long to wait.

I long for Christian ministries to be 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; ordained for life or for limited periods; for universal ministry or for a small community; not just bishops, priests and deacons, but prophets, apostles, teachers, healers, workers of miracles, administrators, helpers. I long for a church which creates and celebrates whatever form of ministry liberates the whole community, a church in which all work together in true co-discipleship for the empowering reign of Sophia-God in our world.

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