

WORKING FOR WOMEN'S ORDINATION.

Marie Louise Uhr

Church politics is making news. Media attention has primarily been on the struggle over ordaining women, first in the Anglican and now in the Catholic church. Now the Catholic Church also faces public scrutiny of its execution of authority, because a series of statements from the Vatican (a Declaration in 1976, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* in 1994, and another statement from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1995) have not stopped the call for women's ordination.

Ordination of Catholic Women (OCW) is a group of women and men throughout Australia who advocate the ordination of women into a renewed priestly ministry in the Catholic Church. With thousands round the world being killed, maimed and raped in wars, millions living in abject poverty, and environmental degradation threatening the globe, whether any church ordains men or women may seem a trivial issue. Yet, neither OCW, nor any of the other groups I have recently visited around the world, is ceasing to advocate women's ordination.

Alan Gill (CT Dec 23) examined responses to the most recent attempt from the Vatican to end the discussion. That attempt was the claim by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that the papal teaching that the church does not have the power to ordain women is infallible. I am concerned here with why we continue to work for women's ordination. The reasons are simple.

We 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 this wounded world. For us, the ordination of women is one step towards creating a more open church, a church concerned not with issues of power and control, with who can and who cannot receive the Eucharist, with who can and who cannot celebrate the Eucharist, but with the liberation of people. We believe that by continuing to claim that women cannot image Christ in ordained ministry, the official church is holding up an image of women as less than men. It is refusing to accept the full humanity of women. While it does this it cannot be the healing force it should be, either for women or for men.

The Vatican gives two main reasons for why it believes the church does not have the power 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 respond in some detail to these interpretations of scripture and tradition. I can only summarize this discussion here.

Papal documents including the recent Congregation statement insist that the institution of an all-male priesthood is based firmly and clearly on the words and actions of Jesus as recorded in scripture. This conclusion rests on quite specific readings of the New Testament.

The papal position, as it is usually put, is that the Gospels show that Jesus called a group of men known as 'the twelve' to be the founders of an all-male priesthood. Scripture scholars challenge this interpretation of the texts on a number of grounds. For instance, some see 'the twelve' as chosen to represent the twelve tribes of Israel; others note that it is impossible to determine from the accounts of the Last Supper whether only

male disciples were present; nowhere in scripture are 'the twelve' seen as leading the Eucharist; and there is little evidence of their leadership after the resurrection. Moreover, Jesus is not recorded as ordaining anyone, male or female, as priest.

Equally, there is clear evidence that women were leaders in early church communities. There is Phoebe, deacon and patron at Cenchreae (Rom 16:1), Chloe, church leader at Corinth (1 Cor 1:11), Paul's co-workers Mary, Tryphaena and Tryphosa (Rom 16:2), and Prisca, teacher missionary and church leader (Acts 18:26; 1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3).

In summary, it can hardly seem surprising that the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1976, the American Catholic Biblical Association in 1979 and the Catholic Biblical Association of Australia in 1995 have all concluded that there is no biblical evidence to support the exclusion of women from the priesthood.

The second argument used by the Vatican is tradition - which is to say that the church has never ordained women. And therefore never should. As historians gain knowledge of the development of ministries in the first few centuries and the differences in practices between communities, evidence for women's continued leadership roles in at least some of these communities is appearing. The priesthood probably developed from the office of presbyter early in the third century; it seems likely that women held the office of presbyter in places not considered heretical during the first five or six hundred years.

But if such ordinations are ignored, and a male-only ordination is accepted, we must still consider the attitudes of church leaders during this time. Patristic writers variously describe women 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). The Vatican Declaration of 1976 insists, with no evidence, that the misogyny evident in patristic writings did not influence their judgement on the question of women's ordination, but this certainly needs to be proved.

Moreover, belief in the inferiority of women lasted well beyond the patristic period. In the Middle Ages, Aquinas said that women could not 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), and his conclusion shaped church teaching until well into this century (Noldin, Summa Theologiae Moralis vol III n465).

There is clearly a long tradition of considering women as inferior to men, and evidence that ordination was denied them, at least partly, on this basis. Traditions based, even in part, on the anti-female social prejudices of earlier times, provide dubious bases for theological argument. Finally, those wishing to use tradition to block innovation, might keep in mind Jesus' condemnation of the pharisees when he saw them using tradition to block the word of God (Mark 7).

At no stage since the release of the 1976 Declaration has the Vatican engaged in scholarly dialogue with those questioning its teaching. Instead, it has simply repeated its conclusions, but claimed more and more authority for them, first calling them 'definitive', and then 'infallible'. The Vatican is using power and authority to block discussion and scholarly argument.

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

In many ways the question of ordaining women illuminates wider issues. Perhaps in the end what are at odds are two different visions of what is church. In refusing to accept that women can image Christ in celebrating the Eucharist, that women are Christ-bearers, the Vatican is denying the full humanity of women. It is upholding a system in which all sacramental power and authority is in the hands of men. Sadly it appears more concerned with power and control than with giving life, with excluding rather than including, with its own survival rather than the good of humanity. And all this in the name of God. Poor God.

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