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Are Opponents of Women Priests Sexists?

DAVID WALKER

An attitude or practice may be described as 'sexist' to women if it unjustly discriminates against women purely because they are women and not men. The denial of priestly ordination to women is judged by many, both within and outside the church, to be an obvious example of such sexism. But is this verdict fair? Is all opposition to the ordination of women as priests necessarily 'sexist'?

For some opponents of the ordination of women to the priesthood the issue is whether or not a woman is practically competent to be a priest. Operating with a basic assumption that 'leadership is male',¹ they ask: do women, as women, possess the appropriate gifts and skills in leadership, administration and decision-making? Are they capable of the emotional detachment sometimes needed or capable of giving total, twenty-four hours a day commitment to the job? Is full-time priestly ministry compatible with the demands of motherhood, home and family and the realities of premenstrual tension and the menopause?

It is difficult to see how those who answer such questions negatively can be judged as anything other than downright 'sexist'. I fail to see how anything a priest might be called upon to do in the course of ministry could be something a woman would be practically incapable of doing. Indeed, it is highly likely that many of the functions at present performed by male priests would be performed significantly better by women. To argue that 'leadership is male', and therefore that women may not be priests seems positively antediluvian in this age of female emancipation. (Is priesthood primarily about 'leadership' anyway?). If the history of women's emancipation in the twentieth century has taught us anything, it is that apart from the obvious differences of function rooted in sexual biology, there is nothing a woman cannot do that a man can and *vice versa*. Moreover, if the distinctive functions of the priest, and bishop, are reduced to their bare core, it would surely be ludicrous to deny that, practically speaking, a woman is capable of performing them. Why even a child could be taught to absolve, consecrate, bless and ordain!

The decisive question, however, is this: is the question of sexual differentiation essentially a question about function? Men and women may be more or less functionally interchangeable, but does this mean that they are thereby wholly interchangeable? Men and women might, practically speaking, be able to *do* the same things.

But can they *be* the same? More importantly, is priesthood best understood in functional terms, as a sort of profession or job for which is required a set of skills, qualifications and training? If it is, then there surely can be no adequate 'non-sexist' reasons against ordaining women to the priesthood. But, if priesthood is something more than a function or a job, if it is more about 'being' than 'doing', then perhaps the matter of women's priestly ordination is not quite as simple as at first sight it might appear to be.

Other opponents of the ordination of women use less crude arguments. For them, a woman is incapable of being a priest not through any lack of practical competence, but because, as a woman, she is incapable of representing a God who, according to traditional and scriptural usage, is almost invariably described in male terminology. This argument lies behind C.S. Lewis's statement that

To us a priest is primarily a representative, a double representative, who represents us to God and God to us . . . We have no objection to a woman doing the first: the difficulty is with the second.²

Can a woman sacramentally represent God our Father, Lord and King or Christ the Bridegroom of his Bride the Church?

This issue is indeed a complex one. It touches on a whole cluster of questions raised, of course, by feminist theologians. Those who find themselves unconvinced by the sorts of argument proposed by C.S. Lewis would maintain that imagery for God in traditional and scriptural language is simply a result of cultural and historical factors and relates to nothing essential in God. For is it not a universally accepted dictum that God has no gender, being beyond the creatural division of male and female? And are not the archetypes of all created perfections, including femininity, contained within God? Why then should feminine imagery be any more inappropriate in theological discourse than male imagery? And why should a man be any less inappropriate or a sacramental representative of God than a woman?

Now this argument, despite its clarity and simplicity, is not wholly convincing. It by no means follows from God's lack of gender that it is of no importance which gender is used when speaking of God. All human language is ultimately inappropriate when used of God since God infinitely transcends all human creatural categories. But this does not mean that all human language is equally inappropriate. God, most Christians would agree, has no body. Yet this does not mean that it is as equally inappropriate to speak of him as possessing gills, tail and fins as it is to speak of his all seeing eyes, loving heart, mighty arm! There are very good theological reasons why masculine imagery should be normative in Christian theology and liturgy. C.S. Lewis is undoubtedly correct when he suggests that Christianity would soon become a fundamentally different religion if Christians began to speak and think normatively of God as Goddess and to pray

to God our Mother in heaven instead of to our heavenly Father.³ For example, would Christian theology be able to retain that proper sense of the divine transcendence expressed in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* if the Creator came to be thought of as a Mother Goddess who brings forth creation as a child is brought forth from the womb? Is not such a notion of creation more akin to pagan notions of emanation, which invariably tend towards some sort of pantheism, than to the robust theism of the biblical tradition with its doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*? God might not 'really' be male. All gender language, indeed all language whatsoever, might ultimately be theologically inappropriate. But this does not mean that in theology 'anything goes'.

However, even if it is agreed that masculine imagery, though ultimately inappropriate of God, is less inappropriate than feminine imagery, this does not mean that theological language and imagery should be exclusively and aggressively masculine. God is immanent as well as transcendent; 'within' as well as 'beyond'. And as St. Thomas reminds us, God contains within himself the 'perfections of all things'⁴—including we must assume, the feminine. The feminist accusation that the language and theology and worship of the Christian Church has become disproportionately masculine and oppressively transcendentalist is not without substance. The Church must find ways of speaking of the feminine in God without resorting to the theological androgyny or denying all that the normativeness of masculine imagery is concerned to preserve. Perhaps the most fruitful place for feminine language and imagery of God is in the realm of the much neglected doctrine of the Holy Spirit.⁵

There is something decidedly feminine about the Holy Spirit: the Spirit broods over the waters in creation, brings to birth in the waters of baptism, gives life, sustains, dwells within . . . Perhaps the priesthood of woman is primarily priesthood of the Holy Spirit—and what is that except an essentially diaconal and prophetic ministry?

But let us return to the argument that says: (a) a priest is a representative not just of the church, but of God; (b) God is almost always spoken of in male, not female, terms in the Christian and biblical tradition; (c) therefore only a male can be a priest. Two things suggest that this argument is neither solid as an argument nor fair to women.

First, the basis for any man's capacity to represent God is not his masculinity but his humanity. Man can represent God because man is created in the image of God. And, as all Christians agree, this divine image is something possessed by men and women equally in virtue of this creation. Therefore to argue that a woman cannot be a priest because she cannot represent God is surely a denial of the image of God in woman. It would be difficult to see how such a view could be defended against the charge of being 'sexist'. If there are valid

arguments against ordaining women to the ministerial priesthood, this is not one of them.

Secondly, the argument fails as an argument against the ordination of women since it is by no means clear that a priest is there to represent in some general way God as Father, Lord, or King. Surely the priest, if he represents anyone, does not represent God in some general, abstract sense; rather he represents God the incarnate Son. He is a sacramental representation, or better, an 'icon' of Christ.

This understanding of the priest as icon of Christ is, of course, one of the main reasons why many Christians are against the ordination of women as priests, especially in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. A priest, it is argued, stands in the place of Christ at the altar. He 'plays Christ' as it were, in the drama of the sacred liturgy. His words of forgiving love and blessing, of consecration and offering are not his own, but Christ's. His place at the unifying centre of the Church as bishop is not his own place, but Christ's. His conforming, ordaining touch is not the work of his own hands, but of Christ's. The priest indeed stands *in persona Christi*. He holds the place, not of an absent Christ, but of a living Lord who makes himself present in and through his living icon.

Those who see priests as icon of Christ in this way fail to see how the priest could be anything other than male. For them the symbolic distance created by a woman playing the rôle of Christ in the liturgy would be as great as if a man were to play the rôle of Mary in a symbolic enactment of the Annunciation or Nativity. In their view the suggestion that the gender of the priest is thoroughly irrelevant would amount to a docetic denial of that humanity of Christ which the priest is there liturgically and sacramentally to represent. Such a denial of the historical 'givenness' of revelation as this ultimately leads in the direction of an ahistorical Christianity which is little more than the ancient gnostic heresy in modern feminist guise.

This argument is, of course, fundamentally at odds with the popular feminist view that, apart from obvious biological differences, there is no essential difference between men and women. It is totally incompatible with the contemporary secular orthodoxy which says that, outside of reproduction, men and women are wholly interchangeable both in terms of what they *do* and what they *are*; that such differences which do obtain are due solely to the culturally variable rôles which society assigns arbitrarily to each. Of course, it does not necessarily deny that men and women are, in principle, functionally interchangeable. It does not dispute that women can be *trained* to perform the same functions as men and *vice versa*. But it does question whether this acknowledged functional interchangeability exhausts the whole issue of sexual differentiation. It suggests that the distinction between male and female goes deeper than mere function and is, like priesthood itself, more a matter of

'being' than 'doing'—something almost ontological. (For those who think like this, to describe men and women as equal would be as odd as describing the sky as equal to the sea!)

Moreover, it is a much more fundamental distinction than that of race or colour. Unlike Jesus' Jewishness or physical stature, Jesus' maleness is an irreducible element of his basic humanity and must be preserved—and *seen* to be preserved—even in the liturgical and sacramental extensions of his humanity. Had Christ been born female, of course things would have been different. Then Christ's priestly icon would have had to be exclusively female. But Christ was born male. Therefore his priestly icon must also be male.

It is difficult to see how much such a view as this can justly be accused of being 'sexist', for it rests not on any belief in the superiority of men over women but purely on the hard historical fact of Christ's maleness. It is no more 'sexist' for a woman to be excluded from the priesthood on the basis of this 'iconic' view of priesthood than it is for a woman to be excluded from playing the rôle of Macbeth in Shakespeare or a boy excluded from performing the rôle of Mary in a school nativity play. Of course women do play male rôles in dramatic productions. But they generally only do so in so far as they suppress their own sexuality and adopt the external trappings of the opposite gender. But presumably women who feel called to priesthood do not experience any need to suppress their own sexuality in order to fulfil their priesthood.

I am not suggesting here, of course, that priesthood is merely a matter of performing the rôle of Christ in a sacred drama, although, of course, it certainly includes this. But I am arguing that there is an analogy between the priest's rôle in this sacred drama of the liturgy and an actor's or actress's rôle in a secular drama; and that the 'sexism' involved in excluding women from playing the rôle of Christ in the former is no more than the 'sexism' involved in excluding women from male rôles in the latter.

To exclude a woman from being the priestly icon of Christ in the sense described above is in fact to exclude her functionally from very little. Practically speaking, it simply means that in any gathering of the faithful a woman is not permitted to perform the simple dramatic functions of pronouncing words of absolution, consecration and ordination accompanied by their traditional manual acts. But a woman should be free to do *anything* else within the Church.

This freedom, of course, is one women at present do not possess. The primary reason for this is that virtually all ministerial power in the church has become identified with, and concentrated in, the ordained priesthood and episcopate. The priestly ministry has, in other words, become hopelessly clericalized. Virtually the whole of Christian ministry has become assimilated into what is in fact only a part of ministry, namely priesthood. Priests and bishops are expected

to be leaders, administrators, parish and diocesan managers and specialists in every form of pastoral ministry. Yet very little of what the average priest or bishop does is distinctively priestly or episcopal. And very little of the power exercised by priests and bishops is such that it cannot be exercised by the laity, both male or female, or by the diaconate.

This concentration of ministerial power in the hands of the ordained priesthood is indeed 'sexist' in a church which only ordains men to the priesthood. Only if this concentration of power is ended can the church's exclusion of women from the priesthood be defended against the charge of being 'sexist'. It is simply a blatant injustice to continue to train women for exercising power in the church and then, once they are ordained deacon, to give them none. Power in the church should be vested primarily in the people of God, both female and male, and not in its clergy. Apart from the distinctive, priestly functions of absolving, consecrating and ordaining, virtually every other function performed by priests and bishops—from parochial administration to pastoral care—could, and in many cases should, be performed by the people of God, both male and female. Of course, there is much more entailed in priestly ministry than performing certain liturgical and sacramental functions. I am not arguing for the return to 'mass priests', but it is difficult to see how this wider priestly ministry differs in any significant sense from that priestly ministry which is the vocation of all the people of God.

The late **DAVID WALKER** was team vicar of St. Francis', Clifton, Nottingham.⁶

NOTES

- 1 The title of a book by the leading evangelical David Pawson on the ordination of women.
- 2 *God in the Dock* (Collins: London 1979) p. 90.
- 3 See *op.cit.* pp. 87–94.
- 4 *Summa Theologiae* Ia Q4 Art.2.
- 5 On this see Thomas Hopkin, ed., *Women and the Priesthood* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press: New York, 1983) pp. 97 ff.
- 6 We are indebted to Dr. Brian Marshall of Westminster College, Oxford who has prepared this paper for posthumous publication.