

Editorial

On 11 November 1992 the General Synod of the Church of England finally allowed the Priests, Ordination of Women Measure to go forward for ultimate approval by Parliament. The Measure passed by substantial majorities in the House of Bishops and in the House of Clergy, but scraped through the House of Laity by only two votes. Despite the euphoria of those in favour of the Measure, it still has to be accepted as expedient by the Ecclesiastical Committee of Parliament: fifteen members of the Commons and fifteen Lords. Among the factors which will concern them will be: the tremendous disruption it is already causing, before becoming law; the slender majority in favour; the grievous financial implications; the prudence of deferring implementation until a confirmatory vote; and the infringement of the sovereign's prerogative to appoint to bishoprics (and other ecclesiastical offices), since the Measure seeks to limit her choice to those supporting the ordination of women. It is still too early to say what will happen in the long term, but it seems most likely that within a year or so there will be women priests ministering in parishes in England, as there already are in eleven other Anglican provinces (out of a total of thirty).

The arguments which have been put forward in favour of the move have varied enormously in substance, though the same is also true for the other side. The quality of the debate has not been high, largely because those in favour of the change are motivated by emotion as much as by reason, whilst those against are divided along churchmanship lines. In particular, a number of Evangelicals have found it impossible to accept Anglo-Catholic arguments from tradition, or from the example of the Roman and Eastern Churches, and this has undoubtedly swung some of them against the male-only position.

In practical terms, passage of the Measure will mean that about 1,300 women deacons can now be priested, though perhaps not all will choose to be. Even so, it can safely be assumed that the Church will soon have over 1,000 new priests, who will undoubtedly relieve the clerical shortage in the parishes. They may find it difficult to be accepted in places, but a parish which is faced with a woman priest or nobody at all is unlikely to be choosy for long.

What is less clear is whether the women concerned, now that they have won the right to be ordained to the presbyterate, will be satisfied with that achievement. Some will no doubt want to campaign for opening up the episcopate to women, though perhaps that issue will remain on hold for a while yet. More serious for most women will be the fear of hidden discrimination against them. Anglo-Catholic trusts and parishes will probably put up the stiffest and most principled resistance, though many

other parishes will also prefer a man first. Women may find themselves proportionately relegated to chaplaincy work, to weaker parishes and to administrative posts. Something like this has already happened in the United States of America and it is quite possible that the same thing will occur in England as well.

Those opposed to the measure will now fear the worst, and with good reason. Conscience clauses and other forms of protection are really only words or scraps of paper; they will be ignored as soon as it is convenient and politic to do so. Apart from a very few places, where local feeling will be strong enough to protect opponents of women priests, there is no doubt that pressures of a non-official kind will soon build up. It is already almost impossible to obtain a teaching post in a theological college without being in favour of women priests, and the same will soon be true of senior posts in the Church at large. This is almost inevitable, since, except in 'no-go' dioceses, for as long as they exist, those called to exercise a transparochial ministry will rightly be expected to work with anyone who holds a valid licence to preach and to celebrate the sacraments. The Church would not function otherwise, and it is foolish to pretend that it might try.

The truth is that there will be discrimination against the losers in this debate, whether anyone consciously wills that or not. Opponents of the Measure must reckon with the fact that they cannot continue to hold their opinions in the mainstream of the Church's life and work. Once the law is changed, they will be effectively marginalized, and nothing anyone says to the contrary will change that basic fact. Fighting to reverse the decision will be a long and difficult process, and one almost certain to fail in the short term since it would involve a decision to ordain no more women priests, and then a patient wait until the existing ones retired. Up to that time, their number will probably increase from year to year. Change has come, whether we approve it or not, and it is unlikely to go away in the foreseeable future.

So where does this leave those who do not accept that women's ordination is in accordance with the teaching of Scripture? Some will undoubtedly leave the Church, though it would be a great pity to lose their ministry. For whatever we may think about the issue itself, there can be no doubt that some of those opposed to the change are among the most principled and dedicated clergymen in the Church of England. This fact ought to be clearly recognized by everyone, and it is to be hoped that accusations of male chauvinism and the like will be avoided—in private as well as in public.

Those who do not leave the Church will be inclined to take refuge in their parishes and carry on with the job, as far away from any women priests as possible. This will probably be quite an easy option for most, since few women (or men) will want to go where they are unwelcome. But as with those who have won the argument, it would be a great pity if the opposition were now to retreat into public silence and private whispers.

That would do their cause no good, and lose them the respect of the Church.

The only answer for opponents of the Measure, clergy and laity, who want to remain in the Church is to try to demonstrate, by their lives and by their ministry, that they have the better case. Rudeness towards women will profit no-one and refusal to work with them will not always be possible, even if it were desirable. At the end of the day, the Evangelical position must rest on Scripture, and Scripture must be allowed to convict the hearts of those who come under it. If this argument cannot be won, then the case against women's ordination is lost from the start—and the opponents of the Measure ought to recognize that, so far at least, they have been less than single-minded in their pursuit of this aim.

There may come a time when the Church once again seeks to put itself under Biblical authority, as it did at the time of the Reformation. When that happens, a re-ordering of its ministry is sure to take place, and it will affect much more than the single issue of women priests. In the heat of battle, let us not lose sight of the wider war to which we are called. If that war is not fought with spiritual weapons, it will not be won. That is the challenge now facing us, and it is in that spirit that we should go forward to face the difficult and painful days ahead.

GERALD BRAY