Appendix E
Theological Questions on the Ordination of Women

Joseph A. Komonchak

One of the conclusions of the meeting at Detroit was to have similar meetings around the country. The following essay was one of the talks from the New York Conference in March, 1976. The editor agrees that it is so pertinent as to merit inclusion in these proceedings.

REV. JOSEPH A. KOMONCHAK, S.T.L. studied at the Gregorian University and is presently a Th.D candidate at Union Theological Seminary. Father Komonchak is Professor of Dogmatic Theology, St. Joseph’s Seminary, Dunwoodie, N.Y.

When I was asked to deliver this lecture, I was given the task of reviewing and evaluating the theological issues involved in the question of the ordination of women. Presuming that an exhaustive list was not required—since the issues which someone or other believes involved are many and range from the sublime to the ridiculous—I have decided to deal with the matter by addressing the short paper issued in 1973 by the Committee on Pastoral Research and Planning of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Entitled “Theological Reflections on the Ordination of Women,” the paper was offered as “a contribution to the continuing dialogue on a subject of great importance,” and, as the bishops said, “to encourage further study and discussion while making honest efforts to identify the major questions which must be examined in depth before conclusive answers can be given.” The paper is most successful in gathering under seven general headings most of the major objections against women’s ordination. If, I think, it is less successful in its theological evaluation, at least it has the merit of involving the “official teachers” of the Church in the process by which the issue will eventually be resolved; and that represents a better model of theological development than commonly is visible. My purpose is not principally to criticize the
statement—though that will be done—but to use its list of arguments as a convenient collection of the issues and then to offer some theological comments on them.

1. The Example of the Old Testament

The bishops refer first to the practice under the Old Covenant, in which “authentic priesthood was limited to males.” But, they add, this custom, which was “in keeping with the strongly patriarchal Hebrew society,” while it represented God’s will for the Old Testament, has no “direct bearing” on the issue of priesthood in the New Covenant.

The description itself is accurate enough: women did not play active roles in either the political or religious life of Israel. The interpretation and evaluation of this fact, however, is perhaps more complicated than the bishops indicate. Woman’s exclusion from a role in official worship may have been part of a reaction against the presence of women as sacred prostitutes in ancient Canaanite cults. There can be little doubt that the many ritual impurities that women could contract also influenced the legislation. Finally, the “patriarchal” presuppositions of Israelite society were also reinforced by certain theological explanations of the “submission” of women to men.

Now, while we may have moved from Old Covenant to New, and, presumably, out of immediate fear of infection by ancient fertility-cults, the latter two considerations did not lose their force under Christianity. The society in which Christianity was born and into which it quickly spread was also “strongly patriarchal” and would not have encouraged assigning important social, public roles to women. And the Levitical legislation about OT priesthood in time came to play an important role in patristic reflection upon Christian ministry.

Christian ministers were not commonly called “priests” until the latter part of the third century. The ascription of this title to them is often related to two other developments—the clarification of the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist and the tendency to draw parallels between the institutions of the Old and the New Covenants. As the one who presided over the sacrifice of the Eucharist came to be called a “priest,” so also the NT “priesthood” came to be surrounded by ideas, practices, symbols, laws which reflect the sacral nature of Old Testament priesthood. Among these was the notion of sacral purity or cleanliness which it was believed was compromised or lost by engaging in certain activities, especially any that involve the sexual powers. This is the chief basis for the development of the church’s legislation about clerical continence, and it could also have served to prevent the idea of a woman-priest from even being raised seriously, since women were considered to be subject to more such impurities than were men. The idea of ritual purity has been used by church-leaders right up into the twentieth century to defend clerical celibacy; and van der Meer believes that it would “not be entirely off the track to see in this sexual taboo the principal reason in the psychological area why the idea that a woman can also be a priest has never prevailed.”

I bring this up, not to revive the idea or to suggest it to new minds, but because I think it is part of the Old Testament heritage that affects our discussion. The bishops are right to label the OT argument as the weakest; but they do not mention that the early Church drew more than the name “priest” from the Old Testament. And, of course, the fact that an argument cannot be defended intelligently does not mean that it will not function on levels where intelligence and reason do not lead.

2. Women as “Deacons”

The bishops next take note of the ministry of women as “deacons” or “deaconesses” in the NT and in the early church. While acknowledging that this “tradition” can be “helpful” to the discussion, they caution against using it to construct a case “for or against the sacramental ordination of women” because of the “fragmentary and indefinite” nature of the information. They mean by this that it is often difficult to determine what the title means or to whom it refers and to evaluate the significance of the rite by which women were “ordained” to the “diaconate.”

It is true that all the data on women-deacons are not clear, but, among Roman Catholics, Gryson and Congar have both concluded that women-deacons did at least in some churches exercise a genuine “order” for several centuries and that they were admitted to this “order” by an “ordination” which was formally indistinguishable from that of their male colleagues. Both scholars, however, also argue that the women’s diaconal ministry was much less extensive than that of the men, being largely confined to ministries which it was considered indecorous for men to perform. If this ministry were to be revived, they go on, it would, to be meaningful, have to be given a different office or function.

The real pertinence of this discussion, of course, is its implication
for the ordination of women to the presbyterate. And when this is introduced, then it is not quite true to say that about women-deacons “theology has not the least misgivings”;—or, if that technically is true, it remains that there are “theologians” who have some misgivings, and the American bishops seem to share them. For in their conclusions they remark that “it is possible to draw distinctions between the diaconate and the episcopal-priestly order, and within the diaconate itself.” It is clear that the distinction they have in mind would in effect consider a female diaconate not to be a part of the Sacrament of Orders; it would rather be “a diaconate of service, non-sacramental and non-liturgical, which would be conferred on women.”

The reason for this distinction is not far to seek: to say that women may receive the sacramental diaconate is to say that they are capable of receiving the Sacrament of Orders, and, if they can receive it on one level, why may they not receive it on the others? The argument here is rather simple: The Code of Canon Law states that only a man can validly receive the sacrament in any one of its three “orders.” This principle would be undone if it were established that in the early church women did validly receive the “order” of diaconate or if they were to receive it today. The sacrament is a unity, so that if one may validly receive it in one order, one may validly receive it in any. This logic controls, it seems, the bishops’ discussion of the issue and suggests that an effort will be made to offer women a “diaconal” ministry, perhaps even through some formal liturgical rite, which will nevertheless not be the same diaconate which men receive.

It is important, I think, to understand the reasoning behind this view. It rests upon the development in the theology of orders which took place in the West during the Middle Ages. In the patristic period, ordination was generally considered to be the rite by which a person was admitted into an “order” or group (class) of ministers—one did not “receive” “Orders,” one was received into an “order.” The orders were distinct, and to have been received into one was to have no claim on the others. The diaconate, presbyterate, and episcopate were related organically. The churches which ordained women to the order of deacons, then, could quite consistently refuse, as they did, to ordain them to the other two orders.

But gradually, and especially in the West, the theology of orders began to focus on the “priesthood” as the central role of ministry. The lower “orders” were considered to be steps towards the priesthood, and, theoretically, all the other orders (including even the episcopate) were conceived in function of the Eucharistic powers residing in the “priesthood.” The Sacrament was thus conceived in a unitary and hierarchical fashion, and it became obvious that a person who could not be ordained to one order—the priesthood—could not be ordained to any order.

There results a very paradoxical situation. To appeal to the primitive tradition of women-deacons has relevance to the question of women-priests only on a theory which the primitive church did not share. On the other hand, to work with the later theory is to face embarrassment before the primitive tradition (which may be why some theologians and bishops question the sacramental character of its women-deacons) and to require alternate, “non-sacramental and non-liturgical,” forms of ministry for women today.

This is not a simple exercise in pedantry. The question of the ordination of women is only one of many issues confronting the theology of ministry and orders today. The classical theology of orders with which most theologians work was elaborated as a reflection on the church’s practice. We are in the course today of major changes in that practice, and many of them do not seem to fit within the classical theory. Without an ordination, no one in the early church, man or woman, would have been entrusted with the tasks that many laymen and laywomen exercise in the church today. Women today are engaged in many more ministries than even women-deacons would have exercised in the ancient church. Where the “unordained” regularly do what once only the “ordained” could regularly do, what is the point of ordination? In the Roman Catholic Church today, women share in pastoral authority, teach, preach, baptize, distribute Communion. A good number of people in the Roman Catholic—and Anglican and Orthodox—Church would be quite content to “ordain” women to such ministries. As I understand it, the movement for the ordination of women is a movement towards the exercise of the chief sacramental ministry of the Church, the celebration of the Eucharist. If that is so, then it is no service to the movement to link it with efforts to “de-sacramentalize” the ministry—a “de-sacramentalized” ministry is precisely what many think women should be content to exercise.

3. The New Testament and the Subordination of Women

In their third paragraph, the bishops discuss the NT texts that require “women [to] hold to a subordinate position in the Church, keep silence in the Church, keep their heads covered, tend the home
and family, etc.” Their discussion of these texts, however, is astonishingly brisk. They remark, first, that “these texts are of Pauline authority alone,” an observation they do not clarify. Further, they maintain that recent developments in the Church’s teaching on woman and the admission of women to the role of lector and commentator “demonstrate that these Pauline texts should not be cited as arguing against the ordination of women.”

From a methodological standpoint, both remarks are extraordinary. What does it mean that these texts are of “Pauline authority alone?”—that they may be disregarded? that they are of no theological or practical import? that they are not binding on the Church? That the latter is intended seems to be implied in the reference to the teaching and practice of the recent Church which directly contradicts the Pauline injunctions. If this is the case, a good number of our ecumenical partners-in-dialogue would have some questions to ask, and there will be some interest in the Church, no doubt, in exploring what other “merely Pauline” teachings or practices might not be questioned and jettisoned.

I do not raise this question because I think the Pauline description of woman’s role should be resurrected, but to draw your—and even the bishops’—attention to the paradox that what Paul directly counselled or forbade is contravened by the Church today, while what he did not directly address—the ordination of women—is held to be sacred.

For the bishops’ dismissal of these texts, in the light of the history of the question—is astoundingly casual: “these Pauline texts should not be cited as arguing against the ordination of women.” In fact, throughout the tradition, they were constantly cited; and one may question whether theologians and canonists would have considered the exclusion of women from orders to be de iure divino without them. Moreover, they continue to be cited. In 1970, Pope Paul VI quoted 1 Cor 11:3-12 and 1 Tim 2:8-15 (on what principle 1 Cor 14:34-5 and Eph 5:21-33 are omitted is not at all clear). The same reasoning which grounds the NT “leadership of men and the subordination of women in the Church,” the bishops note, “is advanced to explain the ordination to the priesthood of men but not of women.” The bishops in fact are singling out one of the many attempts to provide a theological basis for the traditional discipline.

The argument proceeds more or less as follows: According to Paul, it was part of the divine order of creation that woman be subordinate to man. In 1 Cor 14:3-12, the ground is the fact that “man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.” This founds in nature the order of mediation and subordination: “The head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.” A man, then, is “the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man.”

Now it seems to me that the relevance of this text for our question is considerably weakened when one notes that this whole argument serves the single purpose of explaining why woman may not pray or prophesy with her head unveiled. It does not prohibit her from public prayer and prophecy, but proscribes only a practice which few people today would describe as either very important or very evil. The problem is, of course, that this text has in the tradition been linked with 1 Cor 14:34-36, where women are forbidden to speak in the church, and that today an easy passage is made from 1 Cor 11 to Eph 5 and 1 Tim 2 and out of the three an argument against the ordination of women is constructed.

the point is that this is a conclusion, and it is extremely important for the discussion to know how it was arrived at, on what assumptions, on what principles of NT interpretation, by what argument. I think a theologically respectable case can be made for the recent Church’s abandonment of the Pauline instructions, but I wonder whether it would leave any NT basis for continuing the ban on women’s ordination.

4. The “Order of Creation”

That is the question addressed directly in the bishops’ fourth consideration, where they take up “the New Testament [though it too is of “Pauline authority alone”] doctrine on ‘headship’ as reflected in the order of creation.” The texts cited here are 1 Cor 11:3-12 and 1 Tim 2:8-15 (on what principle 1 Cor 14:34-5 and Eph 5:21-33 are omitted is not at all clear). The same reasoning which grounds the NT “leadership of men and the subordination of women in the Church,” the bishops note, “is advanced to explain the ordination to the priesthood of men but not of women.” The bishops in fact are singling out one of the many attempts to provide a theological basis for the traditional discipline.

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Neither step seems justified. One might argue that Paul’s teaching about headship and subordination underlies 1 Cor 14, if this latter text did not in fact contradict what Paul himself says in 1 Cor 11. A consensus is growing that 1 Cor 14:34-5 should be regarded as a later interpolation into Paul’s letter. If this is so, then in 1 Cor Paul did not draw any consequences from the order of creation against public worship-roles for women. And one may ask the point of retaining the argument when the practical point it was designed to press—the veiling of women—has been discarded.

This leaves the texts in 1 Tim 2 and Eph 5. The first of these begins with an injunction that “the men” (andres) of the congregation should pray peacefully and that “women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire, but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion.” And then the author goes on:

Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty (1 Tim 2:8-15).

This is the strongest NT text that is brought against the ordination of women. It builds first upon the priority of man in creation: what was created first is considered to have been created superior. But another point is also introduced, that it was the woman who was first deceived and not the man, with perhaps the implication that the man would not have fallen if she had not been seduced and then seduced him. The logic behind the first argument is not entirely clear, and it is doubtful whether anyone would wish to employ it today. Besides taking the account of the Fall rather more literally than most would today, the second assigns to Eve the role which Rom 5 reserves for Adam and also suggests a greater susceptibility to sin on woman’s part, which cannot be seriously defended either.

We are left, then, with the practical injunctions. We should note, first of all, that there are several of them: only the men are to pray in the assembly, women keeping silent; women are not to wear the hair-styles or jewelry of the fashionable; women are not to teach or to have authority over men. Of this mixed bag, the first is regularly disregarded in our liturgical assemblies, which would be considerably quieter if only men could pray aloud. Church-leaders are not regularly required to pass judgment on hair-styles and jewelry. Women regularly teach both in church and in society; and even in the church—women have had authority over men. The church, then, has felt able to exercise considerable freedom in interpreting these practical injunctions. One is left wondering how this text can continue to be cited, when the practical injunctions have been put aside and the arguments by which they were urged have been called into question also.

There remains Eph 5, but, since this text is usually brought forward in the same fashion as the bishops’ fifth argument, I would prefer to discuss it under that heading.

5. The Priest as Representative of Christ

The fifth consideration is the “divine plan” that “the Word of God took on flesh and was made man—as a male.” From this it is argued by some “that this divine plan is expressed in the priesthood, because the ordained priest must act officially in the person of Christ (cf. Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, #2). It is argued that a male priest is required to act in the person of the male Christ.”

This argument from the representational character of the priestly ministry takes many forms. A first begins with the representative role of Christ himself. As the incarnation of God’s redemptive word and grace, Christ is the representation of God. Now the Scriptures chiefly portray God as Father, the term which Jesus himself used in his most intimate prayer to him and which he taught his disciples to pray. The Fatherhood of God, it is argued, could not have been represented by a woman. That the Incarnation took place in a male, then, is not simply a concession to the male-dominated society into which Jesus was born, but reflects itself the initiating and generative mercy for which the Scriptures commonly use male images. Christ’s maleness was intrinsic to his redemptive role; a woman could not have said, “He who sees me, sees the Father.”

Further, in the ministry and especially in the Eucharistic ministry, the priest is the representative of Christ. He stands over-and-against the community, speaking Christ’s word and sacramentally mediating his grace. As the Second Vatican Council puts it, the priest acts in persona Christi; he is in his ministry a “personation,” a body-
ing-forth, of Christ. As a woman, so the argument goes, could not have represented the Father's love, so a woman cannot represent the redemptive role of the male Christ.

In a second form, this argument builds upon the doctrine of Ephesians that Christ stands to the Church as a husband to his wife. The order of creation—discussed in the previous section—supplies the created symbol of the authority and the life-giving Headship of Christ over his Church. Conversely, in this mystery is revealed the genuine meaning of both man and woman, whose relationship is not simply a matter of sexual differentiation for the sake of procreation, but is an "ontological" difference-in-unity whose final theological purpose is to mirror forth the relationship between Christ and the Church.

Now the priest represents this spousal relationship of Christ to the Church. In certain traditions, the priesthood is even considered to be the sacrament through which Christ continues to be present to his Church as Head to Body, as Husband to Wife. This sacramental presence of Christ to the church it is impossible for a woman to embody.

What may we make of these arguments? First, I think they should be taken seriously, for a few reasons. For one thing, they are regarded as the theological heart of the matter by many of the opponents of women's ordination. For another, they argue from symbols that are central to our whole religious tradition and which speak to and from deep personal and interpersonal human experiences. C.S. Lewis is correct, I think, in warning against treating fundamental religious and personal symbols lightly.8 If the ordination of women were to prevent us from addressing God as Father or from conceiving of Christ as Bridegroom of the Church, we would be in danger of cutting ourselves off from our biblical and traditional roots. The question, of course, is whether ordaining women should be considered to have such implications.

As for the first argument, it may be noted that the NT does not seem to have any theological interest whatever in the maleness of Christ. I have found only three texts in which the word aner is used of Christ (Lk 24:19; Jn 1:30; Acts 2:22), and none of them exploits Christ's "maleness." It is interesting that in Rom 5, where Christ is presented as the "one man" through whose obedience the disobedience of the "one man," Adam, was undone, the word for both figures is anthropos, not aner The point, obviously, is not to question Christ's maleness nor to suggest that one's relationship to him is not affected by it, but simply to show that theological emphasis on the maleness of Christ's humanity is foreign to the NT. Preliminary inquiries suggest that the same thing is true of the Fathers.

Secondly, while it is true that the great majority of Scriptural symbols and images of God are male, there is no lack of female imagery as well. If the Lord is the Father of his people, his tenderness is that of a mother for her child (Is 49:14-16). And if the Lord's cries as he goes out to redeem his people are like those of a "man of war," they are also like those of "a woman in labor," gasping and panting (Is 42:19). We may note with what ease the Scriptures can move from one fierce or gentle image to the other, without embarrassment and without fear of betraying the religious relationship.

If, then, the masculine images of God are to be pressed, this must not be done in such fashion as to violate the laws of analogical predication of God or to prevent our using the full range of biblical images. It is precisely because God infinitely transcends our images and ideas that the great number of symbols is needed. For the symbols are concrete and anyone of them, if it is not to be distorted in its interpretation, needs the others. At one moment in our religious experience it is important to know that God is our rock and our stronghold, at another that he is the spring of living water. If sometimes we need to know that he is our light and our salvation, at others it is good to be able to take refuge in the shadow of his wings. Similarly, if we must approach him as Father or as Bridegroom, we also know moments when we may be with God "like a weaned child on its mother's lap" (Ps 131:2), "not like an infant crying loudly for his mother's breast, but like a weaned child that quietly rests by his mother's side, happy in being with her."19

Moreover, Christ did not hesitate to use feminine and maternal images to describe his work. The love he shows in eating and drinking with sinners is that of the male shepherd foolishly off in search of the one lost sheep; it is that of the father indecorously running down the road to welcome his penitent son; but it is also that of the woman who turns the house upside-down in search of an insignificant coin (Lk 15). Christ has come to gather Jerusalem's children to himself as a mother-bird's wings surround, protect and warm her brood (Mt 23:37). And his death and resurrection are the birth-pangs of the Messiah (Jn 16:21; see Rev 12; Mk 13:8).

Finally, the feminine images are continued in the description of
Christian ministers. Paul called himself a father, but he also did not hesitate to call himself a “nurse taking care of her children” (1 Thess 2:7) or to compare himself to a woman suffering birth-pangs until Christ be formed in his people (Gal 4:19).

Now the point of these references is not to pretend that male images do not predominate, but to suggest that there are dimensions of God’s love for man, of Christ’s redemptive role, and of official Christian ministry which only feminine images can communicate. Christ represented these to the world, although he was a male; Paul represented them to the church, although he was a male. If a male could represent such feminine dimensions of the divine love, it is difficult to see why a woman cannot, in turn, represent to the Church dimensions of God’s love in Christ for which masculine images are used. Reasonably intelligent people understand how all these symbols function and do not press them beyond their intent. The argument against a woman’s representing Christ often works with rather rigid norms of symbolization which do not always escape the “prose-fallacy.”

It is the assumptions of this argument that most need clarification. Is it assumed that, while a man can represent both the masculine and the feminine, a woman can represent only the feminine? Are God’s initiative and free grace more masculine than feminine? Is a wife’s subordination to her husband the only reason why Christ may be considered the Church’s Bridegroom? What assumptions and predispositions— theological, cultural, psychological, and otherwise—lie behind the description of certain attitudes and ministries as “masculine” and others as “feminine”?

May women have a say in the matter, or is this already a violation of “the eternal feminine”? A last comment: it seems to me that the Christian tradition might be explored for help on these ideas of sexual symbolism for God and for the ministry. Margaret Farley has outlined some interesting thoughts on the feminine within the Trinity. Eleanor McLaughlin has uncovered three considerations from the Middle Ages, including Juliana of Norwich’s well-known habit of addressing Christ as “Mother.” Aelred Squire has noted how abbots were often called “handmaids of the Lord” and said to exercise maternal roles, and similar images were also used of bishops in medieval commentaries on the Song of Songs. Finally, there is a beautiful prayer of St. Anselm to St. Paul, which wholly turns on the maternal images the NT uses for Christ and the Apostle.

6. The Example of Christ and the Early Church

The sixth consideration brought forward by the bishops is “the selectivity of Christ and the early Church.” If Jesus, who did not hesitate to break with other social and religious customs, nevertheless did not call any women to be apostles (the bishops add, incorrectly, “disciples”), and if the Apostles did not include women among the possible successors to Judas (although they too filled the requirements) or among the possible assistants chosen in Acts 6—then the limitation of
ministry to men "goes beyond sociological conditions of that day and points to a divine choice."

This argument, too, is a serious one, if for no other reason than that it convinces so many people. Pope Paul VI made use of it recently in his famous dependent clause: "If women do not receive the same call to the apostolate that was given to the Twelve and thereby to ordained ministers. . ."16 And Professor John Meyendorff, from an Orthodox standpoint, recently argued that the decision not to include women belongs to those aspects of NT Christianity which are normative for all ages of the Church.17

We have here perhaps another one of the paradoxes that seem to surface in this discussion. For this argument seems to take its force from what some people like to call Jesus' "feminism." If, in fact, Jesus did break with social and religious restrictions about contact with women, then is there not some significance in his not choosing them as apostles? This is perhaps the place to remark, then, that one should be somewhat cautious about our ability to know Jesus' "feminism." Besides the anachronism of the term, we should keep in mind that in an age in which NT scholars have taught us to be rather cautious in our statements about the messianic consciousness of Jesus, we cannot expect to know much about Jesus' attitude towards women. The Gospels are first of all witnesses to the churches of their respective writers and not to the deeds much less the words of the "historical Jesus."18

To some degree this particular argument finds both sides assuring the other that they have the burden of proof. The opponents of women's ordination place that burden on those who would contradict the practice of Jesus and of the primitive church. The proponents, on the other hand, want the others to bear the burden of showing that there was something more than cultural or social accommodation at work here. One consideration at least to introduce here is the fact that the argument too easily passes from the word "apostle" to the word "priest," particularly when the content of this word especially concerns the Eucharist. The NT has no direct indications about who might preside over the Eucharist. Now, while one might reasonably presume that the Twelve and other "apostles" fulfilled this office, one cannot without begging the question assume that other ministries, including those which women are said to have performed, did not include a Eucharistic presidency. The NT data, in other words, do not require a restriction of presidency over the Eucharist to "apostle-ship," while, on the other hand, Paul (especially in Rom 16) did speak of women's ministries in terms similar to those used for his own and others' missionary and "apostolic" work. The diversity of ministries within the NT churches requires that the discussion be undertaken with considerably more nuance than is usual, and especially that statements and conclusions about what Jesus did or did nor order about the ministry reflect the caution which contemporary NT scholarship recommends.

7. The Argument from Tradition

The last objection the bishops propose is the one they take most seriously: that "the life and practice of the Spirit-guided Church," consistently excluding women from the priestly ministry, constitutes "a clear teaching of the Ordinary Magisterium of the Church. Though not formally defined, this is Catholic doctrine." Though they began their reflections with the statement that "there is no explicit authoritative teaching concerning the ordination of women that settles the issue," they conclude them with the comment that this last argument "indicates" a negative answer.

This argument, too, must be taken very seriously and for a number of reasons. For one thing, the Church is an historical community and for it to disregard its traditions is to flirt with amnesia. For another, the argument carries great weight with a good number of our fellow-Christians, both in and outside the Roman Catholic Church.

An approach to tradition must move between two extremes. The one is represented by passionate outbursts that the issue should not even be raised, that it represents "Western" deformations of the creed and ministry, that it is a casus irrealis simply because the tradition has not addressed it.19 The other extreme is represented by Simone Weil's comment that "history . . . is nothing but a compilation of the depositions made by assassins with respect to their victims and themselves."20 The middle ground is perhaps best expressed by a word of Cyprian: Consuetudo sine veritate vetustas erroris est—A custom without truth is simply the antiquity of error.21 That dictum argues the need for the twofold hermeneutic which Paul Ricoeur has described: a "hermeneutic of restoration," which attempts to bring the power of ancient symbols to bear upon the present, and a "hermeneutic of suspicion," which brings a critical and emancipatory mind to the works of the past.22
Thomas Hopko, an Orthodox theologian, puts the issue well and applies it to our discussion:

Is there some theological and spiritual reason why the Church has ordained only certain of her male members to the sacramental offices of bishop and presbyter? Or is this merely a fact without reason, or perhaps with many reasons that are not theologically and spiritually justified and are no longer socially and culturally acceptable.

Methodologically and ecumenically, it is very important to find an Orthodox theologian admitting at least the possibility of the tradition's being "a fact without reason," for it requires the question to be addressed with Ricoeur's two-pronged interpretative intention. If there is a "theological and spiritual reason," the hermeneutics of restoration will discover it and mediate its transmission; if none can be found, then the hermeneutics of suspicion will uncover the consuetudo sine veritate.

In other words, the tradition is not simply "there"; it has to be understood, judged and evaluated. What were the conditions in which the question was raised in this century or in that? What were the concrete implications of the issue? Who was deciding it? On what assumptions and principles? By what logic? With what notion of scriptural interpretation? Under the influence of what explicit or implicit view of woman and of ministry and of priesthood?

When such questions are answered, there are questions for a critical evaluation: Do these conditions remain? Are those implications truly involved? What motives guided those who decided the issue? Are the assumptions, the principles, the logic, the hermeneutics defensible? Do we mean the same thing today when we ask about "ordaining" "women" to the "priestly" "ministry"?

Van der Meer has asked many of these questions, and he is of the view that none of the arguments brought forward in the tradition grounds a conclusive answer against ordaining women. If one accepts his conclusion, then one may say to the argument from tradition, that if the reasons advanced against ordaining women are not valid, what authority does the mere custom have? If the assumptions, logic and argument are seriously flawed, with what confidence can it be said that the conclusion against women priests was valid?

In this context, it is worth noting that many of the reasons brought against the ordination of women today are not to be found, at least not explicitly, in the tradition itself. This is true both of some of the sillier arguments and also of such serious speculations as those in Thomas Hopko's recent essay on the Trinity. The Fathers and medieval theologians and canonists simply referred to the OT example, to the example of Jesus, to the words of St. Paul, to settle the issue. Those who attempt the new justifications do so out of a sense that the tradition has an "instinct" for the truth even independent of the reasons any one generation might be able to articulate. One can respect that view while insisting that the new arguments are not themselves the tradition and must also be brought under critical examination to determine their "theological and spiritual" value.

The defenders of the tradition, in other words, must defend it; it is not enough to repeat it, nor is it reasonable to require an unthinking deference to it. In a day when many other practices of the Church have been examined and evaluated, and long-standing traditions and customs reversed or permitted to disappear, it is difficult to see on what grounds this tradition must be considered more "sacred" than others. It is our conviction that tradition can be a great beater of the truth that makes us something more than mere "traditionalists." If truth is not what is borne to us and tradition is promoted for its own sake, then the existential history of the Church risks being merely the "dead hand of the past."

Conclusion

In these pages I have tried to present a serious and respectful evaluation of the more frequent and more important arguments brought against the ordination of women to the priesthood. I do not myself find any one of them—nor all of them together—a convincing defense of the traditional discipline. I would be happy if my remarks have enabled you to focus on the basic and central issues and contributed at least modestly to their clarification and evaluation.

Notes


16. *The Pope Speaks*, 20 (1975), 39; the sentence concludes, “they are nonetheless invited to follow Christ as disciples and co-workers.” The following paragraph hints at the pope’s conclusion from this fact: “We cannot change either our Lord’s actions or his call to women. Our duty is rather to acknowledge and help develop the role of women in the mission of evangelization and in the life of the Christian community. To do so will not be to introduce novelty into the Church, for we find traces of such participation, in various forms, even in the original communities and, later on, in many a page of Christian history.”


