



WHY can't women be ordained?

By Fr. Martin Pitstick, 6/11/2009.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches it is not possible to ordain women as priests. Further, the Church has clarified that this is an unchangeable and infallible teaching that belongs to the "Deposit of Faith." Because of our faith in the Holy Spirit guiding and protecting the Church from teaching error, Catholics believe that what the Church teaches is true. Those who are unable to accept this would, like Protestants (who *protest* certain Church teachings), no longer be in *full communion* with the Roman Catholic Church. It is not, however, inappropriate for Catholics to ask why the Church teaches as she does. The Church welcomes honest inquiry into her teachings. She is confident there is no contradiction between faith and reason. This article hopes to give a reasonable explanation as to why the Church teaches it is impossible for women to be ordained.

Explanation

A priest is configured by the Sacrament of Holy Orders to act *in the person of Christ the head* and bridegroom of the Church. "The priest is called to be 'a living image of Jesus Christ, Spouse of the Church.'"¹ The Bible often uses marital images to describe God's relationship with his people. The Church is the Bride of Christ and the priest acts in the role of Christ the bridegroom of the church. This is a male role.

"The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body... Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her... that he might present the church to himself in splendor... Even so husbands should love their wives... This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." Ephesians 5:23-32

*"Priests are called to prolong the presence of Christ, the one high priest, embodying his way of life and making him visible in the midst of the flock entrusted to their care."*²

*"Priests should... regard themselves as living signs... (making) Jesus... present."*³



"Goddesses have, of course, been worshipped: many religions have had priestesses. But they are religions quite different in character from Christianity." C.S. Lewis

The male gender of the priest images the male role of Jesus, the bridegroom of the Church. Only a *man* can be a *bridegroom*. Each Sacrament has elements that are needed in order to fulfill the sign value of that

Sacrament. Just as water is needed for Baptism and bread and wine are needed for the Eucharist, one must be a man to act in the person of the God-man, Christ who is bridegroom to his Church.⁴ The Mass is the celebration of the *Wedding Feast* of Jesus, the Lamb of God, with his Bride.

Jesus also taught us to call God "Father." This is a matter of divine revelation - received from our Lord himself. Similarly, we call priests "*father*" because of the spiritual fatherhood they exercise. Through the priesthood of Christ, they make the love of God the Father present to his children.

Prior to the 1948 meeting of Anglican bishops to consider the possibility of ordaining women, author C.S. Lewis wrote an article entitled: "Priestesses in the Church?" The following is an excerpt:

What the advocates for woman priests are really trying to affirm is that "*sex is something superficial, irrelevant to the spiritual life.*" C.S. Lewis

Why should a woman not in this sense represent God? Certainly not because she is... less holy or less charitable or stupider than a man. In that sense she may be as 'God-like' as a man; and a given woman much more so than a given man. The sense in which she cannot represent God will perhaps be plainer if we look at the thing the other way round.

Suppose... (one) stops saying that a good woman may be like God and begins saying that God is like a good woman. Suppose he says that we might just as well pray to 'Our Mother which art in heaven' as to 'Our Father.' Suppose he suggests that the Incarnation might just as well have taken a female as a male form, and the Second Person of the Trinity be as well called the Daughter as the Son. Suppose, finally, that the mystical marriage were reversed, that the Church were the Bridegroom and Christ the Bride. All this, as it seems to me, is involved in the claim that a woman can represent God as a priest does.

¹ Congregation for Clergy, *The Priest and the Third Christian Millennium* (1999), Chapter Four, 2, par 4; quoting John Paul II in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 22.

² Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), 15, par 3.

³ The Congregation for the Clergy, *The Priest and the Third Christian Millennium*, Chapter Four, #2 par 2.

⁴ It is interesting to note that *impotence* is an impediment to Holy Orders, as it is for Marriage. The "maleness" of the priest is thus part of the "sacramental substance."

“There were prophetesses even in Old Testament times. Prophetesses, not priestesses.” C. S. Lewis

Now it is surely the case that if all the supposals were ever carried into effect we should be embarked on a different religion. Goddesses have, of course, been worshipped: many religions have had priestesses. But

they are religions quite different in character from Christianity. Common sense, disregarding the discomfort, or even the horror, which the idea of turning all our theological language into the feminine gender arouses in most Christians, will as 'Why not? Since God is in fact not a biological being and has no sex, what can it matter whether we say He or She, Father or Mother, Son or Daughter?'

But Christians think that God Himself has taught us how to speak of Him. To say that it does not matter is to say either that all the masculine imagery is not inspired, is merely human in origin, or else that, though inspired, it is quite arbitrary and unessential. And this is surely intolerable: or, if tolerable, it is an argument not in favor of Christian priestesses but against Christianity. It is also surely based on a shallow view of imagery. Without drawing upon religion, we know from our poetical experience that image and apprehension cleave closer together than common sense is here prepared to admit; that a child who has been taught to pray to a Mother in Heaven would have a religious life radically different from that of a Christian child. And as image and apprehension are in an organic unity, so, for a Christian, are human body and human soul.

The innovators are really implying that sex is something superficial, irrelevant to the spiritual life. To say that men and women are equally eligible for a certain profession is to say that for the purpose of that profession their sex is irrelevant. We are, within that context, treating both as neuters. As the State grows more like a hive or an ant-hill it needs an increasing number of workers who can be treated as neuters. This may be inevitable for our secular life. But in our Christian life we must return to reality. There we are not homogeneous units, but different and complementary organs of a mystical body... (It has been) claimed that the equality of men and women is a Christian principle... The point is that unless 'equal' means 'interchangeable,' equality means nothing for the priesthood of women. (End of C.S. Lewis' excerpt.)

C. S. Lewis makes an important point when he says that equality and interchangeability are not the same thing. Men and women have equal dignity but they are not identical or *interchangeable*. They are equal but *different*. This is why a man cannot marry a man.

Equality and interchangeability are not the same thing.

Also, a man may want very much to have a womb and carry a child and give birth as a woman does. But he cannot. Does this mean he is not worthy to carry a child? Or that he has fewer rights than a woman if he cannot give birth as she does? No. It just means he is different from a woman. Equal dignity, but different. This is part of the beauty of the complementarity of the sexes that God has built into creation. One cannot replace one's mother with another father. And one cannot replace one's father with another mother. This complementarity is also expressed between the priesthood of Christ and his Church. The Church is feminine and the priesthood, masculine. To promote a gender-neutral priesthood is akin to promoting gender-neutral husbands for marriage. The result of both would be strange and *lifeless*.

Regarding motherhood, we have a Mother in heaven. She is the mother of Jesus, our High Priest, and is the model for the Church. No other human creature has been more greatly honored than Mary. If Christ wanted to ordain women, she would have been the first. Yet it seems this was not his plan. But her femininity does express the feminine side of the mystical marriage between God and his People. The priesthood images the masculine side in Jesus, the bridegroom. We need both the feminine image of Mary in the Church, and the masculine image of Jesus in the priesthood to bring life to the Church. Our faith is richer for not being limited to a neutered spirituality. It is both the masculine and feminine spiritualities coming together within the Church that bring her life through this mystical marriage.

The Declaration on Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, 1976), gives these additional reasons as to why the Church does not have the power to ordain women: **1. The Church's Constant Tradition; 2. The Attitude of Christ; 3. The Practice of The Apostles; 4. The Permanent Value of the Attitude of Jesus and the Apostles; 5. The Ministerial Priesthood In the Light of the Mystery of Christ; 6. The Ministerial Priesthood Illustrated by the Mystery of the Church.** These are very well reasoned arguments that one can read by downloading this document online.

In the simplest of terms however, men make better *Fathers* and men make better *Bridegrooms*. The priest makes the love of God the Father present to his children by acting *in the person of Christ*, the Bridegroom, in order to make Jesus present to his bride and bring life to her Body.

For Further Reading:

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: “Ten Frequently Asked Questions about the Reservation of Priestly Ordination to Men” (1998), available online.