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Women in the Church

THOMAS P. RAUSCH, S.J.

Women in the Church. Why is it that four words generate so much emotion today? For many contemporary women, the mere mention of the topic brings to the surface strong feelings of frustration, resentment and anger. They feel unrecognized, unappreciated, condemned to a "second-class citizenship" in a Church dominated by men.

I remember in particular one young woman, a vivacious and very intelligent student in a class I was teaching, who withdrew into a strained silence when the class wandered off the topic of the day and into a discussion of the ordination of women. When I asked her later what had happened, this young woman — who was not especially "into" women's issues — replied that she had become at once so angry and so hurt at the thought that a role she admired and respected in the Church was closed to her simply because she was a woman, that her feelings had simply gotten away from her.

Discomfort to Threat

The topic is no less emotional for many men. For many priests especially, any discussion of women in the Church evokes feelings ranging from vague discomfort to acute threat.

Some worry that those seeking a change in the position of women in the Church are motivated more by the secular currents underlying the feminist movement than they are by the needs of the Church and the implications of Catholic theology.

Others fear that the sanctuary of the male-oriented, clerical subculture in which they are comfortable and at home is about to be taken from them, a fear given explicit confirmation in the writings of some women on the subject.

Some priests feel that their own ministry is being rejected by women who feel themselves excluded. A priest whose life has become his

priesthood can easily feel threatened by women who refuse to accept his ministry simply because he is a man.

Ironically, his experience here is precisely the same experience of so many women today who feel that this kind of ministry and role in the Church is denied to them simply because they are women. So the frustration is compounded; voices are raised and frequently become shrill, and dialogue becomes difficult.

It is no wonder then, that on the question of women in the Church, many prefer silence. Yet, the subject will not go away. It needs to be discussed rationally and dispassionately, no matter how much heat and emotion it threatens to generate.

One thing that should be pointed out at the beginning is that "women in the Church" is at least two distinct but related issues.

There is, first of all, the broad question of opening to women ministerial and leadership roles which, hitherto, have been denied to them.

Secondly, there is the much more specific question of the ordination of women.

In response to the first question, it must be honestly admitted that the institutional Church has been glacially slow to acknowledge women as equals to men and to fully recognize their gifts. Before the Second Vatican Council a double standard applied to religious women who, unlike priests, were often forbidden to dine in a restaurant, go to a movie, drive an automobile or visit a friend's home.

Such rules and "customs," it was maintained paternalistically, were for the Sisters' own protection and good.

At times the Church has been guilty of using women, especially religious women. One thinks of the thousands of sisters sent to teach huge classes of children in parochial

schools without adequate preparation, sisters who spent countless vacation periods in summer schools, just to complete their undergraduate degrees. Or of their congregations, governed by rules and a canonical discipline formulated by men without representation on the part of the governed, save for their "Cardinal Protestors," who of course also were men.

Even today it is regrettable that no women have been members of any of the 14 study groups comprising the Pontifical Commission for the Revision of the Code of Canon Law,¹ a revision which could have a considerable effect on the lives of religious women.

Role, Status Changing

Yet, the role and status of women in the Church, both lay and religious, is changing, not only as a result of Vatican II but also because of the wider cultural changes which have affected the role and status of women in society at large.

In the Church women have long played a most significant role in education and they continue to do so, from the primary school — today often in the inner city, providing a unique chance for an education to the children of the poor — to the graduate departments of universities. Many seminaries also are adding women to their faculties today.

On the parish level, more and more women, often but not exclusively Sisters, are being hired as full-time "pastoral associates" (though so far, perhaps out of respect for clerical sensitivities, they are not usually called "associate pastors.") These women already are exercising a variety of parish ministries which in the past had been exercised by priests: administering various parish

¹Thomas J. Green, "The Revision of Canon Law: Theological Implications," *Theological Studies* 40 (1979) 593-679, p. 679.

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programs, teaching adult education, preparing candidates for the sacraments, counseling, bringing Communion to the sick, caring for the aged.

In some rural parishes without priests, women are functioning as parish administrators and an increasing number of young women, not attracted to the religious life, are preparing themselves for Church ministry in the ministerial programs offered by various American seminaries, theological centers and graduate schools.

These professionally trained women will be taking on leadership roles on parish pastoral teams.

On the diocesan levels as well women are increasingly moving into positions of major responsibility. In the 1970s many dioceses in the United States began to go through a process of change similar to that experienced by Catholic colleges and universities at the end of the 1960s.

Authority Shifts

This process consisted of a democratization which was, at the same time, a bureaucratization as the locus of authority shifted from an all-powerful university president or bishop to a sharing of responsibility through various structures of committees, departments, councils and senates. The diocesan administrative structure has been expanded beyond the traditional departments for the parochial schools, hospitals, cemeteries, clergy and, of course, the censor of books. New committees and departments on family life, social services, social justice ministries, media and communications, and ecumenical and interreligious affairs, to name just a few, have been added. Increasingly, too, women, both religious and lay, have been moving into positions of authority as members or heads of diocesan departments and offices which in the past were administered by priests.

Thus, one increasingly finds and will find women serving as vicars of religious, as directors of family life programs, as official members of diocesan marriage tribunals or as diocesan directors of religious education.

Not only do they free priests for ministry in the parishes which are so short of them; it is also frequently the case that the women coming to these positions today bring a level of competence and professional training which their predecessors would have envied. So women are increasingly taking on leadership roles on the level of the local Church, at least in the United States.

What is the position of women at the administrative center of the worldwide Catholic Church, the Vatican?

At present only a handful of women are members of the various congregations and commissions of the Vatican. However, as the involvement of women in leadership roles in the local churches becomes more obvious, it will become more necessary and more acceptable for the administrative centers of the Church, both in Rome and at the national levels, to acknowledge the ways in which professional women are serving the Church today by opening their own offices and departments more readily to them.

What about the much more specific question of the ordination of women? Not many people have been convinced by the theological arguments which have been advanced *against* the ordination of women. Nor is it clear that the question is really a theological one. This does not necessarily mean that the Church should begin to ordain women, at least at the present time.

Bracketing for a moment the theological question, it still can be asked from a practical point of view: Is the Church ready to accept the ordination of women?

The answer, despite various surveys and opinion polls offered by the advocates of women's ordination, still seems to be "not yet."

The ordination of women at the present time is an issue particular to

the United States and certain parts of Western Europe, and even here, the issue remains highly emotional. The changes introduced by Vatican II have not yet been fully assimilated. The ordination of women could be for many the final blow; it is still too radical a change.

The Episcopal Church in the U.S. has experienced a schism, triggered in large part by the ordination of women to the priesthood. In most Latin and third world countries, cultures in which the traditional role of women remains largely unchanged, the ordination of women would be even less acceptable.

At the same time, out of pastoral necessity women are being accepted in roles which have hitherto been closed to them. The emergence of women as natural leaders in the base communities of Latin America may signal that traditional attitudes toward women are beginning to change, at least in that part of the world.

In the southern United States, too, the people of at least one rural parish which lacks a priest have chosen to celebrate for their Sunday liturgy a Word and Communion service under the direction of a parish Sister rather than drive 40 miles to the nearest Mass.

So attitudes are changing here as well.

Testing and Discerning

Perhaps the wisest comment on the question I have heard came from a young woman, a novice in a religious congregation. She said, basically, that she wanted to see women ordained but she didn't want to see the ordination of women come as a victory in a situation creating winners and losers. She felt that this would be too damaging to the Church, already badly divided and in need of healing. She felt that women should be ordained when and if it became clear to the whole Church that the Holy Spirit was calling women to Holy Orders, and she very much looked forward to that day.

There is, therefore, a need for time, time for testing and discerning, and, perhaps more practically, time for the Church to become more

accustomed to at the functions and women are incre

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²See Roger Gry in the *Early Chur* turgical Press, 197

³Quoted in "Stances," *Nation* 10, 1981) 5.

accustomed to and comfortable with the functions and ministries which women are increasingly exercising.

One practical suggestion has been that those seeking the ordination of women focus on the admission of women to the diaconate. There is, first of all, a clear historical precedent for this, at least in the Eastern churches.² Nor is it at all clear that the contemporary Church has closed the diaconate to women.

Shortly before his death in May, 1981, Bishop James Rausch of Phoenix told a group meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota, to evaluate the diaconate program; that the Roman language excluding women from the priesthood had been "carefully worded" so as not to "definitely exclude" women from the permanent diaconate.³

Secondly, many women are already performing "diaconal" ministries. In third world countries, especially, where the diminishing number of priests has become critical and many communities are simply without ordained ministers, women are instructing and baptizing candidates, witnessing marriages, leading small groups at prayer, preaching and distributing the Eucharist at priestless liturgies, and burying the dead. It would certainly be both fitting and appropriate to sacramentalize the ministries that these women are exercising.

Thirdly, seeing women functioning as deacons could give the Church a breathing period, a chance for the members of the Church to become accustomed to seeing women functioning in the liturgy, preaching and celebrating the Sacraments. In a similar way, many Catholics who just a few years ago resisted the introduction of extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist now welcome these new ministers. Some who were once "line switchers" have even become extraordinary ministers themselves.

Admitting women to the diaconate would be a positive step for which a precedent already exists. At

²See Roger Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church* (Collegeville, MN: the Liturgical Press, 1976).

³Quoted in "Rausch Explains Church Stances," *National Catholic Reporter* 17 (April 10, 1981) 5.

the same time it would give the Church a period for testing, discerning and becoming comfortable with women exercising a liturgical and sacramental ministry. Then, if a consensus emerged that women should also be ordained priests, the Church could move to do so peacefully, conscious of being led by the Spirit.

In a recent article entitled "The Future of Ministry,"⁴ Father John Coleman, a sociologist on the faculty of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley pointed to a dilemma which the Church will increasingly be forced to face as the number of priests continues to decline both worldwide and in the United States. According to Father Coleman's statistics, based on the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae* issued by the Vatican, roughly 50 percent of all parishes and mission stations in third world countries lack a resident priest. Because of the shortage of priests, thousands of baptized Catholics in the Philippines, Central Africa and Latin America are denied regular access to the Sacraments.

In France there are currently about 1,500 parishes which celebrate Sunday liturgies without a priest. So, as more and more communities and parishes are forced to rely on the leadership of unordained men and women to gather them for prayer, the possibility increases that a future generation of Catholics could emerge without the sacramental and, particularly, the eucharistic imagination which has traditionally constituted the center of Catholic identity.

Sacramental Economy

Therein lies the dilemma. If the Church continues to insist on the present discipline for ordination as the number of traditional candidates continues to decline, it may run the risk of losing the eucharistic focus of future Catholic communities for want of priests to lead them.

Father Coleman poses the question: "Just who are the real traditionalists? Those who defend no

⁴John A. Coleman, "The Future of Ministry," *America* 114 (March 28, 1981) 243-249.

⁵*Ibid.* pp. 248-49.

options to celibacy even when it means defining Catholic communities by something other than the Eucharist or those who assume that Eucharist is more central to the Catholic imagination of ministry than any disciplinary condition for ordination?⁵

If the Church is to maintain its sacramental economy, it may be forced to turn to other candidates for its future priests, and there are many whose charisms are increasingly being recognized. The United States already has a large cadre of permanent deacons exercising a sacramental ministry. There also is a growing number of women in the Church, both celibate and married, professionally trained for ministry and already exercising prophetic, leading and serving roles.

Who can say that the Church, already so dependent on these ministries, may not one day see fit to sacramentalize them. ■

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Mater Dei Institute is for men over 30 who want to be diocesan or religious priests. Write or call collect: **Father Nigro, S.J., Gonzaga Univ., Spokane, WA 99258.** Tel: 509/328-4220.

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