

# Can the Church Ordain Women?

## Human sexuality and the Eucharist

By Monica Migliorino Miller, Ph.D.

They are strong words. In 1994 John Paul the Great issued his apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. In this very short document the Holy Father intended to put an end to the debate that continued to rage on the subject of women's ordination by saying, in no uncertain terms:

"Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry in confirming the brethren, I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful."

Thus, the Pope declared infallibly that woman cannot be priests.

As far as Church dogma is

concerned, this is a settled issue. However, the subject of women's ordination continues to receive much attention from commentators in the Church and from the secular media — as if this was not a settled question. Apparently, much still needs to be done on the pastoral level to help people understand exactly why the ministerial priesthood is reserved to males.

Advocacy for women's ordination relies on its own four basic arguments.

1. The priesthood is just a job, a functional position and thus gender is irrelevant

to job performance.

2. Male and female sexuality is irrelevant to personhood.

3. Equality, to be true, must mean sameness.

4. The priesthood is the result of an intrinsically evil, unjust male-ordered hierarchical world-view.

Those who hold this last point of view, such as the well-known feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, wish to abolish the ministerial priesthood altogether, since for them any system of power based on "class distinctions" is unjust and needs to be done away with whether women are admitted into that class or not.

They are reacting not just to Pope John Paul but to the document he cites — Paul VI's 1976 letter *Inter Insigniores*, which presents four basic reasons why women cannot be ordained to the priesthood.

1.) The Church's constant tradition. Christ called only men to the priesthood and the Apostles remained faithful to the will of Christ in this matter. The Church does not believe that she has the authority to deviate from an original gesture of Christ. Christ's gesture has a permanent value.

2.) The priest acts *in persona Christi*.

The priest acts in the name of Christ, is a sign of Christ and the sign must be perceptible. Here the document argues that the priest must bear a natural resemblance to Christ and affirms, in a rather startling way, that not only did Christ come as a man but that even now in Heaven He "remains a man."

3.) The unity between Christ and the Church is a marital unity, thus male and female gender have a transcendent and sacramental value within the economy of salvation.

4.) The teachings of the Church depend upon divine Revelation and not on the social sciences. The Church, as a divinely founded institution, must resolve issues according to God's Word.

To this, John Paul added that the Church's inability to ordain women to the priesthood "pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself."

This is an extremely

important statement. It means that the male character of the priesthood has to do with the very nature of the Church. The male character of the priest is not simply a question of Church law or discipline.

If women were to be ordained to the priesthood the very essence of the Church would be affected. Thus it is absolutely necessary to understand this essence and what exactly is at stake in the issue of women's ordination.

The Catholic Church believes that the male gender of Christ is significant to redemption. Christ's sexuality is not just mere biology or a kind of functional costume. His male gender is not arbitrary, as if Jesus could have been a woman just as well as a man and that all that matters is that God became human.

From the Beginning male and female sexuality has never been mere biology. Marriage, the one-flesh unity of man and woman, stands at the center and is the very foundation of the goodness of the created order. From the very Beginning the one-flesh unity of the first Adam and the first Eve constituted a divinely ordained sacramental sign. When Christ enters human history as a male He affirmed the goodness of that created order.

In the New Testament Christ is the bridegroom and the Church is His bride. The Eucharist is a wedding banquet in which Christ, through the priest who represents Him, unites Himself through His Body and Blood with the Church. Theirs is the ultimate marriage — the ultimate one-flesh unity.

If male priests have been entrusted with imaging the Bridegroom to the Church, women have been equally entrusted with being the sign of the Church in the world. Perhaps we ought to turn this whole issue on its head and stop asking why women cannot be priests, but instead ask why can't men image the Church in relation to Christ?

Male and female sexuality are not just conventional symbols or cultural constructs. Christ's gender is not a conventional or historically conditioned symbol. Christian religion exists in and through symbols. Christ's masculinity defines Him and defines His love. The sexes are the substance of creation and the fabric of reality itself. Redemption is not something God imposes on His creation — redemption completes creation and now they exist together.

Women cannot be priests because the Church doesn't have the authority to alter the nuptial beauty of the world — a world that is redeemed in the nuptial love of Christ and His Church made present and real in the Eucharistic celebration.†

Migliorino Miller is a well-known Catholic theologian, author of *Sexuality and Authority* in the Catholic Church and *The Authority of Women* in the Catholic Church.



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