

Women and the Priesthood

Roger Ruston O.P.

One of the factors that has constantly bedevilled the debate about the admission of women to the priesthood is the uncertainty about what a priest is in christianity. It must be obvious that we can't come to any sound conclusions in this matter until we have a theological understanding of the meaning of priesthood and how it relates to the other ministries in the church. The relationship with other ministries is one of the important things to establish if we are going to arrive at a clear idea of what priesthood is. Is it a universal category that in some way comprehends all the other ministries in the church? Or is it just one among many, the central one perhaps, yet not including the others? (One of the questions we have to face after all is why many women who seek to take their rightful place in the ministry feel that they will have got nowhere until the priesthood itself is open to them. What idea of the priesthood lies behind this ambition? Is it the right one? Or is it a historical distortion?)

It is a fact that many theologians in modern times have deplored, that in the Roman Catholic Church there has for many centuries been a gradual absorption by the ordained, sacrificial priesthood of nearly all the other ministries in the church. This is well illustrated by the way in which the sacrament of Orders has been administered since the early middle ages. Ordination meant essentially giving to a man the power of celebrating the Eucharist. The climax of a long series of preparatory rites was the anointing of the hands of the candidate and the bishop's handing over to him the sacred vessels. There was no higher dignity that a man could receive on this earth than this power to handle Holy things and administer the Body and Blood of the Lord. Giving this power and dignity is essentially what ordination meant.

Now, as everyone knows, there were embedded within the process of making a priest, the fossilized remnants of other ministries which in the course of time had lost their independent status in the church. They had become mere stepping-stones to the thing that really mattered—the sacrificial priesthood. Thus, in the ordination books there were rites for the ordination of deacons, subdeacons, exorcists, acolytes, readers, even door-keepers. (Some others, including the female orders of widows and deaconesses,

had disappeared altogether at an early stage, but more of that in a moment.) All these ministries must have been distinct from the priesthood at some time. But somehow the single value of the priesthood had taken them over. Moreover, even the office of bishop had been devalued in comparison with that of the priest—at least theologically. Until recently the ordination of the bishop was thought to add nothing essential to that of the priest. If a man arrived at the fulness of dignity and sacramental power in the priesthood, what more could be added by mere elevation to the episcopacy? He was already ordained. So it was easy to see him simply as a priest with a special juridical place in the hierarchy of the church, but not sacramentally speaking anything more than a priest like the others.

The priesthood then had absorbed all the other ordained ministries. It was a one-dimensional ministry. It is notorious how often the parish priest in the modern church has taken on himself even those functions that were traditionally and much more fittingly exercised by lay people. Reading, teaching, financing, visiting, distributing communion—there's many a priest even now who jealously keeps all such things to himself. It's not inaccurate to say that for a long stretch of its history, the Roman Church has been a presbyterian church. A single ministry has absorbed all the others in one way or another.

Now this picture of the church is clearly not easy to square with the one we are given by St. Paul. For him there was no question of one office in the church doing the work of all the others: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? ..." (I Cor 12:27-30). The emphasis is on the difference: "For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body...." (I Cor 12:14-15). This is the very earliest record we have of the distinction of ministries in the church and there is no reason why it should correspond with the distinctions that are necessary now. The conditions are very different. However, while there was certainly authority and leadership in the early church, no one can say that there were only two classes of membership, priests and laity, or that there was one main office to which belonged all the important ministerial work. There was clearly a place for many different kinds of gift and ministry.

If the monopolisation of all ministries by the priesthood has been a sad thing for the church, dividing it into the clergy, who

minister, and the laity (including all women) who are administered to, we must ask what the true nature of christian priesthood is. Only then will we be able to arrive at a better idea of ministry which will be closer to the original conception of the church as a body in which all members can find a place commensurate with their God-given gifts. You may want to be a minister. But is it really necessary for you to become a priest? Is it even desirable? given the special gifts which you have?

The first thing to make clear is that the word for priest in New Testament times—*hiereus*—is never used of the christian ministry in the books of the New Testament. It is studiously avoided by all the christian writers, right up to the third century, when it begins to be applied to bishops, though in a special, metaphorical sense, as we shall see. In the New Testament, *priest* means a Jewish priest—a member of the family of Aaron of the tribe of Levi. A priest was one by right of birth. Many priests of the Temple became christians, but in doing so they put their priesthood entirely behind them—it counted for nothing in the Church. And for good theological reasons, of course. The sacrifice of Christ on the Cross and the coming of the Holy Spirit right into the midst of men had abolished all need for the old priesthood. Their work was over. Christ had made the sacrifice once for all. The thing was accomplished. The People of God had been made holy by the Spirit and there was no further need for the mediating role of the priests. There was no longer anywhere to stand between God and man.

The word which we habitually use to translate *hiereus* in Greek, or *sacerdos* in Latin—the word ‘priest’—in fact derives from another origin, *presbyteros*, which means elder and stands for quite a different function. The presbyters were the elders of the local churches set up by the apostles. There is not much to distinguish them from the *episcopoi*—the overseers or bishops. As for this office, it derived not from the Jewish priesthood but probably from the elder of the synagogue—the man who led the local community in prayer and was an authority in matters of the Law. Elders were those who kept the dispersed communities together. But whereas in the Jewish communities it was the people themselves who appointed their own presbyters, in the christian church it was at first the apostles: Paul and Barnabas on their journeys “appointed presbyters by the laying on of hands in each church.” The laying on of hands in the early church was a gesture which signified the transmission of the Holy Spirit and a divine appointment through the agency of the existing ministers. It was the presbyters and the overseers who eventually became the clergy as we know it. Other important offices in the earliest church—notably apostles and prophets—disappeared very soon when the church became a more settled affair.

As you probably know the words ‘priest’ and ‘priesthood’ are

used in only two christian senses in the New Testament: of Christ in the first place and of the whole people of God in the second place. If any christian is entitled to be called priest in any way whatever, it is only because he shares in some way in the original priesthood of Christ. There is no one who is a priest in his own right or by descent. All priests in christianity, whether it is people or ministers you are talking about, are only *administering the single priesthood of Christ*.

The theology of the priesthood of Christ can be traced in several places, but especially in the first letter of Peter and the letter to the Hebrews. Why was it important to represent Christ as the High Priest of the Church? Because what he did had at last fulfilled and completed the job that the Levitical priesthood had always been occupied with, yet were never able to bring to completion. I couldn't possibly give you a full account of the biblical notion of priesthood, but I must have a shot at summing up the main purpose of it as it appears to the christian authors.

What priests were essentially for was to purify the people from uncleanness—both ritual and moral—and so to make them fit to live in the presence of God. It was to make a people holy to the Lord—because the Lord God himself is holy. This the Old Testament priests did—or attempted to do—through the medium of repeated sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. And they did it also by proclaiming and expounding the Law of God, since if the People could live by the Law, they would be holy and fit to live in God's presence. But it was a notorious fact, emphasised at every turn, that neither the sacrifices of the Temple, nor the Law, had the power to make the People holy and fit to appear in God's presence. They were ineffectual. But they pointed to something better which was to come. They pointed to a really effective mediation that God would bring about in his own time. And this, said the New Testament authors, was the sacrificial death of Christ. The willing death of this just man—the Son of God—was the act that for the first time was good enough—holy enough—to bring a man into the presence of God, face to face. And so everyone who follows Christ in faith, hope and love is thereby made holy enough to come into God's presence with him. This is something which will be completed in the city of God, the new Jerusalem, towards which we, as a People, are journeying together. Jesus is the 'pioneer' or 'forerunner' of our salvation. This arrival is anticipated here and now in a sacramental fashion: whenever the faith, hope and love of Christians brings them together to celebrate the Lord's Supper—the Eucharist. This is the holy People of God gathered together.

In the Old Testament then, being priestly meant being holy, which meant being fit to live in the presence of God and apt to conduct others into it. It follows therefore that if and when the

People is made fit to appear in God's presence, it becomes a *priestly People*. And furthermore, because of this, it becomes able to mediate God to other men. It is this kind of thinking that allows the author of I Peter to speak of the priesthood of the People of God in these terms. "It is written, You shall be holy, for I am holy ... having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart. You have been born anew, through the living and abiding word of God ... that word is the good news which was preached to you.... Draw near to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ... You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you into his marvellous light." The original word for 'draw near' is one normally used for priests entering the sanctuary—the Holy of Holies in the Temple. It is a very significant word, used repeatedly in the Letter to the Hebrews: the author tells the Jewish Christians to whom he is writing not to be afraid to enter in the very presence of God—not to be afraid to follow in the footsteps of Jesus the High Priest. Some of them had been hanging back—looking over their shoulders at the comforts of the old religion of the Temple—reluctant to attend the Eucharist, which must have seemed rather poor religion compared with what they had known. So it was this drawing near to God in faith, hope and love—expressed above all in the Eucharist—that constituted the priestly life of the People of God. They made what was called 'spiritual sacrifices' rather than animal ones. The meaning of this can best be illustrated by the words of Christ himself: "to love God with all one's heart, and with all one's mind, and with all one's strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself; this is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices". Doing this and spreading the good news of Christ's sacrifice—this was the priestly work of the People, confident that they were in the very presence of God by their attachment to Christ. The whole People of God have a priestly ministry in this sense.

What of the ministerial priesthood then? If in the New Testament the People is priestly and the ministers are not called priests, how did we get into our present state? I've talked about presbyters and bishops, but I haven't yet talked about the Apostles who set them up and from whom they got their charge. But listen to what St. Paul says of his own function: "On some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.... From Jerusalem to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ,

thus making it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on another man's foundation, but as it is written, 'they shall see who have never been told of him, and they shall understand who have never heard of him'."

So St. Paul can speak of himself as a minister undertaking a priestly function. He can say this because what he is doing is making a Holy People out of the Gentiles, fit to live in the presence of God, and fit to celebrate the Eucharist. He is doing this by preaching in the first place. Then follows faith in Christ, then there is established a church in that place, and there is a holy people fit for the service of God, assuming that they hold to faith, hope and love and become a shining light to other men. Preaching the Good News and building up the Church—this is the essence of the matter. Making a people able to follow Christ into God's presence. So you can see just how priestly this apostolic activity is.

Now the Apostles—especially St. Paul—never stayed in one place for very long, but no sooner were they satisfied that a Church was established than they moved on, having appointed elders or overseers in their place to take care of the new church and to carry on the work of building it up through preaching, teaching, forgiving sins, and of course, celebrating the Eucharist. But more of that in a moment. So we have a second, more sedentary kind of christian minister who continued the work of the apostles in one place and who could be thought of as the shepherd of the church in that place. These were real successors of the apostles, though they didn't do all the things that apostles did, nor had they their authority over the church at large. But they were in a derivative sense *apostolic*. They too were 'sent' by God for what St. Paul has called the priestly service of the gospel. It was from this office that there evolved bishops as we know them.

It was these men who gave the young church identity and stability during the centuries when there were yet no church buildings and christians would meet in private houses for the Eucharist. They were an important focus of unity. Where the bishop was, there was the church. It was very important to be united with your bishop, who was a sign of unity of the whole church throughout the world. The office itself had sacramental value. It is part of the essential structure of the church left by Christ.

The situation in the third century seems to be that in any one city there is a single bishop who is assisted in his functions by, on the one hand a group of presbyters, and on the other, doing quite a different job, a college of deacons. The bishop normally presided at the single Eucharist on the Lord's Day, surrounded by these other orders of the ministry. In some writing of the time, the bishop can be called the "High Priest of his people, ministering to the tabernacle of God, the Holy Catholic Church ..." But this Tabernacle of God is, of course, the People, not a building. And so too,

whenever the word 'sanctuary' is used it means this. Both words are being used metaphorically. Far from being a sacred place from which the lay people were to be excluded, the sanctuary before which this "High Priest" ministered was the people itself—especially the widows and orphans. He can be called a priest only because of his function of representing God who is already there in their midst. The bishop in no way stood *between* God and the people in the manner of some High Priest of the Old Testament religion.

Around the bishop there would be a group of elders, perhaps deriving their income from secular means, who served as the bishop's permanent board of advisors and who joined with him in his sacramental functions. They were ordained by the laying-on of hands and they were able to preside at the Eucharist when the bishop was unable to do so himself. They came into their own when Christianity spread from the towns to the countryside and the Eucharist was celebrated in many places on the Lord's Day. Then they represented the bishop. This is the origin of the parish priest.

But the deacons seem to have been more professional—they were the full time assistants of the bishop in the cities of the Roman Empire. They brought relief to the sick and the poor, brought the people's offerings at the Eucharist, conducted their worship, administered Baptism and distributed Communion. It is well known that in many places in the church, especially in the East, there were deaconesses who did these things for the women in the congregation when it would have raised pagan eyebrows to see men doing it. Where men could not go, there had to be women to do the work. It is clear that where deaconesses existed they were counted among the ordained ministry, just as the deacons were, but with less actual authority than they because of their restricted field of action. The deacons, both male and female, clearly had a very important part to play in the life of a church without permanent buildings, where personal contact was everything. In one text they are called the "eyes and the ears of the bishop". There was a clear separation between them and the presbyters. There was no question of their order being a mere preliminary step to the priesthood, as it has been in modern times, and often still is. Judging from a number of prohibitions and condemnations, the deacons sometimes presided at the Eucharist, though this never received official sanction in the church. Their ministry was a different one.

So the essential church order seems to have settled down to these three ministries. What became of the other ministries mentioned by St. Paul—including the celebrated order of Widows—I cannot now discuss. Let me just try to summarise the meaning of the priestly ministry in the early church—something in which each

of these three in some way shared. First of all it was essentially apostolic—it belonged to men who were sent by God to establish and maintain the community of believers, the holy people fit to appear in God's presence. Whatever they did was towards this end—preaching, baptising, reconciling people to God, ministering to the poor, in general gathering the people of God into one. So it was fitting that they should each have a special role to play in the sacrament of the Church—the Eucharist. This was what the people were gathered *for*. So the Eucharist was not, then, the single thing that made the ministerial priesthood. They were priests in a sense—in the basic sense—before ever it happened. They were priestly in virtue of their apostolic work. The first act is preaching the gospel. Then the unity, faith, hope and love of the gathering is expressed sacramentally at the Lord's Supper, where, as St. Paul says, "we proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes".

It is an unfortunate fact of history that when the preaching to the gentiles became a thing of the past, the preaching side of the priestly ministry receded farther and farther into the background until it was only the ritual function that seemed to make a man a priest. So the ministers of the church became the sacrificial priests offering the Eucharist. The way was then open for a wholesale adoption of Old Testament language in describing the christian ministry and for the separation from others, of a priestly class, defined by their power, both sacramental and juridical, over the people of God, the laity. There was then no particular reason why a man should remain in what seemed like the half-priestly stage of deacon when he could go on to be a full priest. Priests then offered Mass on behalf of the people, somehow standing *between* God and the people in the way that became so familiar up to the recent reform of the liturgy in the Roman Church. The priest became largely a man of the sanctuary and the altar—and the tabernacle—note the Jewish terms, and these things have now become physical parts of the church building rather than different ways of referring to the People of God itself, where, according to Christian theology, the real presence of God is to be found. By the Middle Ages, preaching the word had dropped out of the definition of the priesthood altogether. And because of this the bishop seemed to be a more powerful kind of priest, instead of all those things he had been.

This situation has been somewhat rectified by the work of the Second Vatican Council. In the first place, the ministerial priesthood is now clearly seen to be represented chiefly by the bishop. The Constitution on the Church, after outlining the role of the Apostles sent by Christ to gather the people of God through their preaching, and after saying that the bishops are their successors, goes on:

"It is the teaching of the sacred synod that the fullness of the

sacrament of Orders is conferred by *episcopal consecration*, for the episcopate is truly named, by the Church's liturgical custom and the statements of the Fathers, the high priesthood, the height of the sacred ministry ... with the imposition of hands and the words of consecration, the bestowal of the grace of the Holy Spirit, the imprint of the sacred character is such, that the bishops sustain, eminently, and patently, the role of Christ himself."

What is their function? "Outstanding among the foremost functions of the bishop, is the preaching of the gospel." So, preaching the gospel is re-instated very firmly as the original and chief task of the ordained priestly ministry of the Church. This is clearly a welcome return to the theology of St. Paul. A Christian priest is first of all someone called by God to preach the word and so gather together a holy people to celebrate the Eucharist in his presence.

What of the other ordained ministers? Let us first of all remember that the single sacrament of Orders, is something given to the whole Church, not a personal privilege bestowed on individuals. According to Catholic theology it is a permanent part of the church which is not meant to exclude a great variety of non-ordained ministry. Now the bishops, having been 'sent' by Christ in succession to the Apostles pass on their office of ministry, in varying degrees, to various other people in the Church. "In this way, the divinely instituted ministry of the Church is practised in different orders of men, who from ancient times, have had the names of *bishops*, *presbyters*, and *deacons*, ... Presbyters exercise the office of Christ, pastor and head, in proportion to their share in the single priesthood. This consists in gathering together the household of God as a brotherhood with a single spirit and bringing it through Christ in the Spirit to God the Father. They make a single priesthood with their bishop, and they render him present, in a way, in individual local communities." The dependence on the single priesthood of Christ should be noted.

The function of the deacon is to administer Baptism, distribute Communion, preside at marriages, take Viaticum to the dying, instruct the people and bury the dead. This sounds rather as if the deacon was just expected to take some of the sacramental load off the shoulders of the priest, and if that means the priest has more time to get down to preaching the gospel, so much the better. But one commentator has remarked: "The Council did not try to stimulate vocations to the diaconate by any words of encouragement." Though it is now officially acknowledged as desirable in some situations, the idea of the married deacon has met with tremendous opposition in the government of the Church subsequent to the Council. I suppose they see it as whittling away the priestly celibacy, and the all important distinction between clergy and laity (in-

cluding all women). There are still very few permanent deacons operating in the Roman Church in most Western countries. The situation may be different in the Third World or in Mission countries. It will take a long time to 'de-centre' the priest and give other ministries their due place in the Church.

The fossilised minor orders which I mentioned earlier have been eliminated from the rites of ordination and there are now only three grades within it; bishop, presbyter and deacon, each sharing in its own way in the ministerial priesthood. But there are now recognised two "ministries", that of lector and acolyte which may be conferred on laymen and are not part of the sacrament of Order. So laymen may now officially read in church and distribute Communion. I wonder how many parish priests realise this and how many would take advantage of it if they did. But, so far, women are still ineligible for even this official recognition. If they are permitted here and there to read in church and to administer Communion, it is unofficially, as 'extraordinary ministers'.

You will probably realise, if you know anything of the early church, that this is very poor recognition indeed of the ministry performed by women. There seems to be no doubt, for instance, that in St. Paul's time, several women played a very important part in the evangelisation and establishment of the new churches. St. Paul calls them 'fellow workers' and says that they take their share 'in the proclamation of the good news'. (Rom. 16:1-16; Phil. 4:2) Perhaps their ministry was only to other women living in households where a man could not go, still it was obviously on a level with the men's ministry. Clearly too, the office of prophet was shared by women. (I Cor. 11:4-5) This seems to have been a rather important function within the assembled congregation, probably concerned with leading the prayers. While there are frequent prohibitions against women 'teaching'—which means teaching the orthodox doctrines of the faith to the assembled congregation for which the Apostles and bishops alone held responsibility—there was nothing against them raising their voices in prayer on behalf of the congregation, and nothing against them teaching outside the congregation. It seems that in the church of the first four centuries there was far greater scope for women in the ministry than at any subsequent time, and that if women were never permitted to celebrate the Eucharist or pronounce the official teaching of the church, they were certainly involved in a lot of sacramental work and in all kinds of religious instruction and some offices of prayer. The contrast with the present day is startling. I can only put it down to the absorption of all the ministries by the presbyterate, which I have spoken about already. There is little doubt that in some parts of the contemporary Roman Church many of these ministries are again being performed by women—especially among congregations of religious and in what we like to think of still as

'mission territories'. But the Church shows an extraordinary reluctance to grant any kind of official recognition to them. Danielou puts it thus: "It would seem that the Church has always been opposed to conferring upon female ministries too definite a status, that she has rather left initiative to develop on its own according to needs. Thus we see such and such a form of these ministries appearing and then disappearing; different forms co-existing at certain times, with similar functions. It seems as if this may well be a permanent and normal feature of the ministry of women." I will leave you to decide whether you think this is either true or desirable. It does seem to me, that wherever the church becomes an entrenched part of society with a fixed structure, the ministries of women are gradually curbed by the sedentary male clergy. This is the case in the oldest Christian countries at the present time. Do any Catholics know of any parish in this country where a woman has any kind of officially recognised ministry in prayer, evangelisation or sacramental work?

It seems that unless these ministries are recognised for what they are, as vital parts of the life of the Church which need not and mostly cannot be performed successfully by *one man*, then the real issue at stake—what ministries can and should women be performing—will get hopelessly entangled with another one—whether women should be ordained priests. I wish to make it clear that I find nothing convincing in any of the arguments put forward against women being ordained priests, and I look forward to the day when it happens in the Roman Church too. But there are other issues which are being obscured by insistence on this one. Ask yourselves this question: not whether women are fit for the priesthood, but whether the priesthood—as we know it—is fit for women. After all, it is unlikely that an institution that has been moulded by centuries of male ideology, often explicitly anti-feminine, should suddenly be a suitable vehicle for the ministry of women. It needs to undergo a revolution before it becomes suitable. A revolution of the de-centring type that I have hinted at is required. But you may answer me by saying that the only way it can be changed is by allowing women to enter it and change it from within. You may be right.