

Women and the Eucharistic Presidency

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There has been much discussion recently about the ordination of women to the priesthood of the Catholic Church. Most writers on this subject agree that there are no theological reasons why women may not be admitted to the priesthood, and so the debate is conducted between prejudice on one side and sentimentality on the other. I do not see how it can be denied that there are many pastoral ministries, including preaching and counselling, where the effectiveness of women ministers would be very great; nevertheless, I believe that there are important theological considerations which tell against the ordination of women to one of the central ministries in the Church, the celebration of the eucharist.

This has nothing to do with the intentions of Jesus: the fact that he included no women among the Twelve is fundamentally irrelevant to the question of whether women today should be admitted to the priesthood, and not because of changed social conditions (that argument is merely one version of the fallacy that man has 'come of age' in the twentieth century), but rather because of our changed understanding of how the Church stands in relation to Jesus as her founder. Even if Jesus did intend to found a Church, we have no warrant to suppose that he drew up detailed blueprints for its structures: and as it appears much more probable that he had no such intention, but exercised a ministry wholly within the parameters of contemporary Judaism, the question of what he would have thought of women priests becomes purely speculative. Further, it is in any case clear that the relation of the threefold ministry as it developed in the second century to the ministry of the Twelve is extremely distant; since the Twelve could not be replaced in their most important function, that of eye witnesses of the ministry and the resurrection appearances of Jesus (cf Acts 1:21f), the sense in which bishops or popes may be said to be their successors according to a pipeline model of apostolic succession is far from obvious. Besides this, we do have evidence that some women exercised prominent ministries in the early communities (cf Rom. 16:6; I Cor. 11:5ff; Acts 21:9; and the figure of Priscilla); we are never told that they celebrated the eucharist, but then we are never told explicitly that the Twelve celebrated the eucharist.

The arguments I wish to present against the ordination of women to the eucharistic presidency are based on an understanding of the principles of legitimation of the sacramental symbols we employ.

First, in order for a sacramental ritual truly to be 'the outward and visible sign' of God's action on man and to be the locus of that action,

its symbolism must somehow be 'earthed'—not just any old ritual will do. The rite derives its power to interpret our experience and its capacity to transform our experience from the fact of its experienced counterpart in the actions of our everyday world. For example, the fact that water does cleanse, that bread and wine do nourish the body, 'earths' the sacramental rituals of baptism and the eucharist in our normal lives and makes them comprehensible to us as channels of God's redeeming grace.

Where the performance of a ritual is not 'earthed' in the actions of the everyday world, the vital continuity has been broken and so the ritual becomes seriously defective as a means of encounter with God. Thus, we should not dream of inviting anyone to a meal and then serving ourselves alone with fresh food and giving them the leftovers from a previous meal, or of keeping all the drink to ourselves and sharing only the food with them; transpose this rule of everyday hospitality into the sacramental sphere, and we see the bizarreness of administering communion to the laity from the reserved sacrament or under one kind—the continuity has been broken, and the ritual is dangerously defective. Now, it is certainly important to note that, for the individual communicant who receives in these circumstances, his sharing in Christ is not in any way defective: if we believe

*tantum esse sub fragmento
quantum toto tegitur,*

and believe in the permanence of the presence of Christ in the consecrated elements, it is nonsense to suggest that one receives 'less' if one receives from the tabernacle or under one kind. But the celebration of the eucharist is not performed so that the individual Christian may get into his pious huddle all by himself to make 'his' communion. The eucharist is (*inter alia*) the ritual whereby the whole Church throughout space and time expresses and reinforces her unity in Christ: and if we make this indefensible distinction at the table of Christ, where all are equally guests, then we are simply *not* performing a ritual that can possibly express or reinforce this with the full power of the eucharistic sharing in the one bread and the one cup.

In this example, the efficacy of the sacramental act is seen by reference to our ordinary experience. But this, obviously, is not the only principle of legitimation involved. For example, let us consider the question of the eucharistic elements themselves—why use bread and wine, which may be the ordinary food and drink of some periods and cultures (though we know that unleavened bread and wine were not the ordinary food of the Jews at the time of Jesus), but by no means of all? Why not (for instance) celebrate the eucharist with rice and water, to demonstrate and to strengthen our solidarity with the peoples of the Third World? We know that various symbolic values have been attached to the elements: thus, Byzantine polemic against the Latin use of azyme bread claimed that although Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with unleavened bread, now that his death has sealed the new covenant between God and man we should use leavened bread

as a sign of this; and we may compare the elaborate rituals that have been used in the baking of the eucharistic bread, especially in the Nestorian Church. We may vary the form of the bread, we may divide it with a lance into seven pieces before communion, we may mingle a small piece in the chalice before communion, we may use white wine or red wine; but in its essentials the eucharistic action remains the taking, blessing, breaking and giving of *bread* and *wine* simply because of the example of the Lord—because Jesus used bread and wine at the Last Supper.

If bread and wine are not used in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, then we are not in fact celebrating the *Lord's* Supper. We may very well be celebrating an agape that is exceedingly pleasing to God, and one whose symbolism is truly 'earthed' in our experience and aspirations and powerfully opens our hearts to the action in us of the Holy Spirit: but we are not celebrating the eucharist. This may seem merely a pedantic plea for precision in our terminology—it is easy to agree that the word 'eucharistic', like 'eschatological', is much over-used (e.g., the experience of communal pot-smoking has been called 'eucharistic')—but I would suggest that more is at stake than verbal hair-splitting. I certainly would not wish to deny the value of a service where rice and water, or scones and blackcurrant juice, are eaten and drunk to the glory of God; but this is not the eucharist as given to the Church by Christ, and can never replace the eucharist as the central prayer of the Church. For the service with rice and water is not, in the full sense of the word, sacramental, it is not a use of one of the covenanted rituals of encounter with God; its validity as a ritual of encounter with God is limited to a specific set of circumstances. In this set of circumstances, it might even be of more power than the eucharist; but while it would thus satisfy the first criterion of legitimation I have suggested, it could not satisfy the second, the historical anchorage in the Incarnation—hence its value is derived *ex opere operantis* (understanding *operans* to cover the whole group celebrating the ritual). So, the eucharist with bread and wine possesses a universal symbolic value across Christian history, not because a service with bread and wine is somehow more deeply 'earthed' in our experience than one using rice and water (the converse may be true), but simply because Jesus used bread and wine at the Last Supper. We may formulate this second principle of legitimation as follows: a Christian sacramental ritual must be 'earthed' in the contingency of the Incarnation.

Both of these principles must be borne in mind when considering the question of the eucharistic presidency. If it is true that the celebrant, from the offertory onwards, is acting *in persona Christi* when he takes bread and wine, blesses, breaks and gives, then it is important to remember that the Word of God became incarnate in a man. God did not become 'man', he became *a man*: the infinite accepted all the limitations of a contingent existence, in the experience of a particular man living a particular life in a particular set of historical circumstances in a particular place. We may assert that it was only because

of contingent sociological structures of first-century Palestine that God became a man rather than a woman, but I would reply to that assertion that it makes no more sense to claim that God could have redeemed mankind by becoming incarnate as a woman than it would to claim that we should have been redeemed just the same if Jesus had died in the cradle or Judas had had a heart attack en route to betray him and Jesus had subsequently died in his bed at an advanced age. These speculations are utterly futile: and this, not because of any aprioristic limitations I am placing on what God *might* conceivably have done to redeem us, but simply because of what he *did* do to redeem us—namely, to come among us as a man, Jesus of Nazareth, who died on a cross and was exalted to the fullness of life by his Father. We might have been redeemed without any Incarnation at all; but that is not how things happened. We have to reckon with a God who became incarnate as a particular man and lived the life of this particular man: if we claim to be an historical religion, we are inextricably bound to the contingencies of that life and cannot afford to chase the hares of unfettered speculation.

The Christ-event was the means of making manifest in the space and time where men live the eternal self-offering of the Son to the Father in the life of the Trinity, and of offering to men the salvific revelation of what God's love is. The eucharist may be seen as the sacramental means by which we are 'plugged in', so to speak, to the Christ-event and hence to the eternal self-offering of which that was the enfleshing. In order for the eucharist effectively to 'plug us in', its rituals must be 'earthed', at least in their essential structures, in the Christ-event, and in particular in the Last Supper which was the institution of the rite. Hence we must use bread and wine: but hence too, I suggest, the necessity that the president, who acts *in persona Christi*, should be a man.

There are obviously many respects in which the president need not resemble Christ: for example, Jesus was not married (even the second-century Gospel of Philip, which tells us that he loved Mary Magdalene more than the others and continually kissed her on the mouth, does not actually say they were married), but no one would infer from that that the eucharistic president must be unmarried. But the distinction between maleness and femaleness is not a superficial distinction of this sort: it is a radical distinction which affects the whole of our lives, and is not to be glossed over by an appeal to Gal. 3:28 or by vague talk about 'mankind' as the mode of the Incarnation—for it was not 'mankind' that was taken up into the Godhead, but the humanity of a particular man, Jesus of Nazareth. Accordingly, if the eucharistic president is a woman, an important symbolic link with the contingency of the Incarnation has been broken. It would seem then that what I said above about a service celebrated with rice and water must be applied also to a communion service presided over by a woman: while it would be ridiculous to pretend that such a service was in itself displeasing to God, and presumptuous to deny the reality of the grace communicated through such a service, I do not think that it can

properly be called eucharistic, and do not regard it as a satisfactory equivalent to the Mass as normally celebrated in the Catholic Church.

While I see no objections to ordaining women into ministry in the Church, and if need be to a ministry in the traditional threefold order, I would not, therefore, regard the ordination of women to the ministry of presiding at the eucharist as theologically justifiable. However, in the first paragraph of this paper I wrote that there are important theological considerations which *tell against* the ordination of women to this ministry. I would not claim that I have made out an unanswerable case; and I shall now look at a significant pointer away from my conclusion.

This pointer is provided by our present-day eucharistic practice. If the eucharistic celebrant acts *in persona Christi*, what happens when ten priests concelebrate the Mass? Do all ten act equally *in persona Christi*, or only the principal concelebrant? Whatever the answer to this question may be (if there is an answer to it), we can see a defect in the symbolism similar to that which would occur if a woman presided: Christ is only one man, Jesus of Nazareth, and how can he be personated by ten men? To preserve the symbolism, should one follow the Anglican practice where one priest celebrates and other priests present receive communion from him? It might be cogently argued that concelebration, besides preserving the ancient principle that one should participate in the liturgy according to one's order, is an effective symbolic manifestation and strengthening of the essential unity of the Christian priesthood as a sharing on the ontological level (and not in a purely functional manner) in the high priesthood of Christ, and that this symbol is too valuable to be sacrificed merely because some people find the other symbol more important; in any case, as there is always a principal concelebrant, the visual symbolic link with the Last Supper is never lost. Now it might well be urged that the break with traditional eucharistic practice involved in concelebration by ten or fifty or a hundred priests can pave the way for the further break involved in celebration by a woman, and that this further break with tradition would be justified by its own symbolic value—for example, it might powerfully witness to the importance of the place of women in the Church, or the equality of the sexes in Christ, or the maternal love of Christ for his Church (cf Lk. 13:34b). On the other hand, concelebration is an ancient practice (even if it is difficult to say precisely what forms it took in the early Church), whereas within the Catholic tradition celebration by a woman has never occurred normally: and I am inclined to think that here one draws the line between 'eucharist' and 'agape'.

But a final point must be made, arising from this. I have spoken as if we knew precisely in what sense we may say that the eucharistic president acts *in persona Christi*. But one can call the president a 'celebrant' of the liturgy only in a derived sense: the true celebrant in all the sacraments is the glorified Christ himself, acting through the ministry of his Church. When ten or fifty or a hundred priests concelebrate the Mass, only one Mass takes place; it is not as if ten or

fifty or a hundred distinct acts of 'plugging in' to the Christ-event were happening simultaneously. Now if Christ can celebrate the eucharist through the ministry of a hundred priests just as effectively as through the ministry of a single priest, can we draw the line to forbid him to celebrate the eucharist through the ministry of a woman? We must apply Gamaliel's test to this question, and take care lest we be found to be opposing God. And so this paper ends inconclusively: I think that there are good reasons grounded in the value of sacramental symbols and the principles of their legitimation which should make us hesitate to ordain women to the eucharistic presidency; but if God offers his grace through their ministry, then we must revalue our symbols.

Correction

We apologise to our readers for a confusion in the footnote references to 'Art and the Anthropologists' by Adrian Edwards CSSp in our June issue. *Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts* is published by the American Ethnological Society, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1967.

Footnote references ²⁻⁸ each refer to the immediately subsequent footnote (e.g. reference ² refers to footnote ³, etc.).