

'WOMEN PRIESTS'?

Among the most vocal controversies in the Catholic Church in the late 20th century and early 21st has been the question of the ordination of women. As more Protestant denominations, including the Church of England, have begun 'ordaining women', the Catholic Church's teaching on the all-male priesthood has come under attack, with some claiming that the ordination of women is simply a matter of justice and the lack of such ordination is proof that the Catholic Church does not value women. The Church's teaching on this matter, however, cannot change. Why can't women be priests?

In the Person of Christ the Head

At the most basic level, the answer to the question is simple: The New Testament priesthood is the priesthood of Christ Himself and He was a man. Proponents of women priests tend to ignore the mystery of the Incarnation i.e. God became Man, not just in the generic sense but also in the male gender sense. All men who, through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, have become priests participate in Christ's priesthood. They participate in it in a very special way: They act *in persona Christi Capitis*, in the person of Christ, the Head of His Body - the Church. The Church is seen as feminine and the priest is 'betrothed' to the church. His spouse is the Church. Jesus talked about being the bridegroom to His Church. He came and planted the seed of God's love within His Church. By dying on the cross and rising again he 'betrothed' himself to his bride, the church in unending faithfulness and love.

In this imagery, Jesus was and could only have been male. But it's not just imagery – it's reflecting a fundamental truth about us and about God. Just as with the human procreative act, Jesus, the bridegroom, instigates the offer of Himself. The Church, His bride, is called to accept His gift and to nurture it and bring forth new life. The Church is then called to mother all her children, feeding, teaching, hopefully inspiring, but ultimately leading them all to God.

When God created us in the beginning as male and female, He always knew that it would be **His beloved Son** that would be needed to reach out to us and to offer Himself for us. It is this sacrifice, made present at every celebration of Mass that is the summit of the priest's vocation. At Mass, the **priest acts** in the place of Christ: 'in persona Christi'. On the altar, the priest really offers himself as a gift to His bride, the Church. The bridegroom gives everything He has to protect and serve His beloved bride.

Only a male priest can really take the place of Christ, otherwise none of Jesus' offering makes sense. This is why Jesus only invited the twelve male apostles to the Last Supper when He initiated the priesthood. It was only they, and those in their line of succession, that He called to offer the sacrifice of the Mass in the Eucharist. So the stipulation that men only are eligible for ordination is not about equality but theology. It's part of divine revelation.

Christ was a Man

Christ, of course, was a man; but some who argue for the ordination of women insist that His sex is irrelevant, that a woman can act in the person of Christ as well as a man. That would certainly be true if the priesthood were merely about a career. But it would ignore the innate difference between the male and female genders, which is not based on roles, interchangeable at will. Maleness and femaleness lie at the core of our very being – it is part of our very essence as persons.

For the same reason the church believes that adopted children are best served by having a male and a female as adoptive parents like the Creator intended, and not two people of the same sex. This ensures that the child's welfare is a priority. Yes, we are all human and equal before God but blurring the distinction between what essentially constitutes maleness or femaleness has sown the seeds of confusion in the minds of many people today especially the young.

The Tradition Established by Christ Himself

Yet even if we disregard the essential differences between the sexes, as many advocates of women's' ordination do, we have to face the fact that the ordination of men is an unbroken tradition that goes back not only to the Apostles but to Christ Himself. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church ([para.1577](#)) states: Was there something lacking in the nature of Mary, the Mother of God, not to ordain her to the priesthood?

Surely, Mary, if Christ had willed it, would have fulfilled the function of priest better than any other human being. Having given Christ his human nature, she is the only human being who could have said the words of consecration literally “this is my body, this is my blood”.

Protestant clergy do not have the same understanding of priesthood that the Catholic Church has since apostolic times. There is a fundamental difference between the two clergies. The primary function of a catholic priest is to offer sacrifice. In the Catholic tradition, the sacrifice which is offered is none other than the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass which the protestant 'reformers' rejected at the Reformation. They also rejected the catholic priesthood.

When celebrating Mass the catholic priest is ontologically joined to Christ in His sacrifice on Calvary which is re-enacted at every Mass. When a man is ordained a catholic priest a special 'character' is imprinted on his soul – sometimes called an 'indelible mark'. In this context a celibate clergy makes perfect sense. The priest is married to his bride, the Church, the People God has made his own.

The protestant minister is more a leader of church services or preacher. It's more of a career choice and in that sense it make sense for them to have femaleclergy. And then, of course, there is the continuing question mark over the validity of Anglican Orders be they male or female.

The **Catholicism of the Catholic Church** has the final word

'Only a baptized man (vir) validly receives sacred ordination. The Lord Jesus chose men (viri) to form the college of the twelve apostles, and the apostles did the same when they chose collaborators to succeed them in their ministry'.