

## **WOMEN PRIESTS – WHY NOT**

Good evening and thank you for coming to the third in this series of Hot Topics talks – this time on the subject of women priests – why not?

And why not indeed? Well, I'm going to start this talk by admitting that the ban on women priests was an issue that I struggled with quite a lot during my teens. Deep down, I really felt all the arguments that people level against the male-only priesthood quite forcibly. These included the claims that the Catholic Church is behind the times with gender equality; that women could do just as good a job as men – or possibly even better sometimes; that Jesus had only chosen men to be apostles simply because of the cultural restrictions of the time; and that there were women deacons in the early Church, which meant that women had been admitted to Holy Orders and so, presumably, could be priests as well. It is also true that there's a lot of evidence that the Church did used to discriminate against women in many other ways too, so my suspicion as a teenage girl was, to be honest, that the priesthood was just another point of discrimination against women. These fundamental concerns I had led on to further wrangling and doubts: if the Church is behind the times, I thought, and was told by those who seemed to know, then it will eventually catch up and admit women to the priesthood. It's only a matter of time. So why not do it while I was young enough to take advantage? I also worried that, if Jesus restricted his choice simply because of cultural norms, then how could He really listen to me in prayer, as a woman, and how could He really understand – if He was truly God for all eternity then the local Jewish customs of 2000 years ago surely couldn't have blinded Him to the generations of female vocations to be lost. So, you see that this was a big and important issue for me.

Now, of course, as all adults know, the internal strife of an adolescent eventually calms and you begin to accept things as they are, even if you don't understand. The issue of women priests remained a challenge to me for many years, and I was even *taunted* from time to time by well meaning people, and priests among them, who suggested that the Church would eventually change its way. I asked lots of people to explain the reasons why I, and other women, were excluded from the priesthood, but never got a satisfactory answer. That is, not until recently.

In this talk, I'm going to go through the explanations for the male only priesthood I have received. I hope that at least one of them will help to convince you, if you need convincing. If they don't, I urge you to search out the reasons for yourself. I now really believe that the male-only priesthood is God's will, and that, if we genuinely ask God to explain Himself and are ready to receive His answer, then He will always speak to our hearts.

So, let me start with some easier arguments often made against the Church's position that the Sacrament of Holy Orders is reserved to males only. Firstly, that Jesus limited Himself to appointing only male apostles simply because of the cultural norms applicable at that time, in first century Israel. This is not true though – Jesus was clearly not tied by the norms of the times. The Gospels recount many instances when Jesus went against the customs of the Jews – by performing miracles on a Sunday, by counselling the Samaritan woman at the well, by eating with tax collectors and by accepting the devotion of the woman who washed His feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. In fact, it was Jesus' disregard for Jewish customs which ultimately condemned Him to the trial which brought him to the cross.

However, some might then point out that not all of Jesus' intended audience was Jewish – there were non-Jewish customs to be observed as well. Perhaps He tied Himself to the customs of the Gentiles? Again, not true. In fact, it would seem that women were very highly involved in all the major pagan religions of Jesus' time. We have the Vestal Virgins of the Roman religion, and the Gnostic religions of Babylon and Sophia worshipped and venerated Eve and by definition considered women always higher than men. So Jesus, in preaching to the Gentiles, was in fact, going against their norms as well by precluding women from the priesthood.

So did Jesus just fail to understand women? Well, his recorded ministry seems to have equally reached men and women and the testimonies concerning women often seem to touch peculiarly women's issues. Like the woman who was haemorrhaging and touched His cloak for healing – an anathema to a Jewish man to be made unclean by a bleeding woman, but Jesus just turned, smiled and showed His love for her. And the woman who was caught in the act of adultery (for which she and not the man would suffer stoning) – Jesus, by His wisdom and love, saved her, forgave her and set her free. Jesus walked the Earth as a male, but as God, He knew both male and female concerns and issues intimately.

So, Jesus did not value women differently to men, but is the Church's ban on women in the priesthood just another example of its long-standing discrimination against women, or even, as some have said, it outright misogyny? Yes, it does seem that some of the old canon laws and traditions of the Church were biased towards men and against women. There were numerous misguided laws, I would argue, that the Church upheld, some of them even until the 1980s – such as women being banned from the sanctuary, or not receiving communion during the woman's period, or waiting to be 'churched' after the indignity of childbirth, or needing to keep her head covered at all times in the Church. These were all customs of a time – practices that were established and adhered to with sometimes little or no theological grounding. When the new Code of Canon Law was promulgated in 1983, these were all dropped. John Paul II wrote a *Letter to Women* in 1995 in which he apologised to women for injustices against them perpetrated by the Church. But yet still, the male-only priesthood remained. Even John Paul II didn't change that. In fact, far from it – he went further and declared that the possible admission of women priests was not even an open issue – that the Church would not change her mind – that she had absolutely no *authority* to change her mind! After all, the priesthood belongs to God, not the Church.

And what about the argument so often cited by those in favour of women priests that there were clearly women deacons in the early Church? Of course, if there had been women deacons, then women would have been admitted to the Sacrament of Holy Orders and the case against their admission to the priesthood would be much weaker. Well, yes, there are mentions of women deacons in the early Church. There is even evidence of ceremonies of induction of women deacons, similar to the ceremonies of ordination of male deacons. However, I believe that it's anachronistic to look at the roles of women deacons in the early Church and claim that they were clearly ordained, as we understand it. The role of deacon in the early Church was one of service and administration of the Church functions. According to leading proponents of women priests, the role of women deacons was defined as follows: they looked after sick and needy women, they saw to the order of women in the congregation, they assisted at baptisms, and they distributed Holy Communion to house-bound women. However, looking at that list, I feel that none of that is beyond the service of the laity these days. Many Christians look after the sick and needy in the community. It is the

responsibility of all to maintain order and reverence in the Church. One doesn't even need to be Christian in order to validly baptise someone in the eyes of God and Special Ministers of the Eucharist do bring Holy Communion to the housebound.

On the other hand, right from the beginning, the Church was quite clear that the status or characteristics of women deacons, or deaconesses, were not the same as men who were ordained to the diaconate. Church Councils did everything they could to stop women deacons being exalted above the role of lay service. The Council of Nicaea in 325 AD said that deaconesses "possess no ordination, but are reckoned to be among the laity in every respect". In 441 AD, the Synod of Orange declared that "no women deacons are to be ordained. If some already exist, let them bend their heads to the blessing given to the (lay) people". Some in favour of women deacons today cite these councils as evidence that women deacons clearly existed and so women could quite clearly be validly ordained, but this is surely a false argument. There have always been corruptions among believers, but here is a clear case of the teaching authority of the Church coming down firmly and unequivocally against women deacons. They were never accepted by the Church.

So, I believe that although there were women deacons in the early Church, their role was not of the same definition as we currently understand of deacons and anything approaching ordination of women was completely opposed by the ordinary Magisterium of the Church. Significantly, there is no credible suggestion that women were ever ordained to the priesthood.

The next argument that I've often heard is that, nevertheless, women could do just as good a job in the priesthood as men – or possibly even better sometimes. This may be true, but there are a few misconceptions here. Is the priesthood just a job? Are women and men the same in every way? Does an individual's worthiness make them more or less suitable for the call of a vocation? These questions all require some in-depth thought to be answered properly.

Working backwards, does someone's ability or intelligence or goodness affect God's choice of vocation? Should only the most holy, the most perfect be called to the priesthood? No. Jesus knew the limitations of the twelve men He chose to eat His Last Supper with. He knew they were cowardly, weak men – some of whom would betray or deny Him. God doesn't award good behaviour or holiness by a call to the priesthood – the vocation is ours, or is not ours, no matter how we serve Him. That is why we must pray for our priests that they will serve Him well. The same, of course, applies to other vocations. Any of us married here will know how unsuitable for marriage we sometimes feel – and our spouses challenge us to live the vocation better. Holiness doesn't make us any more fit for the vocation – it only reminds us to ask for God's help more often!

Then, is the priesthood just a job? I believe this is a key issue, and many people today misunderstand the priesthood as merely a job. If it were just a job, then I would definitely agree that anyone should be eligible for that job – and whoever would do it best should be selected. Of course, that includes women. However, the Catholic Church believes that the priesthood is not a job – it is a calling, a vocation, and that, once ordained, a priest is fundamentally changed from what he was before.

Holy Orders is one of the three sacraments which change the person receiving them fundamentally – creating an indelible mark called a sacramental character on the recipient's soul. The other two are baptism and confirmation.

This means that from the moment a bishop places his hands on the head of a man being ordained – as either a deacon, a priest or a bishop – he is ontologically changed. There is something about his very being that is changed fundamentally and irreversibly until death. In the case of a man being ordained to the priesthood, he is given the power through a special sacramental grace of being able to consecrate the Eucharistic bread and wine, and of being able to forgive sins in God’s name through absolution. Because the change that has come upon him is ontological (meaning, of his very being), it cannot be taken away. A priest who leaves the priesthood to get married, or even a priest who renounces his faith entirely, is nevertheless always a priest – “a priest for ever, a priest like Melchisidech of old”.

As I said, unfortunately this understanding has been lost sight of by many in the Church today, just as reverence for the Eucharist and belief in the sacrificial nature of the Mass have declined. But fundamentally priests are men who are *set aside* to offer the sacrifice of the Mass – or the Sacred Mysteries. The priesthood is a sacrificial order, a caste of men who are transformed to a different state so that they can offer the sacrifice of the Mass on behalf of the rest of us and impart the grace of the sacraments. There can be no resignation from the priesthood and nor is it a job that one takes upon oneself. As the Catechism says: “No one has a *right* to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders. Indeed no one claims this office for himself; he is called to it by God... Like every grace this sacrament can be *received* only as an unmerited gift.”

When Jesus instigated the priesthood, He had the right to choose whoever he wanted to ordain who would carry His succession onwards. I believe that, in choosing the twelve apostles, He did, and that He continues to choose His people day by day. How they live up to that call depends on them and depends on our prayers for them.

An underlying assumption of some women who desire to be priests is that they have a right to be able to take on this role. Those in favour of women priests often base this on a presumed right to equality, but equality is not to be confused with sameness. As a baptized Christian I am perfectly equal to Pope Benedict, I am equal to Fr. Paddy. My response to the call to holiness is what is important, God will not judge me better if I was a deacon, priest or bishop. God will judge me based on my response to his call. I have different talents to the pope and the priest, I am myself. Basically, what I’m trying to say is that the Christian life is not about attaining status or roles within the Church, but about attaining heaven. And, as John Paul II once said, “the greatest in the kingdom of heaven are not the ministers but the saints”.

It seems to me that anybody (male or female) searching for their true vocation, should always challenge their incentives carefully to be sure that it is the vocational call to which they are attracted rather than to the associated extras. If the extras were to be removed, how excited would the individual feel about their call. So, for example, someone might feel called to marriage for the main motivation of parenting children. Although a yearning for children in itself is not wrong, the person should be mindful that they or the person they might marry may be unable to have children. If this ‘associated extra’ were to be removed, does the call to commitment, to dedication of one’s life to this other person still feel as strong as they thought? In the same way, someone who feels called to Holy Orders (both male and female) should challenge themselves, I would suggest, on each of the above points – if their motivation is for power to change the Church, let them imagine being a priest without any voice; if their motivation is for respect or acknowledgement, let them consider being a

priest who is constantly ignored or belittled. A true call from God will be one strong enough, with prayer, commitment and grace, to withstand all pressures and disappointments. A vocation is something to be lived in and of itself, even when you've been dealt a hard hand.

Now, I want to move on to what, for me, is the real clincher. I had heard all of the afore-mentioned arguments before, but none of them really made sense to me or persuaded me that only men should be priests – none of them really hit the nail on the head and solved the issue for me once and for all – not until I started looking into the Theology of the Body. John Paul II's work on discovering what we can learn about God by learning about the pinnacle of His creation – us – has enormous implications right across our understanding and view of the world. This teaching calls us to look at ourselves as humans, to open our eyes to how we mirror God, to appreciate that He made us to a specific design and for a specific purpose and to accept that purpose in the way we live our lives.

Now the Theology of the Body is very broad-reaching, but the part that has most relevance here is that which deals with God's plan in creating us male and female. As Genesis says "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; *male and female he created them*". God, from the beginning, created us as male and female – both equal and in His image. Our maleness or femaleness is not just an outward appearance, but something fundamental to who we are, how God created us, and even to how we as human beings reflect the image of God.

Furthermore, God calls each of us to be spousal – to offer ourselves as a gift to another. He also calls us to be procreative – to unite with God to bring forth life. But taking these two calls to the very practical level – the only way people can unite to create new life is for a man and a woman to come together. We need the difference between the sexes in order to form this life-giving communion. And men and women have different callings in this life-giving communion. The bridegroom gives his seed and the bride conceives life within her. One role isn't better than the other. Both are equally dignified and indispensable<sup>1</sup>.

This response to God's call to be unitive and procreative is on the very practical level. But not all men and women are called to be fathers and mothers of children. We are, however, all called to offer ourselves as spouses – either to *one* other person as a husband or wife, or to the Church or to some other cause which serves and boosts the Kingdom of God. We are also all called to be parental - either to our own children, or to our parish or community, or to individuals that we meet on life's path whom we can inspire towards God. Whatever way we live out this two-pronged call, we must do so in the context of how God created each of us, including from the fundamental perspective of whether we are male or female.

When Jesus came among us He said that He came to serve. He 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, as His dowry, He paid the ultimate price for his bride, the Church.

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 act, Jesus, the bridegroom, instigates the offer of Himself. The Church, His bride, is called to accept His gift and to nurture that gift and bring forth new life in God. The Church is then called to mother all her children, feeding,

---

<sup>1</sup> Good News about Sex & Marriage, Christopher West

teaching, hopefully inspiring, but ultimately leading us all to God's love. When God created us in the beginning as male and female, He always knew that it would be His Son, His male heir, that would be needed to reach out to us and to offer Himself for us – initiating the gift of Himself because we, in our humanity, could never initiate so beautiful an offering!

It is this sacrifice, made present at every celebration of Mass, that is the summit of the priest's vocation. At Mass, the priest is really in the place of Christ: 'in persona Christi'. On the altar, the priest really offers himself, as Christ offers Himself, as a gift to the Church. This sacrifice is the payment for our salvation, as it were, – the bridegroom gives everything He has to protect and save His 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.

It is precisely because we believe that Christ's sacrifice is made truly present at the altar of the Eucharist, that the priest must be male. Without this reality then the Eucharist is simply a memorial. If it is just a memorial then the person leading the memorial does not offer of themselves any more than their time and their leadership skills. In that case, one might just as well choose the person with the best skills, whether they be male or female. I believe that this is the reason why non-Catholic Christians often have women pastors – if we are only looking for leadership skills, then today there is clearly no reason to be gender specific.

As a final point, I should say a few words about Church Authority. Many people who advocate women priests either do not accept the authority of Church teaching, or believe it is a matter of ongoing debate and will change. However, I do believe that we are called, as members of the Catholic Church, to accept her teaching in the Holy Magisterium. The Church has never in the past had or accepted women priests – she had always been very clear only to accept the ordination of men as deacons, priests and bishops. John Paul II went further to declare that the Church would never ordain women in the future either – that the Church had no 'authority' to ordain women. This statement was made from the understanding of the fundamental and compatible roles that men and women are called to play in the Church, from the basis that Jesus was and could only have been male and that the priest by his sacrifice at the altar of the Eucharist 'in persona Christi' could only ever be male.

But by referring to the Church's authority, John Paul II was basing what he said on the inability of the Church to supersede God's will. With all of the above reasonings, the Church believes that God willed, from the beginning, that priests would always be male. It is clear that God wanted and does call men to be priests. It is clear that when a bishop lays on his hands in an ordination, the sacrament of Holy Orders is validated and that the sacraments that this ordained priest then offers are valid as well. What John Paul II highlighted by referring to 'Church authority' is the unknown if bishops were to start ordaining women. If women priests were against God's wishes, then would the laying on of hands be valid? Would the apparently ordained female priest's offering at the altar be valid? Would her absolution in confession be valid? If in our last moments before death we cannot be sure that the priest offering us absolution and last rights is doing so validly, then that is a risk too high to take. Since we have no evidence that God *wills* for women to be priests, we have no authority to take that risk with people's souls. The sacraments belong to God, and the Church of

today cannot risk tampering with them. They are far too important to meddle with in the interests of appearing modern, or wishing to appease a particular body of opinion.

In conclusion, I know full well that this is a really difficult issue for many Catholics – as it most certainly was for me. I know that it's unlikely that I'll have convinced anyone here this evening who passionately believes in women priests. But what I hope I've been able to do is demonstrate that the ban on women in Holy Orders is not discrimination or misogyny, and that there are many strong, coherent and persuasive arguments in favour of the Church's position. I believe that if we think with purely secular brains, the Catholic ban on women priests is absurd. However, if we really try to see this issue in the context of how and why God created us, what his purpose was in sending his Son to be our redeemer, what the role and vocation of a priest really are, and what really takes place during the Eucharistic Prayer, then we begin to realise that there's something really profound, even beautiful, about the Church's teaching. On the face of it, surely women could do just as good a job of being priests as men – in fact, I reckon, in many cases far better. But on reflection, the Catholic teaching turns out to be amazingly deep, meaningful and – I do believe – true. Thank you.