

The Ordination of Women

Examined in the light of History and Theology

by

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A very unoriginal, depressing
blast at the Bp of Hong-Kong.
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The Ordination of Women

The recent so-called ordination of a woman by the Bishop of Hong Kong is liable to produce disastrous results for the Church of England, always supposing that the report in the papers is true. The clamour for the ordination of women is a modern development and is part of the rise of aggressive feminism which argues that since women can be soldiers, engineers, lawyers, doctors and what not, they can also be priests. At the very outset then we find them classing the priesthood as a trade or profession. If the priesthood were no more than that, no doubt their claims might be supported. Those who oppose them are charged with believing in the inferiority of women to men.

There is no doubt that Christianity raised the status of womanhood out of the inferiority in which it formerly existed. Our Lord's teaching suggests no idea of inferiority—He was attended by the Blessed Mother and by the Holy Women. It was women who first saw the Risen Lord. Nevertheless, the Twelve and the Seventy were men. The Blessed Sacrament was instituted in the presence of men, The Apostolic Commission, John xx, 19-23, was given to men and the general charge of Mt. xxviii. 19, 20; As regards spiritual privileges men and women are equal, but as regards ministerial function there is a difference.

We have a few passages in the New Testament which bear on the subject :

I Cor. xiv. 34. "Let women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted to them to speak." The late Dr. Percy Dearmer* interpreted this as forbidding women to chatter while the service was going on, and he further said that it was superstitious to follow St.

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Paul's advice. There is no doubt, however, that the Apostle here is referring to public speaking. If one person can dispense with Apostolic precepts by an accusation of superstition, there is no doubt that we should soon get rid of them all. In I Cor. xi. 5, St. Paul refers to women praying or prophesying with their heads unveiled. Here he is referring to one of the many abuses which had sprung up at Corinth. It is the head unveiled, an ill-mannered, irreverent custom in the house of God, to which he specially refers here. The prophesying he has referred to in the same epistle, forbidding women to teach publicly in the mixed congregation. In his instructions to Timothy, I. Tim. ii. 11-12, he repeats "I suffer not a woman to teach." In the same epistle he makes it quite clear that it is public teaching which he forbids, not private teaching, for he expressly commands the elder women to teach the younger. We hear in the Acts of the Apostles of Philip's daughters who prophesied, but we have no evidence whatever that they prophesied in the public assemblies of Christians. There is in the New Testament not a scrap of evidence that women ever held the office of priest or bishop. If any woman could have claimed such office surely our Lady could have done so. The Lord's brothers held high positions in the Church: His sisters did not.

In his epistle to the Romans* St. Paul commended "Phoebe our sister," who was the *diakonos* of the Church in Cenchreae, and had been a succourer and helper to many, including the Apostle himself. Here the word means nothing more than a servant and there is certainly no technical sense in the word as yet. The younger Pliny refers to the *ministrae* whom he had tortured to get at the truth. In the *Apostolic Constitutions*† such "succourers and helpers" had the name *diakonissa*—There must have been a need for women to perform

* xvi. 1.

† iii. 15 etc.

certain duties like visiting amongst the women, preparing them for the baptismal rites and so forth. These had an office with a technical *name*, but not an *order*. The "succourer" or "helper," *prostatis*, had a name almost as technical as *diakonos*. In Jewish communities it meant the legal representative or wealthy patron. Sanday and Headlam said the expression used by St. Paul suggested that Phoebe was a person of some wealth and position, who was thus able to act as patroness of a small and struggling community.* *Diakonos* originally meant a servant, waiting-man, minister, messenger. We remember that the primary duty of the first seven who were called deacons, was to serve tables. The office of deaconess when we first hear of it seems to have been chiefly to minister to the needy.

The restriction of the priesthood to men originated in a generation specially infused by the Holy Spirit. Although in the Church there is neither male nor female, yet the work and calling of the sexes continued different. There is no inferiority ascribed to women, but there is difference of function.

From the first century until the fourth we hear very little of the deaconess. Clement of Alexandria, in speaking of the services of women to the Church, refers to St. Paul's rules concerning women. Origen speaks of Phoebe as set in the *diakonia* of the Church, but "ministering women" has not the same sense as the modern "women ministers." We hear practically nothing of them during all this time. Either they had been discontinued and revived or they had continued without any reference being made to them.

The Church Councils make very little mention of them. The Council of Laodicea (of uncertain date, but in the fourth century) forbade the ordination of priestesses. The first Council of Orange, 441 A.D.,

* Sanday and Headlam. Romans, pp. 417-18.

forbade the ordination of deaconesses for the future and directed that those actually ordained should receive the benediction together with lay persons. The Council of Chalcedon, 451 A.D., forbade the ordination of a deaconess under the age of forty. (At some places and times sixty was agreed upon). If she should marry after ordination she and her husband should both be under anathema. The Council of Epaune (Albon, near Vienne) 517, forbade the consecration of widows to be deaconesses. The widows were a separate body from the deaconesses and their primary duty was constant prayer. Hippolytus, *Ap. Trad.* xi. 4-5, says the widow was to be instituted by being named only. She was not to be ordained. "Ordination" was for the clergy only, because of their liturgy. The widow was instituted for prayer. The Gallican canons decreed that no woman, however learned and pious, was to teach in the general congregation.

The duties of a deaconess in the early ages were :
 (1) To act as servant of the bishop. The *Apostolic Constitutions* said that no women were to have any communication with the bishop, except through the deaconess. (2) To assist at the baptism of women. (3) To visit sick women. (4) To minister to the poor. (5) To teach, and especially to teach the consecrated virgins.

As time goes on the resemblance increases between the deaconess at the head of a body of consecrated virgins and an abbess. St. John Chrysostom wrote letters to Olympias and other members of a body of forty deaconesses attached to the Great Church of Alexandria. Theodoret and Gregory of Nyssa refer to them as heads of bodies of virgins.

The words *Cheirotonia* and *Cheirothesia* were both used in connexion with the ordination of deaconesses in the East, as they were with the other orders of the ministry. The latter word stresses the imposition of hands, the former simply expresses the stretching forth

of the hands over the candidate. The *Apostolic Constitutions* give evidence of the laying on of hands in the case of deaconesses, and Sozomen says that Nectarius ordained Olympias deaconess by the laying on of hands. In the earlier Eastern rites deaconesses were appointed without imposition of hands. In the Greek *Euchologion* the bishop laid his hands on the candidate, invested her with a stole and handed her a chalice which she replaced on the altar, but this gave her no authority to administer the chalice nor did she ever do so. The action was purely symbolic.

Deaconesses among the Nestorians read the Scriptures at meetings of women in the absence of the clergy, took care of the altar, the lamps and the communicants' roll, anointed adult women at baptism and did other things at baptism which decency required to be done by a woman.

Technical phrases varied much in the early Church at different times and places. Deaconess usually means a female Christian official, but in the decrees of the Council of Tours, 567 A.D., it means a deacon's wife. In the writings of Gregory the Great (*Ep.* ix. 7) "presbytera" is not a female priest, but a priest's wife living apart from her husband. Widows are generally people supported by the Church, having thereby leisure for constant prayer ; but there were widows, and especially widows-president, who were ecclesiastical officials performing the duties of deaconesses. Sometimes the widow seems to be superior to the deaconess. At other times the case seems to be reversed.

In the *Didascalia* and the *Apostolic Constitutions* we are told that deaconesses, or sometimes "widows-president," were in many cases used in the baptism of women, but the priest said the actual words. In the *Testament of Our Lord* the widows-president, at baptism, "beneath a veil," receive the women "by a veil." In the *Ethiopic Didascalia* a deaconess received a baptized woman ascending from the water. But women were

strictly forbidden to baptize by the Gallican Statutes, A.D. 500. Deaconesses sometimes kept the doors of the church by which the women entered. In *The Testament of Our Lord* (5th century), in which the deaconess appears to be inferior to the widow-president, the deaconess is allowed to carry the Blessed Sacrament to sick women. There was a certain amount of irregularity about the treatment of the Blessed Sacrament in those days. We hear of people sending it as presents to their friends, but all these irregularities were put down in time. The *Testament* forbids women to speak in church. The *Apostolic Constitutions* similarly forbid this. Cyril of Jerusalem forbade women to pray or sing aloud in church. Epiphanius would not allow of woman priests though one or two heretical sects claimed to have such. To him it was a heathen custom.

Women never had any part in the instruction of mixed assemblies. The deaconesses had no monopoly of teaching the women; indeed, the widows-president might in some places instruct the deaconesses. Tertullian said it was not permitted to women to speak in church, nor to baptize, nor to offer the oblations, nor to perform the duties that belong to men. In time the deaconess gave place to the abbess or consecrated nun, but in the religious houses all priestly work was done by the chaplains; members of female communities were not allowed to preach publicly, much less in the parish churches. The nuns themselves said and sang the choir offices. Though not allowed to approach the altar, they might in the absence of a male server give assistance to the priest from *outside* the sanctuary. Certain abbesses exercised large control over their communities and their estates, and even over the clergy and people in parishes dependent on their house, but in the latter case only in more secular matters. They might, and did, decide the hours of service in the chapel and deal with the advowsons of the parishes connected with the house, but to minister at the altar or to preach to mixed congregations were unthinkable things.

Communities existed for the ascetic life. Monks were not necessarily priests, and nuns, except in particular cases, were not deaconesses. In the *Lausiac History* of Palladius (A.D. 420) the presbyter and deacon were described as going every Sunday to say Mass for a female community, the deacon because no woman could perform his part in the service.

The Apostolic Constitutions (late fourth or early fifth century) give us the formula of ordination for deacons and deaconesses. Though much alike there is one great difference: in the case of the deacon only there is a prayer that he may be found worthy of a higher standing. These *Constitutions* (viii. 27) say: "A deacon does not bless. . . he does not baptize and does not offer, but when the bishop offers, or the presbyter, he distributes to the people, not as a priest, but as ministering to the priests. A deaconess does not bless, neither does she perform any of those things which the presbyters or deacons do, save only the keeping of the gates, and the ministering to the presbyters in the baptism of women for the sake of that which is seemly."

In the *Testament of Our Lord* widows and deaconesses were allowed within the veil during the offering of the Eucharist, but whereas the deacons and widows stood behind the priest, the deaconesses stood behind the sub-deacons. The widows received after the deacons, but the deaconesses after the laymen.

Deacons and deaconesses, in the early stages of Church history, were mentioned so often together, not because both had ministerial functions, but because neither of them had such; they were merely the servants of the Church and the poor. Of the original seven who were called deacons Stephen preached and Philip baptized, but these seem to have been exceptional cases. The dignity of the deacon increased, partly from his close association with the bishop, and he became a subordinate cleric. In Rome the seven deacons were

of considerable importance. The deaconess shared only in the early stages of this development.

The Apostolic Constitutions mention as one of the functions of a deaconess the duty to seat and supervise the female members of the congregation. She must be a virgin, or a widow of one marriage, and if the latter, of good position and character; in fact she must be a lady. The Code of Theodosius the Great, 390 A.D., seems to consider her as separated from the world, and as having handed over all her property to her relatives.

The office of deaconess died out in the East. Having gone through a form of ordination or setting apart, she at first stood on a level with the deacon in general position but not in function. She gradually fell behind the minor orders, though in another way as a ruling woman, the head of a society of virgins, or the abbess of a convent, she became of greater importance, and there was a tendency from the fifth century onward for the deaconess and the head of a community to mean much the same thing. In process of time the deaconess was no longer required for the anointing of the body of a woman at baptism, for that anointing was dropped. She was no longer required to visit the pagan women whom the priest could not visit in their seclusion; the women were all nominally Christian. In the Orthodox East deaconesses have disappeared since the Middle Ages. Balsamon, Patriarch of Antioch in the eleventh century, knew that there were some at Constantinople, but there were none in his patriarchate. Though the name of deaconess still survived in Eastern service books, as anything does which has not been expressly removed, the office had practically ceased amongst the Orthodox by the thirteenth century.

In the West we have no evidence for the existence of deaconesses until the fourth century, in Gaul not until the fifth, and in Rome not until the eighth. The Acts of the Synod of Nismes, 394 A.D., speak of the ordination

of women to the levitical office amongst the Manichaean heretics, and look upon such a proceeding as an outrage. The second Council of Orange, 553 A.D., recognised the existence of deaconesses but renewed the order of the first Council at the same place, that no more should be set apart. The *Leonine Sacramentary* had no form for ordaining to offices lower than the diaconate and till the seventh century the Roman books had none. In Italy there is an epitaph at Pavia to "Theodora the deaconess of blessed memory" (539 A.D.).

Cassiodorus, writing some time after 538, knew nothing of deaconesses in the West. We find them mentioned once or twice in the eighth century. In the eleventh a number of papal charters refer to them, but there is evidence of confusion in some of them between the deaconess and the abbess. Otto, Bishop of Vercelli in the tenth century, says that the deaconess was a thing of the past. Duchesne suggests that the disappearance of the deaconess was due to the fact that adult baptisms had become exceptional. Abelard seems to regard the abbess as the only representative of the deaconess, and that not by ordination but by virtue of being abbess. He says "those whom we now call abbesses were formerly called deaconesses."

Thus the deaconess became in the West absorbed into the consecrated nun.

The Roman *Pontifical* has a rubric directing the bishop to hand a breviary to a newly consecrated nun with the faculty of saying the canonical hours "in place of the diaconate of women." In the consecration of a Carthusian nun the same words were used as in the making of a deacon, but no nun ever does the work of a deacon.

In the religious orders of women the *Breviary* is recited or sung by the women themselves. Amongst themselves, in the absence of a priest, they are allowed

to say some of the offices for the burial of a Sister. In a Carthusian house of nuns the newly consecrated nun wore a stole and maniple, at least until recent times. At a conventual High Mass a nun read or sang the epistle, but without leaving her place in choir. But all this is simply concerned with the life of the nuns in the convent. Pius X laid down the following rule: "Singers in the Church have a real liturgical office, and therefore women, as being incapable of exercising such office, cannot be admitted to form part of the choir or of the musical chapel."* This rule covers all churches and chapels other than these of female religious. As for the latter there is no suggestion whatever that women can perform any priestly function.

The modern deaconess is a Protestant revival. There were women called deaconesses among such sects as the Bohemian *Unitas Fratrum* and the Mennonites of the Low Countries. Some of the sixteenth century puritans wished to revive the office and the Independent congregation at Leyden set apart deaconesses or widows to attend the sick and impotent. The German Lutherans began some such organization early in the last century (1833). The modern continental Protestant deaconesses are looked upon as a sort of sisterhood without vows. Of course, Protestants do not believe in a sacrament of order conveying an indelible *character* any more than they believe in monastic vows. Catholics talk of men being made deacons and ordained priests. Once a priest always a priest. He has an indelible character. Hence though deposed, or suspended, or suffering under ecclesiastical discipline of the most extreme type, in a case of necessity when no other priest is present he can exercise his priestly ministry. Now there is no pretence of conferring *character* in the ordination of these Protestant deaconesses. They were intended to do the work of sisters of mercy, and in Paris

* *Motu proprio*. Nov. 22, 1903.

among the French Protestants it was originally under the title of sisters of charity that they were set apart: only later did they take the name of deaconess.

The revival of deaconesses in the Church of England began, in 1868, when Bishop Tait, on his own authority, laid hands on Miss Elizabeth Ferrand and conferred on her the title of deaconess. Since then a Committee of the Convocation of Canterbury has talked about "the revival of an ancient order." The Lambeth Conference of 1897 said that the deaconess held "a position in the Church similar to that which belonged to the deaconess of early days."

Now the position of the deaconess of early days varied considerably; sometimes she ranked after the deacons and sometimes after the minor orders. There was usually a form of ordination or setting apart to a lifelong ministry with definite duties among women, but *never* any duty at the altar or in the ministry to the general congregation. If the deaconess is to be simply a Church worker set apart for life like the ancient deaconess there is no particular objection, though why the Church of England should revive what the rest of the Catholic Church, East and West, has discarded for seven hundred years, one fails to see.

But gradually and craftily a new order of women is being aimed at, something which is entirely different from anything which has hitherto existed.

At present the general assumption has been that these deaconesses were not in holy orders, though it is assumed that they will not marry. The American Episcopal Church states officially that the office is vacated by marriage. The sacrament of order is surely permanent. If the new deaconess is really in Holy Orders how can she vacate that character? Will she after marriage still be a deaconess or merely the head of a household? It just shows the rashness with which all this has been brought about.

It cannot be urged that an episcopal blessing confers holy orders.

The service for making deaconesses in most English dioceses hitherto would do equally well for a lay reader. There is nothing in the modern deaconess's work to suggest any special order. She does what any layman can do. She belongs to a diocese by the permission of the bishop. She can resign her office or be dismissed from it. Where is the indelible grace of order here? We are told that the deaconesses are all united to-day in insisting on the permanence of their "orders." That may be so, but it is possible to have hallucinations. Behind it all is the spirit of the feminist revolt. In none of the present services for making deaconesses is there any assertion of these permanent and indelible orders. Some deaconesses, without vows, wear the costume of a religious and like to be called "Sister"—but that does not make them "religious" in the technical sense.

Lately, with the help of some of the Anglican bishops, they have been permitted to administer the chalice, a thing unknown in the whole history of the Catholic Church, and to take Matins and Evensong publicly in church and to preach, equally protestant and uncatholic proceedings. Parish priests still have some rights and Catholic priests must flatly refuse to allow them to do any of these things. They talk about reviving the ancient order of deaconesses. This is not the ancient order. It is an abuse which has crept into the Church with the open or tacit approval of the bishops. It is with some of them a council of despair. In the last forty years the Anglican clergy have dwindled by a third of their number. The bishops would be better employed in putting forth all their efforts to find more candidates for ordination.

The fact is that there is a small but clamorous party of women demanding the priesthood. It cannot be that they have a vocation. You cannot have a

vocation to an impossibility. Even women who ought to know better are carried away by feminist assertiveness. They cannot be Catholics or they would never dream of such a thing. No Roman Catholic woman in the world aspires to the priesthood, nor an Orthodox woman either. There is nothing to prevent them from becoming Protestant ministers like the late Miss Maude Royden, and they can then do as much preaching as they like. But now, because women serve in the forces, because they are better educated than they used to be, because they have obtained entrance to all the trades and professions, they do not mean to be satisfied till they have forced their way into the priesthood. There is abundance of work for them in the Church if it is work they really want. The religious houses can find plenty of opportunity for them all; opportunities with which all Catholic women are content, and there are other means of service as well.

Dr. Percy Dearmer once referred to the custom, frequently seen abroad, of a party of women saying a litany or the rosary together in church. Sometimes a girl or a woman begins a hymn in an assembly of school children. The present writer has seen on a Sunday afternoon in a church in Rome an old woman carrying a cross and acting as leader of a party of women in saying the Stations. But the girl or woman only leads the congregation as a member of the congregation, and not a mixed congregation at that. She does not minister at the altar or in the pulpit.

Dr. Dearmer produced another argument in favour of holy orders for women: he referred to a private chapel where the lady of the house served at Mass. He ought to have known that any priest is liable to censure who allows such a thing. In accordance with the Canon Law a woman is forbidden to make the responses except as a member of the congregation, or to

assist the priest by handing him the bread and wine. This last rule is renewed in the revised Canon Law of 1917.*

The fact that there would be great uncertainty, to put it very mildly, about the validity of the consecration at Mass performed by a woman, ought to be a sufficient deterrent. They could have only a very Protestant conception of the Mass if it did not.

Again, we are told: "The times have changed and we must change with them." Why must we? It is the argument for the divorce court, for the desecration of Sunday, for secular education, and a hundred other evils. The Church should be above the world and the times. She has renounced the world. Her work has always been to resist modern thought unsanctified by the Christian faith and practice.

We all yearn and pray for the re-union of Christendom. The divisions of Christendom since the sixteenth century have brought sin and wickedness, wars and misery, and a thousand other ills. We Anglicans look to the rock from which we were hewn and work and pray to be re-united in the Catholic fold. Revive the ancient deaconess with the powers and duties of the ancient deaconess and nothing more, and no harm will be done, though it seems unnecessary when there are so many religious available. Ordain female deacons to do the duties of a deacon, ordain female priests, so-called, and the hope of re-union is at an end. Neither the Catholic nor the Orthodox will have anything to do with us. Moreover the Church of England will be split from end to end. No Catholic could possibly stay in her. In fact if the so-called ordination at Hong Kong is anything more than a newspaper story, we shall have to insist on the whole affair being repudiated by those in authority, or else we shall all have to

* Can. 813, s. 2. Life of Darwell Stone, pp. 270-71.

reconsider our position. It is possible that the Episcopal Church of Scotland, and the Church of South Africa and many of the Colonial dioceses would do the same.

St. Thomas Aquinas, Sent IV. xxv. 1-2, argues that women, though one in Christ with men by virtue of their baptism have different functions from men in the Christian body. His view was that deaconesses were not deaconesses in the sense that deacons are deacons, that is, they were not in holy orders, but they were persons who were appointed to do certain things. Dr. Darwell Stone said: "The common sense is that there are things which a woman can do and a man cannot, and things which a man can do and a woman cannot, and faculties, functions and capacities which are quite distinct from moral qualities. It does not follow that milk is worse than water, because not the matter of baptism, nor apples worse than bread because not the matter of the Eucharist.*

"England's Church is Catholic though England's self be not" sang John Mason Neale. Some thousands of priests have spent their lives teaching that the Church of England is still part of the Catholic Church. If there is to be any tampering with the sacrament of Holy Orders we shall have sadly to confess we were wrong and to seek a place for our ministry elsewhere. The South India scheme is bad enough, but that if persevered in must end in a schism on the part of four dioceses. This scheme for the ordination of women is far worse.

* Life of Darwell Stone, p. 300.

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