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## WOMEN AND PRIESTHOOD

'For any sane person the thing is so absolutely grotesque that he must refuse to discuss it.' The quotation is from an editorial comment in the *Church Times* of July 24, 1914; and the 'thing' that no sane person would discuss is the ordination of women to the priesthood.

The monstrous regiment of women in politics [continued the *Church Times*] would be bad enough, but the monstrous regiment of priestesses would be a thousandfold worse. We are not inclined, however, to treat the proposed Conference [on the subject] as a sane scheme; we regard it as of a piece with that epidemic of hysteria which has manifested itself in the violence of feminine militants. It will pass with time. . . .

The point of view of the *Guardian* was very much the same as that of the *Church Times*. Reference was made in the issue of July 16, 1914, to a 'preposterous' suggestion which 'emanates chiefly, if not entirely, from a little band of women who have pushed the claims of their sex to such a point that they have lost all sense of proportion.' And in the next week's issue there appeared a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury in which the writer, Mr. Athelstan Riley, alluded to the assertion of 'the equality of men and women in the sight of God—equality in privilege, equality in calling, equality in opportunity of service'—as 'very mischievous nonsense,' the acceptance of which 'would make the Church of England a laughing-stock throughout Christendom.' Mr. Riley professed himself to be aghast at the self-deception of those who were raising the question of the ordination of women, and asserted that they were snatching at empty shadows which could never satisfy their higher nature.

The monstrous regiment of women in politics seems nowadays a very tame affair; the leader of the epidemic of militant hysteria has had a statue to her memory unveiled by an ex-Prime Minister, and, so far from having died away, as the *Church Times* prophesied, concern with reference to women's ordination has now spread to the episcopate itself.

The prelates at this time in conference at Lambeth have received for their consideration a memorandum on the subject very carefully compiled by a group of Anglican men and women

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working with the encouragement and under the guidance of an episcopal chairman. Among the memorial's signatories are four bishops, four deans, an archdeacon, eight canons, four doctors of divinity, two principals of clergy-training colleges, one rural dean, and five parochial clergy. Exactly what reception the memorial will receive it is difficult to anticipate, but no one in the least acquainted with the present episcopacy can suppose it possible that the tone of any comments which will be made will at all resemble the vituperative shrillness of the Church Press of 1914.

It is clear that the compilers of the memorandum are very far from expecting the bishops to set about ordaining women to-morrow. They are engaged in no 'conspiracy to capture the priesthood for women'—to quote once more the phraseology of 1914. The memorandum shows no failure to realise that the exercise of a vocation within the Church depends upon the Church's recognition of the validity of that vocation. Indeed, it is because of this realisation that the memorandum has been put forward. Perhaps the most impressive section is the final appendix, which consists of statements, quoted for the most part from letters, by women who believe that they have a call to the priesthood. It is impossible to think that these letters can be ignored by a body of men met together in virtue of the fact that they themselves are aware of a call which the Church *has* recognised. The statements will inevitably revive for them the recognition of their own vocation and the response with which, as young men, they found their own claim to consideration received by the Church. They will find themselves thinking of the encouragement and the welcome given them, of the way in which their doubts and hesitations were understandingly eradicated, and their aspirations strengthened and affirmed. They may find themselves wondering how they would have felt had their sense of vocation been incontinently ruled out as necessarily presumptuous, based upon self-deception or conceit, and obviously unworthy of a moment's serious consideration. Possibly some will find themselves forced to admit either that such a reception would have embittered them against the Church, or that it would have caused their own convictions to dwindle into nothingness. Others may find themselves admitting that, had their disability been universally assumed in advance, their vocation would not have revealed itself to them at all.

There is very little, if any, bitterness in the statements quoted in the memorandum. One writer says: 'I tried to strangle it'—*i.e.*, her sense of vocation to the priesthood—'in bitterness against religion, but without success.' Another: 'The only thing I can see is to teach divinity in girls' schools.

While I like this and think it well worth doing, it does not give me what my vocation demands.' Another: 'I did go through a period of intense spiritual bitterness, but all that passed.' (Although her bitterness passed her sense of vocation did not pass.) Another: 'There is something which I can hardly put into words which makes it very difficult to let it be known that one believes herself called to this work. If there were any authority to which the vocation could be submitted (as in the case of men) it would be simple. But as the claim rests entirely on one's own personal judgment, which no one in authority will ever examine or confirm, the sense of being presumptuous is very difficult to overcome.' Yet another: 'When I left school I was quite sure that, if it had been possible, I should have sought ordination. . . . I love teaching and have no sense of having lived a frustrated life, but am perfectly conscious that for me it is only a substitute.'

Seventeen women—most of them with good academic qualifications and with practical experience in social work or in teaching—have agreed to the inclusion of their statements in the memorandum. How many women share the experience of these seventeen it is impossible to know—probably a considerable number; but whether there are seventeen, or seventy, or seven hundred is not the point. If there were only one woman with a sense of vocation to the priesthood, the question at issue would be the same. What has to be faced is quite simple: Is there any *principle* against the ordination of a woman? Is a woman who believes herself called to the office by God necessarily deluded? Is there something in womanhood, as womanhood, that debars a woman from the priesthood? Now that the sense of vocation in seventeen women has been made articulate and has been presented to the bishops in conference with a request for judgment, the time is clearly past in which it was enough to say: 'The thing is unthinkable; it has been settled once and for all. Moreover, women do not seek to be ordained.' It is difficult to think that the bishops—men whose sense of vocation is a reality—will be able to dismiss such an appeal with a curt command to put away the thought of ordination as a temptation of the devil. 'One deep calleth another.' The bishops are men who have themselves experienced God's call to the priesthood; they have, moreover, recognised the call in other men. They will, surely, as they read the letters of these women, recognise the call again. It is difficult to suppose that they who have found in the exercise of their vocation a sacred privilege capable of bringing deep spiritual satisfaction should placidly seek to dissuade these others from 'snatching at an empty shadow which can never satisfy their higher natures.'

It will be urged by many who are themselves outside the Church that the futility lies, not in the fact that women are seeking something which is and must be the exclusive prerogative of men, but in the fact that the whole notion of the priesthood is out of date and absurd. Obviously, if one does not believe in the Church, one does not feel the need of ministers in the Church. If one does not want to have priests, one does not want to have women priests. To argue the general question of the value of the priesthood would be beyond the scope of this article. It may be worth while, however, to emphasise the fact that the women whose statements are quoted in this memorial have a very genuine belief in the Church and in her need for priests. They have not put forward their statements in the spirit attributed to them by the Church Press of 1914. They are not 'claiming' admission to a 'profession' on feminist grounds. They are not insisting that to exclude women from the ministry is 'unfair' or 'unjust' to the women. The writers quoted do not want to be priests in order to prove that there is nothing men can do which women cannot do; they do not want to be priests primarily because they feel that there is need for the expression in the pulpit of 'the woman's point of view,' or need in the confessional for help which 'only a woman can give a woman.' They want to be priests for the same reasons that certain men want to be priests; they feel that God has given to them a call to serve Him and His Church in a particular way—a call which, in their eyes, would not be fulfilled by, for instance, ministry in any of the Free Churches. They believe that *incidentally* much good might come of the women's special appeal; but it is important to state clearly that they do not desire priesthood as the last step forward for feminism, but as a means towards the coming of the Kingdom of Christ. The weight of custom appears to them to be quenching the Spirit of God, and the loss to the Church appears to them lamentable. Again, none of these women is asserting that she has a vocation which she ought to be allowed to exercise immediately and without scrutiny. Any of them would take for granted, and indeed would feel an urgent need of, both testing and training before ordination.

It is difficult for those who have for long been accustomed to the idea of women priests, and whose own shock of surprise at the notion became a thing of the past a generation ago, to reiterate with any degree of freshness the counter-arguments to the objections put forward by those who continue to be distressed or enraged by the notion. 'Christ took upon Him the form of a man, not of a woman': true, but it is His humanity, and not His sex, that is essential to His incarnation. 'Christ chose none but men to be apostles': admitted, but neither did he choose a

gentile. 'St. Paul forbade women to speak in the Church': yes, but St. Paul was making regulations in a pagan city in the first century. 'Christian tradition supports the sex-limitation': it does, but it also supported slavery. 'A woman's physiological constitution is different from a man's': it is, but priesthood calls for no feats of physical endurance greater than those expected of, say, women doctors. One might easily prolong the to-and-fro of argument; but the exercise has some resemblance to a game of badminton played by opponents whose interests lie elsewhere.

It is doubtful whether any of the arguments brought forward against the admission of women to the priesthood have, at any rate for more than a few moments, seemed significant to anyone who did not, independently of argument, feel that there was something unseemly in the idea. Some people admit frankly that they can see no reason against having women priests, but that they would feel uncomfortable if they came into a church and saw a woman at the altar or at the confessional. There seems to be something very deeply rooted in nearly all Catholics which is moved to distress or to hostility when the idea of women priests is first brought to their notice. In some cases the emotional reaction is brief, in other cases it is protracted, but it is very rarely absent altogether. An objection which is based, not upon reason, but upon an instinctive emotional reaction, may be a sound objection or it may not. The subconscious, as Myers pointed out years ago, may be either a treasure-house or a rubbish-heap, and the same is probably true of the unconscious, if by that controversial term we may be allowed to designate whatever it is that stimulates a person to mental activity which he not only does not but cannot analyse.

The distress experienced by most Churchpeople fifteen or twenty years ago upon first meeting with the suggestion that women should be priests could scarcely have been more extreme had the suggestion been one sympathetic to, shall we say, incest. Are we, then, to assume that the instinctive reaction in the one case is necessarily as well justified as in the other? Surely not. An instinctive reaction may be valuable under certain conditions and worthless under others. When a lamb grows too big to stand beneath the ewe at time of suckling, it learns to kneel. This is a valuable reaction. But the cade lamb, when it has reached the same stature as this ewe-fed lamb, kneels too—a reaction wholly futile when its nourishment comes from a bottle in the adaptable hand of the farmer's wife. It is possible for civilised human beings to resemble the cade lamb and to react instinctively to one situation in a manner appropriate only to another. The people who dread to see women priests in England

in the twentieth century are like dogs trying to bury a bone in the drawing-room carpet.

The choice of metaphors must not, of course, be taken as implying that civilised life can do without those primitive elemental things which may be symbolised by mother's milk and mother earth. To set up as praiseworthy a world of feeding-bottles and drawing-room carpets and to depreciate the breast and the soil is not in the least the intention of this article. It is the writer's firm belief that the primitive elemental things 'birth, and copulation, and death,' along with the rhythm of the seasons and the crops, have intense primitive value, and will have so long as the world endures, but that Mr. T. S. Eliot's Sweeney is wrong in asserting that 'That's all, that's all, that's all, that's all, . . . that's all the facts when you come to brass tacks.' It is the firm belief of the writer of this article that there are also two other facts—creative religion and creative art—which have an equally intense positive value, and, furthermore, that these two facts are in a unique relation to all that Mr. T S Eliot sums up in Sweeney's formula.

To work out the analogies between the creative religion of the sacraments ('the outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace') and the creative art, which has been defined as the 'expression in a medium of an æsthetic impression which has been apprehended as worth while in itself,' and to analyse the relation of both to 'birth, and copulation, and death,' would take a great deal more space than is available here. It must suffice to suggest that in such an analogy and in such an analysis may be found the basis for a rational explanation of the age-long hostility to the admission of women to the Christian priesthood. A Christian woman priest has for generation upon generation been taboo. Certain taboos (*e.g.*, that upon incest) may reveal themselves as in accordance with rational ethical judgments which have a binding power of permanent value. Others—as those upon the woman doctor, the woman nurse, or the woman priest—have had a value which has proved itself to be transient. The taboo upon women priests is out of accord with a condition of affairs which includes an articulately expressed need on the part of women for the opportunity to share with men the human activity of creative religion.

It is more than likely that these latter paragraphs will seem to the reader both fantastic and obscure. Their relevance to the earlier sections is, however, so fundamental, in the opinion of the writer, that it would have been disingenuous to have omitted them.

To return from these speculative regions of psychology and metaphysics to the issue of the moment, and to put that issue in

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its simplest form: certain women believe that they are called of God to serve Him in the priesthood; certain priests, certain bishops even, believe that these women are indeed called of God; these facts are being brought before the conference of bishops now assembled at Lambeth. It is clear that this is not a question only for the bishops and for the women who think that they have a call; it is a question for all Churchpeople. Either a number of serious-minded women are deluding themselves and others, including many leaders of the Church, with regard to a very important issue, or the weight of custom is quenching the Spirit of God. This article is put forward primarily as a plea that no Church person should dismiss the question without thinking about it, and that no Church person should think about it without praying about it.

URSULA ROBERTS.