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Did Jesus Exclude Women from Priesthood?

Sandra M. Schneiders

This sentence purports to give the principle upon which the fundamental affirmation of the Declaration rests, namely, "the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith judges it necessary to recall that the Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination" (emphasis mine). Section 4 of the Declaration, and specifically the sentence being commented upon here, maintains that the reason why the Church is not only unwilling at this time to ordain women but is now, and will always remain, unable to ordain women to the priesthood is that Jesus acted in some way during his earthly life which divinely established the priesthood as exclusively male. This assertion raises two serious questions, one of theory and one of fact.

The Theoretical Question

The principle invoked by the Declaration is that in some cases of sacramental activity (obviously not in all) some practice of Jesus is known to be directly and normatively relevant to later sacramental practice. In all (and presumably only) these cases the Church cannot alter the prevailing sacramental practice.

This raises the theoretical question of the criterion for determining in which cases the behavior of Jesus binds the Church. In respect to the issue of ordaining women the question becomes: on what grounds has the Sacred Congregation decided that Jesus' behavior in the matter of choosing the Twelve constitutes a norm binding the Church in the matter of ordaining priests? And on what grounds has it decided that the behavior of Jesus in the matter of choosing the Twelve is binding insofar as it touches on the sex of the Twelve but not insofar as it touches on their race, ethnic identity, age, or other characteristics?

Both the Declaration and the official Commentary imply that the operative criterion is the relationship that a certain symbolic activity of the Church manifests between the historical events of our salvation and the sacrament which realizes that salvation in our lives. In such cases, according to the Declaration and Commentary, a change in the practice of the Church would destroy the symbolic expressiveness of the sacrament because it would destroy or obscure the reference to the historical event.
The Commentary gives as an example of the application of this criterion the use of bread and wine in the Eucharist linking the sacrament to the Lord's Supper. The relationship between the Lord's Supper on the night before he died and the Eucharist is the clearest example (and perhaps the only clear example) of the relationship between a particular historical action of Jesus and a present sacramental activity of the Church. It is certainly clearer than the relationship between any known practice or action of Jesus and the present sacrament of ordination. Furthermore, it is certain that Jesus' use of unleavened bread and wine at the Supper was not a mere historical accident or a culturally dictated choice, something which is not at all certain in regard to the choice of men only as members of the Twelve. These elements were prescribed for the Jewish Passover of which the Christian Eucharist is a fulfillment. Therefore, unleavened bread and wine link the Eucharist with both the certain action and the explicit intention of Jesus in establishing the New Covenant in his blood.

Despite this clear connection between the historical action of Jesus and the sacramental practice of the Church the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith approved, under certain conditions, the use of grape juice rather than wine in the celebration of the Eucharist by alcoholic priests. If, in this case in which Jesus' manner of acting and especially his intention in so acting is certain, and their relationship to the present sacramental practice is perfectly clear, the behavior of Jesus can be set aside for the good of the Church and/or some of its members, it is difficult to see why, in a case in which the actual behavior of Jesus, his intention, and the relationship of his behavior to the sacrament of ordination is not clear, and in which the pastoral reasons for a change in the sacramental practice are urgent, the Church must consider itself unable to change. In other words, if the principle can be waived in a clear and certain case, it is not very convincing to argue that it must be applied absolutely in a much less clear and certain case.

In fact, the absence of any workable criterion for the application of the Declaration's principle seems to have been obvious to the Declaration's authors, for the final appeal in the Declaration is simply to the decision of the Magisterium in deciding when and how the principle is to be applied: "In the final analysis it is the Church, through the voice of her Magisterium, that, in these various domains, decides what can change and what must remain immutable. . . . The Church makes pronouncements in virtue of the Lord's promise and the presence of the Holy Spirit . . . " (par. 23).

This appeal of the Declaration to the Spirit's guidance of the Magisterium is, in the present case, more than a little suspect. It is a matter of record that the Magisterium, on this matter, is not expressing the faith of a very significant segment of the Church, especially in the United States. Furthermore, the Magisterium, in this case, acted contrary to the growing consensus in the theological community that there is no theological obstacle to the ordination of women, and in contradiction to the carefully studied and explicit conclusions of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. The Commission voted 12 to 5 that, should the Church decide to ordain women, it would not
be acting contrary to the will of Christ. In other words, the official biblical scholars at the service of the Sacred Congregation maintained that the major argument given in the Declaration cannot be defended on biblical grounds. The Congregation had this knowledge at hand before it published the Declaration, which nevertheless makes no reference whatever to the Commission's work or to its conclusions.

In a case in which there is not a clear consensus among the faithful and in which the most competent available theological and biblical opinion run counter to the Congregation's position it is doubtful that the latter can legitimately claim to be guided by the Spirit unless it wishes to maintain that it is the sole and independent organ of the Spirit in the Church. Such a claim, which seems to be implicit in the way in which the Declaration was formulated, is contrary to the Church's traditional understanding of itself and especially to the renewed ecclesial self-consciousness since Vatican II.

The Factual Question

The Declaration claims that in refusing to ordain women the Church is following a perpetually binding "manner of acting" of Christ. Even if there were some criterion for ascertaining which actions of Jesus were normative for the sacramental activity of the Church (and if such a criterion exists it is not clear from the Declaration or Church practice what it is or how it can be applied) it would still be necessary in the question of the ordination of women to establish the fact that Jesus acted in such a way as to indicate his intention to exclude women, for all time, from priestly ordination.

The Declaration maintains that the "manner of acting" of Jesus to which it appeals is Jesus' choice of males only as members of the Twelve. Implicit in this argument, and absolutely necessary for its validity, is a syllogism which is operative throughout the Declaration but which is never expressed:

Jesus ordained only the Twelve as priests.
But Jesus selected only males to be among the Twelve.
Therefore, Jesus selected only males to be ordained priests.

Let us leave aside completely the question of whether, in choosing only men to be among the Twelve, Jesus intended to exclude women as such, any more than by choosing only Jews he intended to exclude Gentiles as such, or in choosing only Caucasians he intended to exclude non-Caucasians as such, and so on. A number of authors have already pointed out the invalidity of singling out sex as an object or as the only object of Jesus' intentionality in his choice of the Twelve. St. Paul's clear affirmation that the sexual distinction in matters salvific is abolished by Baptism into Christ (Gal 3:28) makes the Declaration's position on this point even more questionable on theological grounds than it already is because of its lack of foundation in the historical attitude of Jesus.

The most serious factual problem in the major premise of the Declara-
tion's implicit syllogism is that Jesus did not ordain anyone, male or female, to the priesthood. The Twelve are not the unique or even the principal precursors of the later Church officials whom we call priests. And both men and women were among Jesus' immediate followers who were, in virtue of a commission from Jesus or subsequent activity in the early Church, the precursors of present day priests. The Declaration limits its argument to the Twelve for the obvious reason that this is the only group associated with Jesus which was composed exclusively of males and hence the only possible basis for the Declaration's conclusion regarding the exclusion of women from priestly ordination. But there is simply no historical grounds for regarding the Twelve as the first priests, for maintaining that Jesus ordained them, or for considering them as the exclusive precursors of that role in the Christian community which is later filled by ordained priests.

It is unnecessary to repeat here the careful scholarly work that has been done in recent years on the subject of ordained priesthood in the early Church. Suffice it to say that there is wide consensus among reputable New Testament scholars that there were no Christian priests in New Testament times and therefore certainly none ordained or appointed by Jesus. The priesthood does not emerge in the early Church until the end of the first century at the earliest and, even at that relatively late date, the evidence is scanty and unclear.

The functions within the early Church which later came to be associated with ordained priesthood were never limited to the Twelve, and some were apparently never exercised by the Twelve. We have no clear evidence that any of the Twelve ever presided at the Eucharist and it is relatively clear that others, notably prophets, did so by some sort of official designation. It is interesting to note that the role of prophet is one which we are certain women played. The tasks of missionary proclamation, baptising, catechesis of new converts, administration and service of local communities, and the like, were functions that were certainly exercised by ministers who were not members of the Twelve and, in at least some (if not most) cases, not appointed by the Twelve.

There is clear evidence that a number of these functions were exercised by women and no clear evidence that women were excluded from any of them as a universal practice or on principle. What we do know for certain is that there were women among the disciples who went about with Jesus during his public life (Lk 8:1-3), a woman who received an Easter appearance of Jesus and was directly commissioned by him to announce the kerygma (Jn 20:11-18), women who were involved in the founding of early Christian communities (Acts 18 with Rom 16:3-5), women leaders in some early communities (Rom 16:1-2, 6, 12), women involved in the catechesis of new converts (Acts 18:26) and in public liturgical functions (1 Cor 11:5). In short, there is no historical reason to maintain that women were certainly absent, much less intentionally excluded by Jesus and/or the early Church, from any of the functions which later came to be associated with the ordained priesthood.

The only group associated with Jesus to which it is certain that no
women belonged was the Twelve. But the only role which belonged exclusively to the Twelve in the economy of salvation was that to which no one, male or female, is successor, namely, that of constituting together the foundation of the renewed Israel, the Christian community, as the twelve patriarchs constituted the foundation of the Chosen People. Consequently, the all-male composition of the Twelve is irrelevant to the question of any future ministry in the Church, including ordained priesthood. The Twelve are immortalized as the foundation of the Church. As such they have no successors. And as disciples, apostles, teachers, early Church leaders, etc., in which capacities they do have successors, they are members of a wider group which was never all male.

In summary, the principle invoked by the Declaration for the exclusion of women from the ordained priesthood, namely, that the practice of Jesus makes such exclusion mandatory for the Church, is inapplicable in theory because there is no criterion according to which it can be applied in this case, and indefensible in fact since Jesus did not ordain anyone to the priesthood and the functions in the later Church which were eventually associated with ordained priesthood were never restricted by Jesus to males.

Notes

1. Par. 5.
2. For example, we have no precedent in the behavior of Jesus for auricular confession, confirmation, anointing of the sick with oil, or most of the other sacramental activities of the Church, almost all of which have undergone change down through the centuries.
3. Contemporary sacramental theology has largely abandoned the search for specific "institution texts" for most of the sacraments.
6. I am in no way minimizing the pastoral urgency of the decision in favor of alcoholic priests but wish merely to point out that the pastoral urgency of the ordination of women, if only because of the number of people negatively affected by the present exclusion of women from orders, is even greater.
7. The Detroit "Call to Action" Conference in Oct. of 1976 was an episcopally-originated consultation of the faithful in the United States. The participants gave the U.S. bishops a clear recommendation for the ordination of women to the priesthood.
8. The numerous responses criticizing the Declaration, e.g., that of the Faculty of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley which was published in
the Los Angeles Times on March 18, 1977, bear witness to this growing consensus. A major objection to the Declaration is the failure of the Sacred Congregation to consult with theologians and theological faculties prior to publishing the Declaration.

9. The exact text of the questions (in English translation) on which the Commission voted during its plenary session in April, 1976, was published in the San Francisco Monitor, Vol. 118 (June 17, 1976), pp. 1-2.


11. See, e.g., Lumen Gentium II, 12 on the importance of the consensus of the faithful in doctrinal matters.

12. The Declaration’s second section is entitled “The Attitude of Christ.” It attempts to show that Jesus had every reason to select women as members of the Twelve, and, therefore, the fact that he did not do so indicates that he intended thereby to exclude women as such. The same argument, however, could be used regarding Gentiles. The Declaration, in its fifth section, maintains that sexual differences are much deeper and more significant than ethnic differences. It should be noted, however, that the early Church immediately admitted women to Baptism (cf., for example, Acts 17:4) even though Jewish law had no ritual initiation of women into the covenant community analogous to circumcision of males. Nevertheless, the admission of Gentiles to Baptism required a specific divine revelation (Acts 10:1-11:18). Evidently ethnic differences were more, not less, religiously significant in the early Church than sexual ones. The amazement of Jesus at the faith of Gentiles (e.g., Mt 8:10-12; Mk 7:24-30), which has no parallel in regard to women, suggests that this might also have been true of Jesus.


15. There is some evidence of priestly activity by bishops in 1 Clement 44:4 (c. 96 A.D.) and at least a suggestion of regulation of eucharistic presidency in the Didache (early 2nd century).


17. Acts 21:9; 1 Cor 11:5.


21. This interpretation is rejected by the Declaration in note 10. The note takes the strange position that the Markan explanation (Mk 3:14) of the task of the Twelve, which is never attributed to Jesus, is to be preferred to the only logion on the function of the Twelve attributed to Jesus (Mt 19:28; Lk 22:30). Since it seems hardly tenable that Jesus had or claimed to have de-
tailed knowledge about the events of the eschaton (cf. Mk 10:40; 13:32) it is
difficult to understand the note's assertion that Jesus' explanation of the
function of the Twelve as judges of the twelve tribes refers only to "their par-
ticipation in the eschatological judgment."
22. On this point see Brown, *Priest and Bishop*, p. 55.