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# Women and Priestly Ministry: The New Testament Evidence

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*In August 1976 the Executive Board of the Catholic Biblical Association of America appointed a committee of prominent scholars from its membership to study and report on the Role of Women in Early Christianity. This Committee developed into a Task Force whose members are Madeleine Boucher, Richard J. Dillon, John R. Donahue, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Eugene H. Maly, Sandra M. Schneiders, and Richard J. Sklba. The following statement is a précis of the ongoing discussion of the Task Force. The Executive Board directs it to be published in the Catholic Biblical Quarterly as part of the official record of the 1979 annual meeting and commends it to the membership.*

THIS STATEMENT presents a brief examination of the NT evidence concerning the role of women in the Church and a conclusion. It is not an exhaustive study, but addresses biblical arguments commonly advanced in the current Roman Catholic discussion on the question of women and priestly ministry.<sup>1</sup>

In adducing NT evidence for use in the theological discussion, the exegete recognizes the nature and the limitations of the sources, and the necessity for careful

<sup>1</sup>Arguments for and against the admission of women to priestly ministry are discussed in the following official statements and reports: Catholic Theological Society of America, *A Report on the Status of Women in Church and Society: Considered in Light of the Question of Women's Ordination* (Mahwah, NJ: Darlington Seminary, 1978); National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Theological Reflections on the Ordination of Women* (Washington: USCC, 1972; also in *JES* 10 [1973] 695-99); Pontifical Biblical Commission, "Can Women Be Priests?," *Origins* 6 (July 1, 1976) 92-96; Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood," *Origins* 6 (February 3, 1977) 517-24 (also pub. with Commentary [Washington: USCC, 1977]; compare L. and A. Swidler, eds., *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration* [New York: Paulist Press, 1977]).

and critical interpretation. As has long been known, we do not have in the NT an exact or complete record of the ministry of Jesus or the development of the early Church. Material in the Gospels and Acts for example, transmitted orally for some time after the historical events it narrates, was already subjected to the process of selection and theological interpretation before and during its literary composition. In other books, such as the epistles, we have fragments of information about the early Church which surfaced perhaps because the author dealt with a particular problem in a local church, as when Paul wrote to Corinth, or incidentally, as in greetings to members of a community. The NT provides no discussion of the role of women in the ministry of Jesus or the early Church, but only occasional and limited information. Following is an historical-critical assessment of that evidence in light of the current discussion.

### *Ministry and Ministries in the Early Church*

The Christian priesthood as we know it began to be established no earlier than the end of the first or beginning of the second century. In the primitive Church before this, ministries were complex and in flux, and the different services later incorporated into the priestly ministry were performed by various members of the community. As the list of charisms in Eph 4:11 shows, ministry was diversified: "And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers." (Cf. Paul's list in 1 Cor 12:28: apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in tongues; and 1 Cor 12:4-11; Rom 12:4-8.) Paul speaks of ministries as "gifts that differ according to the grace given to us" (Rom 12:6); and he says of them that the Spirit "apportions to each one individually as he wills" (1 Cor 12:11). The diverse charisms have but one source: God, through the Spirit, bestows them as he chooses (1 Cor 12:4-11, 18, 28). They also have a single purpose: just as the members of a body have different functions which work together for the good of the whole, so the different charisms are given to individuals for the common good, "for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12; cf. vv 15-16; 1 Cor 12:7, 12-31; Rom 12:4-5). Thus, while Paul could speak of charisms as varying in importance with respect to "upbuilding," the NT evidence does not indicate that one group controlled or exercised all ministries in the earliest Church. Rather the responsibility for ministry, or service, was shared by various groups within the community.

### *Women in the NT*

Central in the NT is the conviction that the kingdom of God has broken into history and that the old social order is transformed: now, by virtue of baptism in Christ, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no 'male and female'" (Gal 3:28, with reference to Gen 1:27). That this conviction was implemented with respect to women both in Jesus' ministry and in the early Church, to the extent allowed by cultural possibilities, can scarcely be doubted. Women were among the disciples, or followers, of Jesus from the beginning and they were faithful to the end (Mark 15:40-41, 47; 16:1; Luke 8:1-3). The women, most prominent of whom was Mary Magdalene, were the first to discover the empty tomb (Mark 16:2-8; Luke 24:1-11) and, according to some Gospel traditions, the first to see the Risen Lord (Matt 28:1-10; John 20:11-18); and they were among those designated by him as his

witnesses (Luke 24:48; cf. 24:22, 33). In Paul's view, the requisites for apostleship were to have seen the Risen Lord and received a commission to proclaim the gospel (1 Cor 9:1-2; 15:8-11; Gal 1:11-17), and in Luke's view, to have accompanied Jesus during his ministry as well. Women thus actually met the criteria for apostleship. Women were admitted to baptism and membership in the Church, without qualification, from the outset (unlike the Gentiles). Women were members of the earliest community which formed the nucleus of the Church (Acts 1:14-15) and were among those who received the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Ministry, which derives from the gifts of the Spirit communicated by baptism, was open to women.

There is evidence that many of the functions which later were associated with the priestly ministry were in fact exercised by women, and no evidence that women were excluded from any of them. There were women instrumental in the founding of churches (Acts 18:2, 18-19 with 1 Cor 16:19 and Rom 16:3-5); women in leadership roles (Rom 16:1-2, 6, 12; Phil 4:2-3); women with functions in public worship (1 Cor 11:5); women engaged in teaching converts (Acts 18:26). Women prophets are attested (1 Cor 11:5; Acts 21:9). In Paul's greetings at the conclusion of Romans, a woman minister (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae is named (Phoebe: Rom 16:1; cf. 1 Tim 3:8, 11), and very likely a woman apostle (Junia: Rom 16:7). Thus, while male leaders may have been more prominent and numerous in the early Church, and while women's activities may have been somewhat limited by what was culturally permissible, many roles which ultimately were associated with the priestly ministry were evidently never restricted to men.

The limitations presently placed on women's role in the Church and the arguments advanced in support of those restrictions must be evaluated in light of the evidence for ministerial co-responsibility and for the presence of women in ministries in the Church of the NT period.

### *The Praxis of Jesus and the Apostles*

The assertion that the attitude of Jesus and the apostles provides a permanent norm excluding women from ordained priestly ministry in the Church presents difficulties of both a theoretical and an historical kind.

The most serious logical difficulty lies in the claim that the source for such a norm is the intention of Jesus. Only a conscious theological decision could provide a clear imperative; but it cannot be shown that a theological decision was made to exclude women from priestly ministry. All that is known is that there were no women, Gentiles, Samaritans, or, evidently, slaves among the Twelve; it is not possible to deduce from that fact a conscious intention rather than unconscious social and cultural motivation. That becomes clear when we pose the question whether in choosing the Twelve Jesus intended to establish a criterion for office in respect to sex, but not in respect to race, ethnic identity, or social status.

The argument raises, in addition, many exegetical and historical difficulties by failing to take into account the complexity and unclarity of the origins of the Christian priestly ministry as we know it. The circle of Twelve is the only exclusively male group associated with Jesus; but the Twelve, while usually regarded as predecessors of the later Church officials called priests, are not their sole precursors. Jesus did not ordain the Twelve; according to the Gospels he appointed them, on the model of the

patriarchs, to "sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" in the new age (Matt 19:28; cf. Luke 22:30). To this eschatological role, the only one belonging exclusively to the Twelve, no one is successor. In historical roles which individual members of the Twelve exercised, during Jesus' ministry and in leadership positions of the earliest Church, they were always part of a wider circle not restricted to males. In Jesus' ministry, the Twelve were among the followers, or disciples, of Jesus who included both women and men (Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:1-3) and who, after the resurrection, formed the nucleus of the primitive Church and provided its leadership.

In the earliest Church, the roles and functions which later came to be associated with the priestly ministry were never limited to the Twelve; and some (e.g., administrator of a local church, leader of public worship) are nowhere in the NT explicitly attributed to the Twelve. Neither were they conferred by the Twelve (at least not in every case), but were gifts from God through the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4-11, 28). While the Twelve were probably apostles (*apostoloi*, a post-resurrection designation), the circle of apostles was wider, including among others James, Paul and Barnabas. Apostleship (according to the Pauline or Lukan understanding) could neither be conferred nor handed on by succession; Paul expressly disclaims having been made an apostle by men (Gal 1:1). The Christian terminology of priesthood arose in relation to the eucharist, as that gradually came to be understood as sacrifice (e.g., *Did.* 14). Very little is known as to who presided at the eucharist in the earlier Church. While it is reasonable to suppose that the Twelve and the missionary apostles were among those who did, our only evidence is that prophets and teachers played this role (*Did.* 10:7; cf. 13:3; Acts 13:1-2); and prophecy, the charism second in importance only to apostleship (1 Cor 12:28; cf. 14:1-5), is one which we are certain was given to women (1 Cor 11:5; Acts 21:9). Other ministries, apparently more significant in the earliest period, such as missionary preaching, teaching of new converts, administration and service of local churches, were exercised by persons who were not members of the Twelve and in many cases not appointed by the Twelve, and who evidently were not exclusively male.

Thus, the claim that the intention and example of Jesus and the example of the apostles provide a norm excluding women from priestly ministry cannot be sustained on either logical or historical grounds.

### *Disciplinary Regulations*

In the NT, it is important to observe, there are no texts which address the specific question of women and Church office. Only three epistolary passages have to do with women in the assembly, and these are no more than disciplinary regulations pertaining to proper conduct. The exclusion of women from Church office can hardly be deduced from these texts. In 1 Cor 11:3-6, Paul instructs women to wear a headdress, that is, to appear in the proper and customary attire, when praying or prophesying, so that these new converts may not appear eccentric. Notwithstanding Paul's attempt to ground it in the order of creation, the Church has acknowledged the cultural contingency of the regulation by no longer imposing it. In 1 Cor 14:33a-35, women are forbidden to speak in the assembly. It must be noted that the verb here is "to speak" (*lalein*) and not "to teach." To interpret the verb "to speak" as meaning "to teach," and to understand these verses as barring women from the official function of teaching, is unwarranted

by text and context. The context indicates rather that the prohibition is against asking questions (v 35) or in some way disturbing the assembly (cf. vv 28, 30). It is in a Pastoral epistle, generally assumed to have been written in a later period, that women are admonished not “to teach” (*didaskein*) but to be submissive and silent (1 Tim 2:11-15). That such a prohibition, which could cover speech of all kinds, was not always and everywhere known is certain, since in Paul’s mission women not only prayed and prophesied at worship (1 Cor 11:5) but also exercised the ministry of teaching (Acts 18:26). Thus these three passages, which do limit women’s activities to what is decent and accepted, are pastoral directives concerning worship, and they are motivated by social and cultural factors. They can scarcely be taken as permanent theological norms relating to Church ministry.

### *The Created Order*

Nowhere do the passages cited in the preceding paragraph invoke faithfulness to the attitude of Jesus. Rather the authors, alluding to the two creation stories in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2-3, attempt to ground the disciplinary regulations in a theory of the subordination of woman in creation. Although Paul draws back from a consistent subordinationist view (1 Cor 11:11-12), he orders the headdress (1 Cor 11:3-16) because the “head” (source of being) of a woman is her husband (v 3) and because man is the image and reflected glory of God, while woman is the reflected glory of man (v 7), since woman was made from and for man (vv 8-9, and cf. the similar argument in 1 Tim 2:13-15). But if these disciplinary injunctions are culturally and historically limited, so, much more importantly, is the theological anthropology on which they are based. The presuppositions of Paul’s patriarchal culture have influenced his interpretation of Genesis. Certainly an anthropology in which woman is subordinate to man cannot be derived from the first creation account which—unlike Paul—speaks of the two sexes of humanity, created at the same time, as equally in God’s image: “in the image of God he created him [*’ādām*, humanity]; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27; cf. Gen 5:1-2). Neither can it be derived from the second creation account, where it is the likeness and unity of the pair, made from one human being (*’ādām*), that is stressed (bone of bones, flesh of flesh, woman [*’iššā*] from man [*’iš*]; Gen 2:23). According to both accounts, man and woman are equal in the created order. It is only later in the second account that, in an etiology, woman’s subordination in the social order is ascribed to sin (Gen 3:17); it is a consequence of the dis-ordering of the created order. Paul is truer to the Genesis accounts when, in Gal 3:28, he speaks of a restoration in Christ of the original equality of creation (cf. Col 3:10-11).

### *Conclusion*

AN EXAMINATION of the biblical evidence shows the following: that there is positive evidence in the NT that ministries were shared by various groups and that women did in fact exercise roles and functions later associated with priestly ministry; that the arguments against the admission of women to priestly ministry based on the praxis of Jesus and the apostles, disciplinary regulations, and the created order cannot

be sustained. The conclusion we draw, then, is that the NT evidence, while not decisive by itself, points toward the admission of women to priestly ministry.

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