

maintain that the Church *has* no clearly articulated theology on this matter. Thus they come to the conclusion that this teaching is based on sexual prejudice. On the former point we might agree, but not on the latter.

A detailed explanation of the male-only priesthood does not exist, and with good reason. It has never before been a point of contention. The Church rarely works out a full-blown theology until it is called for by the circumstances of the time. Thus the Church always believed in and taught the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. However, until the doctrine was attacked, definitive formulations were not brought forth. The clear statement of the hypostatic union was achieved at the Council of Chalcedon as a response to the Monophysite heresy.

### **Arguments Against the Ordination of Women**

In the current debate, we should realize that the burden of proof rests on those seeking to change tradition. This is a standard debate procedure and one not adhered to by many of the partisans of women's ordination. The best argument against the ordination of women is really the simplest but also the most easily caricatured: It has never been done. No other issue resulting from the Second Vatican Council so clearly flies in the face of tradition; a vernacular liturgy, permanent deacons, and even married priests all find precedent in tradition.

The Holy Father has consistently said that the Church cannot ordain women (CCC 1577); not that she does not want to do it, just that she does not have the power to do so. The reason is that Jesus Christ, Lord of the Church, chose only men. "But Christ was limited by his own culture, which had a low opinion of women", comes the retort. That might be true, at least in the sense that our Lord had to preach the gospel to people who were limited by their own cultural conditioning. However, Jesus never hesitated to break with other cultural patterns of his day (for example, dining with sinners). How do we explain this apparent inconsistency, except to say that the all-male apostolic ministry is an expression of divine will?

Second, it is important to recognize that in the Christian faith sexuality is not a matter of indifference, for Christianity is an incarnational religion that takes the flesh seriously. In the early Church the Gnostic sects tried to say that sexual differences did not matter; the reader will recall that the Gnostics had problems accepting the humanity of Christ. The Church responded by asserting the symbolic value of the flesh as well as its real meaning as part of God's creation. In the Christian scheme of things, neither sex is *better* than the other. Each is *different* from the other.

Third, the reasons for a male priesthood are enhanced by Byzantine theology. When God chose to reveal himself,

he did so through the taking on of human flesh by the second Person of the Blessed Trinity as God's Son. Anyone called to the priesthood since is called as a member of the one and unique priesthood of Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus was the icon (image) of the Father, so is the priest to be an icon of Jesus. This is also tied in with the so-called scandal of particularity, which reminds us that God's ways are not our ways. For example, why did God call the Jews and not the Romans or the Greeks, who were certainly better educated and far more cultured? We do not know. Nor do we know why men are chosen as instruments of sacramental grace, especially since the qualities they are expected to show forth in their lives are often looked upon as "feminine" virtues (such as patience, humility, kindness). Perhaps the paradox itself contains the answer: God chooses whomever he wills to confound our human expectations and to show what an incredible new order of reality is being established. We must be comfortable in living with mystery.

Fourth, we are not dealing with the question of rights here, for no one (male or female) has a "right" to ordination (CCC 1578). If persons had such a right, the Church would not be able to set any prerequisites for Orders in regard to health or intelligence or moral living. All that would be necessary would be the assertion of a self-perceived inner call. No, a call to priesthood is one that comes from the Church and not from the individual. The biggest problem of all, however, is this strange idea that somehow sacramental ordination increases one's holiness or one's chances for salvation. Neither logic nor experience bears this out. Far from a question of rights, then, it is really a question of a diversity of roles and ministries in the Church—all of which are needed for the building up of the Body of Christ. In the natural order, a man should not feel inferior to a woman simply because he is incapable of bearing children. His role is different, and so it is in the Church.

Finally, we must remember that the role of a priest in the liturgy is to stand in the person of Christ (the icon of the Father), not as part of the people, but as their head (CCC 1548, 1563; cf. CCC 1553). In the liturgy we witness a union between the bride (the Church) and the groom (Christ). That spousal union is made visible and sacramental through a male priesthood—and only through a male priesthood.

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# **Holy Orders**

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*The Priest, an Icon of Jesus Christ, Sacrifices His Own Life for the People's Sake*

When people hear of "ordination", their thoughts generally turn to the priesthood, because that is their usual contact with the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

However, the sacrament actually involves three ministries: the diaconate, the priesthood, and the episcopacy (CCC 1536).

In all three orders, men are commissioned by a bishop's laying-on of hands (CCC 1538) to serve the Church by preaching God's Word "in season and out of season" (1 Tim 4:2) and by making present for God's people his saving mysteries.

A call to service in the Church comes from God and is acknowledged and validated by the Church. Like the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament, once a man is consecrated by God for a special task, his ultimate meaning is bound up with that task (CCC 1583). If he relinquishes it, his own dignity and personal meaning, as well as that of the Church that calls him, are threatened. Surely that is the heart of our Lord's comment that one who puts his hand to the plow but keeps looking back is unfit for the kingdom (Lk 9:62).

### **Deacons**

The diaconate, since Vatican II, has been restored to its original status as a distinct ministry (CCC 1571). For centuries the diaconate was regarded as a "stepping stone" to the priesthood. The Fathers of the Council, however, called for its restoration as a permanent state, especially for mission lands. This development has given rise to two categories of deacons: permanent (who usually have a secular occupation, are of a mature age, and may be married) and transitional (who are celibate and who will become priests).

The liturgical functions of deacons include preaching, the distribution of Holy Communion, baptizing, and acting as the Church's official witness at marriage. The Acts of the Apostles indicates that their primary function was to do works of charity (6:1; CCC 1570).

It is interesting to note that some very reputable theologians, such as Louis Bouyer, question whether the diaconate truly belongs to the Sacrament of Orders. The rationale behind this line of argument comes from the fact that a deacon can do nothing after ordination that any layperson cannot do with proper delegation but without ordination. No dogmatic statement defines the diaconate as part of Orders; nonetheless, the general theological opinion and practice of the Church would hold for its inclusion.

### **Priests**

The priesthood exists for the Eucharist (CCC 1566). This was certainly the mind of Christ as he instituted these two sacraments within the context of the Passover Supper (Lk 22:17-20). Fidelity to the Lord's command requires the continued celebration of the Eucharist, which, in turn, requires a ministerial priesthood. Having said that, we must face up to the fact that the New Testament never speaks of the apostles or their successors as priests. Why so?

The first and most obvious reason was a fear that Christian ministers would be identified with either the Jewish or pagan priesthood, and the early Church felt a strong need to distance herself from both. The second reason was a concern that the unique high priesthood of Jesus Christ not be clouded over (Heb 8; CCC 1544-45). Just *as* Christ's redemptive sacrifice was effected once and for all (never to be repeated), so too is Christ's priesthood unique. However, the Eucharist, which sacramentally represents the Sacrifice of Calvary, requires priestly ministers. Such ministers are not priests in their own right, but participate in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. This point is sometimes lost on certain other Christians who think the Catholic notion of priesthood in some way nullifies the unique priesthood of Jesus.

The New Testament is also quite clear in describing the entire community of the Church as a "royal priesthood" (1 Pet 2:9; CCC 1546). If so, why a priestly "caste" within the Church? The Hebrew Scriptures spoke of the Israelites *as* a royal priesthood (cf. Ex 19:6), but they still had a priestly class. If the Israelite community *as* a whole was to fulfill its priestly witness in the world, it needed the ministry of priests. The Church is no different: Having been ministered to by their priests, the people can then minister to the world (CCC 1547).

No competition should exist between clergy and laity, because all Christians are called to serve both Christ and the world. It is not a question of who is better but merely of

different ways to serve. It is ironic that, despite our contemporary understanding of sociology and psychology, we should experience so much role confusion *as* some clergy seek to run for public office and some laity seek to administer the sacraments. This situation is a result of poor self-understanding on the part of both clergy and laity. A careful reflection on Paul's theology of the Body of Christ might be very profitable (1 Cor 12).

### **The Tradition of Priestly Celibacy**

An ancient tradition of the Latin rite calls for celibate priests (CCC 1579). The priest's concern for the Church must be total, so that his individual attention and love are centered on his ministry (cf. 1 Cor 7). However, some misunderstandings about celibacy need to be clarified. First, celibacy does not depreciate marriage; its place in the priesthood emphasizes the fact that marriage and priesthood are vocations in themselves and that both deserve one's complete commitment (CCC 1620).

Second, the reasons behind celibacy are not simply pragmatic, for example, greater priestly availability or economy. Celibacy is meant to be an eschatological sign that reminds people that "we have here no lasting city" and that our sights need to be set on that city "where God is all in all". The witness of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom is all the more needed today precisely because we live in such a sex-saturated society.

Third, the ecclesiastical law of priestly celibacy is not divine in origin, although surely the Lord's clear preference (cf. Mt 19:29; Lk 14:26). This means that the law does admit of exceptions. For this reason, the Holy See has granted special permission for some married Anglican clergy who have joined the Roman Catholic Church to maintain their marital and family commitments and also to be admitted to the priesthood.

### **The Specific Functions of a Priest**

A priest is a witness to the gospel, and a proclaimer of the Gospel (CCC 1564-66). That Word then needs to take on flesh. Hence, a priest is ordained for two specific functions: to offer the Sacrifice of the Mass and to be an agent of reconciliation in the Sacrament of Penance. A priest must also do more than this. He must truly be a father to his people, standing as a constant sign of dedication to the gospel and to reflecting the mercy of Christ.

It is for this very reason that Catholics have always devotedly returned their priests' love by calling them "Father". Cardinal John Henry Newman observed that, of all the titles he had held in his life, that of "Father" meant

the most to him. This title should not create distance between priests and people but should serve as a reminder of the depth of the relationship that exists—a relationship that is essentially familial. Nor are critics on solid scriptural ground who question this usage based on Matthew 23:9. The clear intent of this passage is to forbid giving to any human being the honor due to God himself. The same critics usually see no difficulty in addressing their male parents as "father" or in referring to physicians, professors and ministers *as* "doctor" (teacher), a title likewise mentioned in the Matthew passage.

### **Bishop**

A bishop possesses the fullness of the priesthood (CCC 1557-59). As such, he is the chief priest of his diocese and is capable of administering all the sacraments. He serves as a symbol of unity and continuity; a bishop provides the link with the apostolic Church. His teaching authority rests on that fact and on his union with the entire college of bishops under the headship of the Pope.

I am writing these reflections about Holy Orders on the eve of my own anniversary of priestly ordination. At this time each year I make a special point of thanking God for *giving* the Church the gift of the priesthood and for my vocation. Because a priest deals with intangible realities, it is often hard for him to calculate his own effectiveness. Most priests will never know the tremendous good they have done. Perhaps that is one reason some priests hesitate to invite other young men to join their ranks. The solution to the so-called vocation crisis lies in a rediscovery of the meaning of this sacred ministry in the Church. Or, as a French spiritual writer said: "If people could realize what the priesthood is, there would be too many priests."

### **Wait a Minute, Why Only Men?**

If it is true that the priesthood exists for the Church and the Eucharist, then it is entirely appropriate for us to reflect on one of today's most controversial questions: "Why only male priests?"

Of course, honesty requires us to note that the ordination of women is, for the most part, an issue only in the United States, Canada, and portions of Western Europe. It is also rather predictably derived from the secular feminist movement.

Both of these observations should give us reason to pause. Proponents of women's ordination