

## THE MINISTRY OF WOMAN IN THE CHURCH

### I. INTRODUCTION

History bears witness to the fact that the ministry of woman is to be acknowledged as a phenomenon in the world of religion from earliest times. In the beginning, woman's participation seems to have been accepted as an appropriate, if not always an exclusive, prerogative. Today, however, woman's role in ecclesiastical service has become a multidimensional problem. This is particularly true in the Roman Catholic Church, where the accession of woman to the ministerial priesthood is actually an impossibility.

The question can be studied profitably in the light of three existential "moments," which must be seen as concurrent and co-existent rather than as chronological or consecutive. The first moment provides an historical perspective which takes into account evidences of pre-Christian, non-Christian and Christian practices. We are encouraged to aim at a creative, responsible shaping of the future through attention to the facts of history in which continuity and process are the most significant elements to be considered.

A second moment of insight derives from the effort to explicate the elements of a Christian anthropology. Here, woman is perceived essentially as MAN—*HOMO*—, while mankind—*HUMANITAS*— is apprehended primarily as *creature*, differentiated in duality, totalized in di-unity.

Finally, in a moment of theological intuition, the ministry of woman in the Church calls for a synthesis encompassing ecclesial, incarnational and eschatological realities. In the light of this theological intuition, we see the need to formulate an authentic, Christian concept of priesthood and to define the specific character of woman's collaboration in ecclesiastical ministry. This will be possible, however, only to the extent that theological reflection, on the one hand, transcends the prejudices of discrimination and, on the other, refuses to resort to aggressive, "feministic" tactics in affirmation of woman's role in the Church as "proof" of her "equality" with man.

In this paper, I propose to consider the elements indicated above in relation to what seem to be the critical issues regarding the ministry of woman in the Church. In what follows, I will suggest that the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church is to be affirmed as a *principle consonant with the mission of the Church of Christ in her spatio-temporal reality*. Furthermore, in the particular historical moment which we are experiencing, it might well be a *guarantee* as well as an *expression of orthodoxy of faith* in the Christian community.

## II. THE MINISTRY OF WOMAN AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH

To speak of the ministry of woman in terms of the mission of the Church is to recognize both the ecclesial and the historical dimensions of this question. Both of these dimensions figure in the material available to us regarding woman's place in the world of religion.<sup>1</sup> Although documentation on this subject from the distant past is often inadequate, even when extant, it seems certain that, in the origins of most major world religions—pre-Christian, non-Christian and Christian—, woman has been accorded some position or title of honor. This is clear either from the role or function assigned her or from the teachings and principles enunciated by religious founders in her regard.

### A. *Historical Perspective*

Prior to the Christian era, several stages can be distinguished in woman's religious role. According to some authors, the first ministerial function of primitive religious man was the tending of a mysterious, powerful fire at the entrance to his cave. This site gradually became the *locus* of an altar. Because it was woman who tended and maintained the sacral element, she was the first to whom priesthood was attributed.<sup>2</sup>

As fertility rites developed initially among sedentary peoples

<sup>1</sup> Elsie Thomas Culver, *Women in the World of Religion*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967. This book presents a comprehensive treatment of the subject.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

and kingship cults flourished primarily among migratory peoples, both priests and priestesses increased in number with the male gradually coming to dominate the scene.

With the advent of revealed religion, another stage in woman's ministerial role can be discerned. In that history of the people of Israel which is accessible to us in the Old Testament, we learn that woman was not only excluded from priesthood; even her participation in Jewish religious worship was severely restricted. When we recall, however, that the final editing of the historical books of the Bible most likely lay in the hands of priest-scholars, we might well ask to what extent male prejudices tended to rationalize and "canonize" the existing social institutions of their day. Did the priests, for example, in their desire to purify the Hebrew religion, reject woman along with the fertility cults, with which they probably honestly more or less identified her?<sup>3</sup> Or did Old Testament man, recognizing that woman to a great extent controlled the gift of life, arrogate to himself a monopoly of rights: domination, possession, administration, in reaction to woman's power to make decisions concerning life?<sup>4</sup>

Be that as it may, the fact remain that the texts of the Old Testament in their actual form presuppose, *de facto*, the exclusion of woman both from hierarchy and from official priesthood in Judaism, as well as her inferior status in most legal prescriptions, if not in all social circumstances.<sup>5</sup>

Lack of sufficient documentation prevents the reconstruction of a complete picture of woman's role in the early Church. For one thing, the status of her ministry was never clearly defined.<sup>6</sup> For another, her ecclesial function was never taken as a means of improving her actual life-situation.<sup>7</sup> The first service expected of

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302, n.9.

<sup>4</sup> F. Dumas, *L'autre semblable*. Geneva: Delachaux et Niestle, 1967, pp. 53, 54.

<sup>5</sup> Article, "Woman," in *Dictionary of the Bible*, John L. McKenzie, S.J. New York: Herder & Herder, 1967, pp. 935-937.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Daniélou, S.J., "Le ministère des femmes dans l'église ancienne," in *Maison-Dieu* 61 (1960). Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, pp. 70-96.

<sup>7</sup> *Chrétiennes des Premiers Temps* (eds. Jean-Claude Guy, S.J. and François Refoulé, O.P.). Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1965, pp. 51-57.

woman in the early Church was an efficacious contribution to the building up of a "community of love." This expectation came in consequence of the recognition that woman did spontaneously what all Christians were called to do in imitation of the Lord who had come not to be served, but to serve.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from this, a more positive influence was exercised by some women through functions which were specifically diaconal, liturgical or catechetical. There was never a question, in the early Church, of the admission of woman to a properly priestly function. Still, she did perform a rich ministerial activity.<sup>9</sup>

Her proclamation of the word comprised a post-baptismal *catechesis* for the instruction and spiritual direction of recently baptized Christian women. She shared in the *mission* of the Church by instructing women, adolescents and children in preparation for the sacraments of initiation into the Christian community. Her role in *liturgy* was both sacramental and cultic. As Tertullian testifies, she was never permitted to celebrate the Eucharist, strictly speaking:

Woman is not allowed to speak in the Church, nor to teach, baptize, make the offering, nor claim for herself any part of man's function (*munus*) nor of priestly ministry (*officium*).<sup>10</sup>

However, she did participate in an auxiliary manner in the liturgical services. Her assistance in the baptism and final anointing of women was recognized as both diaconal and ministerial. The ministry of service proper to woman's role as *prophet* in the assembly was recognized and accepted. In this function, she appropriately assumed at the altar that posture depicted in early Christian art as the *Orans*. Woman as prophet was above all the symbolic representation of prayer in the believing community.

With the dawn of the third century, an institution for the ministry of woman had come into existence. There was an order of widows, to be succeeded before the end of the century by an order

<sup>8</sup> The "unwritten history of Christian charity" alone testifies to the countless women in the early Church who tried to serve the poor and the sick as Jesus had served them.

<sup>9</sup> Daniélou, *op. cit.*, pp. 70, 75.

<sup>10</sup> *De Velandis Virginibus* 9:1; quoted in this perspective in Daniélou, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

of deaconesses. Ordination rites were developed, with greater enthusiasm, it is true, in the East than in the West where, by the end of the fourth century the institution had come to be considered as an honorific function, rather than a ministry.

In time, the privileges and prerogatives proper to widows and deaconesses in the early Church were assumed by monastic institutions, where they gradually became disassociated from the concept of ministry. Today, women, both lay and religious increasingly exercise functions which were identified in the first centuries of the Christian era with diaconal or ministerial service.

Thus the earliest intuitions of mankind's religious experience have been carried forward in a movement of *continuity* which is operative at the heart of the historical experience. Insofar as this continuity can be identified as Christian, we can speak of desacralization and purification of the ancient myths attached to Man's earliest religious perceptions. To that same extent, we ought to be able to speak of a *process* by which continuity becomes more than perdurance, through eschatological orientation and incarnational commitment.

To what extent has this been true in regard to the ministry of woman in the Church? Indeed, it would seem that the evidences of the past, as of the present, point to the fact that woman has been deprived of her rightful role and function in Christianity. This is, at least, a current argument. The *ministry* of woman has become a question of the *concept* of woman, that is, a question of anthropology.

#### B. *Anthropological Insights*

In the light of the situation which prevailed in the early Church, it is difficult, historically speaking, to explain the exclusion of woman from the ministerial priesthood on the grounds of antifeminism. That there was prejudice cannot be denied. There prevailed, however, a specific religious situation which cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, there was also a social situation which Christianity, for one reason or another, did not modify.<sup>11</sup> The attitude toward woman which often persists even today in the Church seems to point to the need for a Christian anthropology which would integrate the

<sup>11</sup> Refoulé, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-36.

findings of anthropologists into an authentically Christian vision of Man.

Scholarship points to the fact that it is highly questionable to attempt to demonstrate a revealed or "biblical" anthropology which would herald the *equality* of the sexes as an indication of their *identity* of role or function. Woman is *eser kenegde*, the helper who stands face-to-face with man. Both human experience and scientific research tell us that neither man nor woman is an "absolute" being, totally independent and capable alone of realizing the task which is his at the heart of the cosmos. Biologically, psychologically, sociologically and spiritually, man and woman discover in each other an equality of complementarity which is expressed now in collaboration, again in rivalry, but always in the realm reserved to human activity: the realm of conscious, intentional, personal responsibility.<sup>12</sup>

What answer is to be given, then, to those who claim that this collaboration has never been fully admitted in the Church? What, specifically, can be said to the many who would trace the roots of this prejudice back to the Fathers of the early Church?<sup>13</sup>

Without any embarrassment, we have to admit that some of the greatest Fathers of the Church on occasion roundly denounced woman. Invocation of the patristic argument, in this instance, however, is too heavily freighted with ambiguities to be invoked with confidence. Too many texts are still inaccessible, locked in little-known Oriental languages. More often than not, the influences and elements of style and expression which underlie the writings of the Fathers have been overlooked as well.

Occasionalism, polemic or intentionality often determined the tone and content of their writings.<sup>14</sup> The *diatribe*, along with other classic modes of argumentation, characterized their manner of favoring one value to the apparent detriment of another, no less authentic, no less Christian.<sup>15</sup> Some antifeminine attitudes had been assimilated into the early Church by the roots, as it were, from Judaism. The

<sup>12</sup> Rene Habachi, *Commencements de la creature*. Paris: Editions du Centurion, 1966.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Danielou, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> Refoule, *op. cit.*, investigates this point; cf. p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 1 cf. also, Jerone, *Contra Jovinian* and Chrysostom, *De Virginitate*.

Fathers were not wholly immune to this influence. Also, pagan concepts of woman and marriage had to be purified.<sup>16</sup> There was the ever-present threat of a subtle, pernicious influence from certain heretical groups which exploited woman, even as they assigned to her a role and a function which she had never enjoyed in the assembly of orthodox believers!<sup>17</sup>

In their zeal to come to terms with the problems at hand, the Fathers did not always make distinctions which they knew well enough to take for granted. They focused their cruelest energies on woman, sometimes because the strong influence of a good woman in the Christian community was a vivid reminder to them of the dangerous power which a less scrupulous woman could wield in the life of a man. She called to mind only too clearly that once there was Eve!

We cannot agree with those who would support a feministic plea for the "liberation" of woman under the guise of an "anthropological" argument based on presumably reliable cultural or sociological findings. Nor do we espouse the position of those who fall into the pitfall of preoccupation with anti-feminism in a discussion of the ministry of woman in the Church.

What is needed urgently for such a discussion is a Christian understanding of woman to clarify our perception of the modalities by which her collaboration with man in Church and society can be appropriately assured.

The insights of anthropology, inserted into the continuum of a Christian perspective of history, contribute much to such an understanding. But these insights do not give us a final word on the subject, nor do they operate in a vacuum. Their structures are constantly being refashioned with each attainment to frontiers not previously perceived by the mind of man. They are, moreover, the outgrowth of a climate in which Christianity has, wittingly or not, contributed to the desacralization of the world, forcing this world, in a sense, *to become* what it is *meant* ultimately *to be*, as created reality.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *La Femme* (Lettres Chrétiennes). Texts chosen and presented by Frances Quere-Jaulmes. Paris: Edition du Centurion, 1967? Introduction.

<sup>17</sup> This was especially the case in Gnostic and Marcionite sects.

Christianity, then, is faced with the challenge to come to grips with both history and humanity in a constantly renewed encounter. It is not enough to reaffirm the truths of the past on the strength of new forces that confirm scientifically what Revelation has long since proclaimed. It is not enough to admit the facts of the past and proclaim their validity for the present. The concept of woman as MAN—*HOMO*—, as one who shares without exception the nature and the destiny of mankind—*HUMANITAS*—is to be affirmed effectively. Man and woman stand together as creatures in the presence of the One Absolute. Theology must begin at the roots of humanity if it would encompass the mystery of duality and di-unity which is perceived in the differentiation and the totalization of mankind.

### C. *Theological Intuition*

The ministry of woman in the Church has yet to be introduced as a subject for authentic theological discussion in the ecclesiastical forum. Efforts to do so, more often than not, have, until now, ended in the *impasse* provoked by the admission that there are no theological reasons for or against the accession of woman to ministerial priesthood.

In order to foster such a discussion, it becomes necessary to establish an authentic theological basis for the question. The dimensions of this question would seem most immediately to be ecclesial, incarnational and eschatological.

In the first place, a valid "theology of the ministry of woman" must address itself to the historical reality of the Church, to the fact of her temporality and to her search for contemporaneity.

The Church exists because Man is redeemed in time and space. All things are constantly being transformed in Christ through modalities which take into account the spatio-temporal dimensions of human experience. There is a dialectic of challenge-and-response between the secular and the religious which forces the one and the other to greater transparency through recognition and acceptance of its specific state-of-being. The Church, then, responds to Man, to the human manner-of-existing. She must, however, in some way call forth the truth of each mode of Man's being by refusing to accept

conditions which belie or betray what Man *is* or what he is *meant to be*. In this way, the limitations of ecclesial existence, resulting from the temporal aspects of historicity, enable the Church to assume a character appropriate to each historical "moment." The note of contemporaneity frees her from servitude to an "absolute" which would hinder her effective proclamation of the Word to mankind at any time, in any place.

The Church's temporality leads us to consider, in the second place, the *incarnational* dimension of any theological discussion of the ministry of woman. The Church-in-the-World is faced with the phenomenon of pluralism. The identification of some human beings as "Christian" does not rest on the assumption that they are no longer human beings, but rather on the fact of their existence-in-relation to other human beings who are not Christian. In the same way, Christians gathered together in believing assembly are "Church" not because they are no longer to be identified with man-in-Society, but rather because of their constitution-in-relation to Man assembled in some other mode of collectivity, in a specific pattern of civilization, in a unique cultural milieu.

Thus, multiple existential options can be seen as appropriately available today to Christian man. Unity of faith in an incarnational perspective urges us to look to the "total present," where valid experiences of the past appear, filtered through fidelity to Tradition and to the actual spatio-temporal situation. Fidelity to Tradition, in the light of an *incarnational* intuition, cautions us against confusing *unity* of faith with *uniformity* of practice.<sup>18</sup>

Thirdly, the ministry of woman can be considered theologically in its *eschatological* dimension. At this point, we are led to consider mankind as *coming-to-be*. In other words, eschatology seems to imply an evolutionary process.

The recognition of this fact is related to one of the most valuable insights of the present age, that of Man's arrival at a new level of human self-consciousness. Through this awareness, we have not only come to discern the ascending movement of mankind's development. We also perceive that this development has often been measured

<sup>18</sup> The principle was enunciated by Irenaeus of Lyons in the famous Easter controversy with Victor I (cf. 190 A.D.).

almost uniquely by the achievements of great but solitary human beings in a given society.

The frustration of contemporary man consists, in part, in the conflict between his aspiration to admit all men to the realm of optimum human achievement and his inability to realize this aspiration immediately and directly.<sup>19</sup> Again, this sense of frustration derives from the recognition that maximized opportunities are often made available to man through achievements and values which are technological rather than human.

Man must be able to identify as his own the "peak" moments of a slowly mounting, yet clearly discernible continuum before he can be assured of the validity of history as a dynamic human process. An eschatological perspective would further reassure him that the dynamism of this process is meant to be touched by the presence of the Church in the World.

The characteristics of temporality, contemporaneity, plurality and eschatology as dimensions of theological discussion evoke a theme first enunciated by Irenaeus of Lyons (+202): the theme of *recapitulation* (ἀνακεφαλαίωσις) of all things in Christ.<sup>20</sup>

For Irenaeus, history, like historical man, was characterized by continuity and development. Man experiences change and progress. In Adam, mankind was in adolescence. In the Second Adam, Christ, each man individually and all men collectively grow to the measure of perfect Manhood,<sup>21</sup> carried forward in an experience of ever greater maturity, measured against the fulness of Christ. It is *Christ* who is the center of time and space. All things find new meaning in Christ, because of the eschatological significance He bestows on them. All creatures, all human experiences, all elements of existence are sustained, fulfilled, perfected, realized—*recapitulated*—in Christ.

This theme of recapitulation throws light on the historical reality of woman's ministry in the Church in terms of the historical mission of the Church.

In her *temporality*, the Church is in the world so that the world

<sup>19</sup> This subject was the topic of a series of lectures given by Yves Congar, O.P. in Strasbourg during the spring of 1967.

<sup>20</sup> This theme forms the central intuition of the theology of Irenaeus.

<sup>21</sup> Refoule, *op. cit.*

might become what it was originally meant to be. The Church is of and among mankind, so that men and women might attain that reality which corresponds to creative intentionality in their regard.

In her search for *contemporaneity*, the Church comes gradually to discern the essentials of man's faith-experience. She perceives that the achievements of the past—even of the Christian past—are not to be absolutized as ultimate attainments.

Because the historical mission of the Church is both *incarnational* and *eschatological* in character, she must strive to read the "signs" of each "time" in continuity rather than in isolation. Man's status in society is not only the consequence of a prior ecclesial presence in human time. It is also a "given" which is to be assumed by the Church. In other words, it is highly probable that the Church is not asked to *create* civilizations as much as to *redeem* them.<sup>22</sup> It is in relation to the actually existing order of a given human situation that the "Christianization" of humanity takes place.

We must be on our guard against a too-facile dismissal of human insights in the search for an authentic theological basis for the question of woman's ministerial role in the Church. Conversely, a simplistic integration of the evidences of the past can invalidate both the concept of history as well as that of theology. This would be the case, if these evidences were utilized to resist the authentic evolution of progress because no precedent exists for a proposed activity.

The situation of theological thought today clearly affirms the need for a viable theology which appropriately takes into account the varied dimensions of Man's total existential posture. To admit this is to admit the necessity for a reflection-in-faith on the ministry of woman in the Church, with attention paid not only to all that is meant by the notion of "ministry," but to all that is implied in the concept, "woman," as well.

In fidelity to the historical mission of the Church, it is no longer the moment to ask *if* there ought to be a clearly-defined ecclesial ministry of woman. We must ask *what* such a ministry ought to be; we must ask *when* and *where* it is to be. In the light of the theological intuition proposed above, the question clearly becomes one that is to be asked at that level of Christian consciousness where collegiality is

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

most vitally operative. This is so because it is at this level that orthodoxy of faith is most directly challenged and defended.

### III. THE MINISTRY OF WOMAN AND ORTHODOXY OF FAITH

This paper began with a suggestion that the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church can be affirmed as a principle consonant with the mission of the Church of Christ in her historical reality. It was furthermore affirmed that the enunciation of such a principle at this particular moment of history might well be an expression and a guarantee of orthodoxy of faith in the Christian community. This twofold acknowledgment presupposes a willingness to investigate the ministry of woman in a manner which would release within the believing assembly an inner dynamism of growth in self-awareness and self-understanding in regard to the mission of the Church in terms of priesthood, ministry, celibacy, and the collaboration of man and woman in the work of Redemption. Such growth could result from a theological reflection which must seek in every age the appropriate means of expressing and preserving orthodoxy of faith in regard to the mystery of the Incarnation.

#### A. *The Ministry of Woman: Expression of Orthodox Faith*

The Church-on-Earth will never have finished contemplating and attempting to penetrate the mystery of Jesus Christ. The first credal affirmation of the believing community was: JESUS IS LORD! The earliest doctrinal crisis was the Christological controversy which provoked the first great ecumenical councils. Current studies in Christian theology point to the fact that Christology continues to remain a vital area of reflection and research in our age. An examination of the present conflicts and tensions in the Church might indicate, more clearly than we suspect, that every religious problem, in one way or another, implies a basic Christological position.

With all this, it is not fashionable today to speak of "Christological controversies." Nicaea and Chalcedon are far behind us. Few persons would admit that the verbalization of concepts which, on the surface, seem to have little or nothing to do with Christology may, in fact, be a proclamation of one's faith or lack of faith in the

totality of the Mystery of Jesus Christ. This fact reminds us of the ambiguity that lies at times behind certain doctrinal definitions of the past which appear today as suspect as parallel declarations rejected at one time as unorthodox. This is so, since man's path to God in faith moves through mystery, symbol and paradox.

Christian faith affirms that once in human history Word manifested Divine Reality as Person. In Christ, mankind encounters Ultimate Person in the experience of Ultimate Symbol. Christian faith further affirms that, in the Incarnation, God became Man. In Jesus Christ, mankind acknowledges Supreme Duality in Supreme Unity. The mystery of the Incarnation lies at the heart of the summons to live the Christian mystery. It is *paradox*, finally, which measures the orthodoxy of Christian belief.

Today, we tend to be uncomfortable with symbols, impatient with paradox, uninterested in mystery. We seek to reduce the unknown to formulae and equations. What we have not yet recognized sufficiently is that a total desacralization of the underlying mythic character of any Christian doctrine is, in the last analysis, not always desirable, even were it possible. As we protest the "irrelevant" symbols of the past, we often fail to recognize that new symbols rush in to fill the vacuum which we ourselves create. We fail to recognize the danger of being forced to live in a world of fantasy which we have had little conscious, responsible part in bringing to be.

These thoughts are significant in considering the ministry of woman in the Church.

An affirmation that admits the possible accession of woman to ministerial priesthood necessitates a recognition of the paradox of the human situation, in which unity is possible only because of duality. The acknowledgment of woman as a possible candidate for ministerial priesthood calls for an acceptance of the reality of a created order in which differentiation of person is not dominated by monistic discrimination.

In Himself and for us all, Christ assumed *all* humanity, that all mankind might be transformed into His likeness. Because He submitted to the limitations of the human condition, His experience of humanity was, of necessity, limited to a man's mode of existing. Still, Irenaeus tells us that in Christ all things, all creatures, all human, temporal experiences and institutions are *recapitulated*.

The word of the End-Time, by which the apostle proclaims that in Christ there is neither male nor female has been confided to the Church-in-mission. This word is preserved and transmitted according to the measure of her relationship with Christ. This means that the question of the ecclesial ministry of woman must be asked beyond the limiting factors of a pre-conceived "impossible." The goal to be aspired to in ministerial priesthood is similar to that described by one author for the building up of civilizations and cultures:

A civilization which would be exclusively masculine over-extends itself in aggression and reaches a dead-lock of offensive challenge. A purely feminine civilization exhausts itself in coquettishness and dies as a result of its own inanity. Here lies the metaphysical *raison d'être* of sexual differentiation. One without the other would be condemned to death; out of their encounter is born life.<sup>23</sup>

In professing her faith in an Incarnate God who is central to time and history, the Church is ever in search of new modes of credal affirmation, adapted to each succeeding age. The search, however, is not restricted solely to modes of adaptation. It is determined just as importantly by the desire of the believing community to find more adequate formulations of a faith which is increasingly purified through theological reflection and the work of the Spirit, who continues to make known all truth. The affirmation of the possible admission of woman to ministerial priesthood is a principle whose enunciation offers to the Christian community an appropriate expression of orthodoxy of faith in a God who assumed all of human history in the form of a Man who ultimately transcended every limitation of finitude and contingency.

#### B. *The Ministry of Woman: Guarantee of Orthodox Faith*

An affirmation of the ministry of woman is one mode of expressing orthodoxy of faith by reason of the elements of mystery, paradox and symbol inherent to the concept. This same affirmation can also be a guarantee of orthodoxy in the Christian community.

As an expression of faith, the affirmation of an ecclesial ministry for woman is based on one aspect of the theological concept of

<sup>23</sup> Habachi, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

recapitulation, by which all human, temporal experiences and institutions are assumed in Christ. Another aspect of recapitulation is the event of a "new creation," by which the ambiguous character of Man's religious and human values are desacralized and purified through the redemptive grace of Christ, the Second Adam.

It is through a continual process of re-creation and transformation that orthodoxy of faith is preserved in the Christian community. Man's tendency to absolutize must be consistently countered in the light of Absolute Truth. This necessitates a constant *critique* of values once perceived as primary. It also calls for the courage to challenge value-judgements which may have "canonized" given experiences or realities, either positively or negatively.

The effort to preserve orthodox faith must lead us, then, to look closely at ecclesial and ecclesiastical structures. An incarnational vocabulary would state that we must be led to look closely at the "body" of the Church. This point has been suggested recently by a British anthropologist, Mary Douglas, in her efforts to formulate a principle of social theory in terms of orthodoxy and heterodoxy.<sup>24</sup> She holds that the Arians are among us whenever, wherever, and to whatever degree there exists contempt for the body: the body physical, societal, liturgical, ecclesial.

In terms of the ministry of woman, this would mean that an attempt is made in the sphere of the religious to deal with woman at another level than that of her humanity. There follows a *de facto* exclusion of woman from priesthood simply because she is not man. This is clearly a new mode of neo-Arianism. The specific physical differentiation of woman becomes a source of divisiveness which gives rise to rivalry, misunderstanding and provokes a state of rupture between herself and man. The question is lost in a vicious circle.

One solution resides in an attempt to seek out an identification of woman which will lead to an authentic Christian concept of Man. In this age of personalism, we have yet much to learn about persons, especially concerning the implications of their corporal modalities of being and existing. It is not unlikely that the question of woman's accession to ordained ministry may, in fact, open the way at last to

<sup>24</sup> The theme is the subject of a book soon to be published in England

a valid Christian understanding of such concepts of Man, Man's inter-relatedness in the realm of human communication and Man's relation to God. Once this has come about to some extent, we may be in a better position to question the concept of priesthood in the Church. We may discover that the core problem in contemporary theology actually lies in the notion of priesthood. Once the Christian community has attained a more adequate understanding of priesthood and ministry, the Church will be able to refocus her perspective in regard to other critical theological and religious issues in view of more viable, creative solutions to them.

The ministry of woman, as an element of guarantee of orthodoxy in the believing community must be considered as one possibility of Man's growth to fullness of humanity. It is not possible to consider the question of ministerial priesthood for woman, however, unless we refuse to subscribe to a dualism which separates person into component parts: the "spiritual" which are to be "saved"; the "material," which are to be despised and rejected. Contempt for the body which, in this instance, is female results in practices of monistic discrimination and carries all the overtones of an age when only orthodox Christianity was able to affirm duality without dualism and di-unity without monism in its confession of belief in the Word-made-Flesh.

As a guarantee of orthodox faith, the principle of woman's possible admission to ministerial priesthood confronts multiple traditions with the one Tradition of the Gospel. The enunciation of this principle posits a challenge to woman to pursue the means of growing toward that freedom in Christ to which she is called. It is in fidelity to her own modality of being-free that she will find the possibility of preparing to respond to the call to ministry at the time and in the manner determined by the Christian community.

#### IV. *The Role of Woman in the Church*

What immediate conclusions can be drawn from this investigation of the ministry of woman in the Church? Three seem appropriate and possible, at first sight. In the first place, the affirmation of woman's accession to ministerial priesthood is to be enunciated. Secondly, authentic theological discussion is to be initiated in an

attempt to clarify and specify the basic elements and modalities which such a principle suggests. Thirdly, in preparation for the moment when the ordination of women will be a reality, an order of deaconesses should be established in the Church, officially integrating into a defined ministry the multiple diaconal services not performed by women in varied and proper circumstances.

The ordination of women ought not to be sought at the present time. There are still too many uncertainties surrounding the notions of both "woman" and "priest" in Western Christianity. The reasons for such a request of the Church are not wholly disinterested or divested of ambiguity. Motivations need to be clarified. Modalities of function need to be discovered, so that the role of woman in ministerial priesthood might be an authentic effort of collaboration and complementarity rather than a duplication of activity distinguished only because it is the work of a woman.\*

\* It is quite probable, too, that the question of admitting woman to ministerial priesthood ought to be decided at that level where the principle of collegiality is most operative. In this way, the voice of each local Church would express its proper need and the will of the believing community would indicate the manner in which it discerns that this need might be most appropriately met.

This search for modes of effecting collaboration demands of both man and woman a maturity and honesty that does not yet exist as a commonplace. An understanding of woman which would clarify the notion of her role and function in the ministry of the Church, for example, ought to take into account her ability to recall man to the most profound roots of his being. It is her prerogative to make a unique contribution to the preservation of the sources of life for tomorrow.

In an age when tomorrow itself is threatened by cosmic uncertainty, a definition of woman's ministry in the Church must be consonant, too, with her existential potentiality to *reconcile men with life*.<sup>25</sup> To the degree that woman seeks to prepare herself appropriately and adequately to engage with man in a dialectic of challenge

<sup>25</sup> These are the words of Pope Paul VI, in an address to Italian women in Rome, 1965.

before the cosmos, to that same degree will she discover the means of extending and intensifying her own collaboration in the building up of the world of the future.

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