

WORKSHOP: WOMEN IN THE WORLD CHURCH

The starting point of reflection on this topic was the question of admission of women to the ministerial priesthood. Karl Rahner's analysis of the argument advanced in the Vatican Declaration of 1976 was evaluated. In response to the doctrinal argument that the exclusion of women resulted from a deliberate decision and therefore constitutes a normative and binding expression of the will of Christ, Rahner asks whether there is sufficient evidence of a deliberate choice. He proposes that the failure to include women may be only a human tradition, dictated by the sociology and culture of the time.¹

Recent evaluation of the New Testament evidence, however, suggests a different response. The Pontifical Biblical Commission,² the Catholic Biblical Society of America Task Force,³ and Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza (*In Memory of Her*)⁴ find evidence that women *were* admitted to positions of leadership (as missionaries, teachers, apostles, leaders of communities) in the early church. Schüssler-Fiorenza, in particular, probes the texts of the tradition to reach behind the androcentric interpretation and disclose the revolutionary impact of the gospel on social relationships. The tendency to read back into the texts later concepts of ordination, priesthood, and eucharistic presidency obscures the data. Critical feminist scholarship, then, introduces a serious challenge to the doctrinal argument for the exclusion of women from priesthood.

Rahner did not comment on the arguments set forth in the theological reflection section of the declaration, but this, too, seems to deserve careful attention and response if the dialogue with the official position is to be carried forward. The declaration teaches that it is profoundly fitting that priestly ordination be reserved to men because the priest in his ministry represents Christ, most especially in the eucharist when he acts *in persona Christi*. The nature of sacramental signification requires that there be a "natural resemblance" between the sign and the one signified; it follows that only a man may take the role of Christ in the eucharist, for in this capacity he is the image of Christ himself who was and who remains a man. This line of argument recalls the role of the eucharistic president as the sacramental symbol of the true priest, Christ, who stands not only within but also "over against" the worshipping congregation. Ecumenical dialogue sometimes reveals how this understanding of the place of Christ in our worship has been overlooked and even replaced by a vision of eucharistic worship as a "community project." Still, as discussion

¹*Theological Investigations* XX (New York: Crossroad, 1981), chapter 3.

²Report in *Origins* 6 (July 1, 1976), 92-96.

³Report in *Origins* 9 (December 27, 1979), 451-54.

⁴New York: Crossroad, 1983.

indicated, Roman Catholic appeal to the notion of acting *in persona Christi* is not necessarily persuasive. Is this operative only during the consecration (and possibly in the act of absolution)? Or do Christians who serve as the ministers of the sacrament of marriage also act *in persona Christi*? Is the Vatican Declaration's appeal to this introducing a new and restricted use of the expression?

Secondly, the declaration raises the question of the theological consequences of the *fact* of the Incarnation of the Word according to the male sex. This fact is found to be harmonious with the whole economy of salvation and especially with the nuptial imagery surrounding the mystery of the covenant (Eph 5:25). In response, one may point out that this nuptial imagery does not seem to be linked to the eucharist in any obvious way. It is difficult, in fact, to explain the link between the sacrificial death of Jesus effectively commemorated in the eucharist and the self-donation of husband to wife in marital intimacy if one is looking for symbolic expressions of this in the liturgy. If the link can be made, it does not appear to have a basis in eucharistic symbolism. Discussion on this point recalled that the use of nuptial imagery by celibate theologians can become overly romanticized.

The emphasis on maleness is not, however, unimportant if viewed as a consequence of the scandal of particularity. Those proponents of the admission of women to priesthood who abstract from the fact of maleness, or who appeal to a risen Lord who no longer bears the limitation of sex, seem to risk denying the reality of the Incarnation. Is sex purely contingent? The Vatican Declaration and its commentary insist that the distinction between men and women is not suppressed in glory; so fundamental is sexuality to the identity of the person that it cannot be transcended without a loss of identity. It is possible to read the declaration as stating simply that the fact of Christ's maleness belongs to the economy of salvation. No claim is made that a male is a better image of God.

This leads into the discussion of theological anthropology. Jesus is the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), but this does not mean that the transcendent God is male or is limited by sex. God is beyond sexuality. Recent studies have begun to recover the richness of female imagery for God — Father, Word, and Spirit — to be found in the Bible, in theological reflection, and in the traditions of Christian piety and mysticism. These images are also applied to the sacred humanity of Jesus. Even if female subordination has been legitimated in the past by appeal to the male as the more adequate image of God, we are able today to repudiate this rationale. We may even, with Rosemary Ruether, conclude that in a patriarchal culture a male who subverts the patriarchal system as Jesus did is the "best" image of a liberating God.⁵ In discussion of this section of the presentation, it was proposed that perhaps rather than thinking of God as beyond sexuality one could think of God *as* sexuality, or as embracing the fullness of what it is to be male and female.

⁵*Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

This led to the next set of considerations. In the 1978 *CTSA Research Report on Women in Church and Society*, two models of anthropology were set forth: (a) dual anthropology, which sees humankind as comprised of two "natures," complementary to one another and mutually exclusive; traditionally, the male has been seen as "normative" and the female as auxiliary according to this view; and (b) single anthropology, which emphasizes the spiritual equality of men and women and limits the impact of sexuality on social roles to "reproductive specialization." The CTSA report favored the latter view as more consistent with baptismal equality and common human nature, and as corresponding more closely to contemporary experience and the findings of the human sciences.

A review of that research report by Mary F. Rousseau⁶ has subjected this analysis to a careful philosophical critique. According to Rousseau, the dual anthropology, so described, is guilty of *materialism*, giving biology the determining role in defining male and female, almost to the point of assigning them to different species. The single anthropology, so described, is guilty of *dualism* of mind and body, ignoring the human condition of bodiliness in favor of an abstraction, a sexually neuter humanity.

Rousseau proposes instead a holistic anthropology, a view of "the unity of human nature in which matter and spirit are so joined that each is proportionate to, and pervasive of, the other, with the unity of a single substance, a single being, a single material/spiritual nature."⁷ Rousseau argues that sexuality is not separable from humanity or from individuality. It has a meaning for every aspect of a person's life. It is both biological and personal. As humans, we are neither absolutely determined by our sex, nor completely free of it. Human nature is analogous in women and men, not univocal (single), nor equivocal (dual). We have two ways of being human. On this view, complementarity can be rehabilitated as a psychosomatic reality. The commitment to complementarity which appears to have divided men and women into mutually exclusive, stereotyped "natures" can yield to a psychosomatically grounded complementarity which still allows tremendous freedom to the individual to define how femininity and masculinity will be expressed.

This holistic anthropology takes the Incarnation seriously (against the temptation to Gnosticism or Docetism) and still affirms the wide potential for shaping male and female roles in accordance with human freedom. While valuing sexual differences and the special contributions of women and men, this view takes into account our actual experience of being able to move beyond rigid stereotypes. On the other hand, it provides a place for the feminist interest in articulating those special dimensions of women's experience which cannot be adequately accounted for in the single anthropology. While appeal is made to culture and socialization as an

⁶"Theological Trends: The Ordination of Women; a Philosopher's Viewpoint," *The Way* 21 (July 1981), 211-24.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 216.

explanation of the unique experience of women, this appeal does not seem to some sufficiently rooted in our bodies and our psyches.

Just as some feminist thinkers are willing to rehabilitate the notion of complementarity at the level of philosophical analysis, so some are also expressing renewed interest in Jungian theory. Ann Belford Ulanov has done much to promote this.⁸ The psychological critique of dual and single anthropologies is that neither matches the full experience of women. The dual view appears to imprison us, while the single view disregards our claims to special experience. Jungian theory, modified according to Ulanov's reconstruction, proposes the possibility of recovering "what it means to approach things from a distinctly feminine point of view."⁹ Ulanov explores masculine and feminine modalities of being human and celebrates the insights that come from female experience. In her opinion, it is not political injustice or the will to dominate that accounts for sexual discrimination but fear of the female, a fear which affects women as well as men.

By discovering and recovering elements of feminist spirituality, women contribute to the transformation of the social order and of the Church. The values of mutuality, relationship, intimacy, vulnerability, and compassion which arouse fear are, in fact, basic to women's experience of being human. This reasoning suggests that complementarity may be useful as the basis for an argument in favor of the ordination of women.

Finally, it was noted that since 1979 there has been a shift among some Roman Catholic women away from interest in ordination and towards a desire to transform the Church and its structures, especially to eradicate all hierarchical patterns and all vestiges of clericalism and patriarchy. Rather than focus on admission to priesthood, some now devote their energies to developing a feminist spirituality and new models of ministry that give full scope to the expression of typically feminine gifts. For some, this direction is accompanied by a conviction that the whole Christian community images the Risen Christ and shares in his ministry.

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⁸*Receiving Woman* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981).

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 23.