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Women in Holy Orders?

by Ida Friederike Görres, 1965

IN THE TWENTIES we first heard it rumoured that women — German University graduates — had presented a petition to the Holy See concerning their admission to Holy Orders. I wonder whether they ever received a formal answer or whether their plan was engulfed in blank silence. We thought the story rather a huge joke. Nowadays the problem seems to have attained the dignity of serious debating matter. This is, in fact, nothing to be surprised at.

The development which, in its origins a century ago, was called the Emancipation of Women has swept not only Europe, but the whole world. What carried it to final triumph was not the dogged struggle of some small but resolute feminist groups, but the tidal waves of our two World wars. The overwhelming momentum of these simply blasted the remaining barriers between professions deemed masculine or feminine. Millions of women of every age, station and class in every nation involved stepped into the gaps left by men fighting or imprisoned, or lined up with them, proving once for all the capability and proficiency of women in every job, trade and task of our civilisation.

After the wars, totalitarian governments, fully aware of the immense economical advantages of the new situation, took care to keep their female labour-potential mobilised. In other countries people continued to take it for granted from a host of motives. Today there is not a single career or calling which could not be claimed by a woman able to show her adequate training for it, and none would exclude her on principle. But she cannot be a Catholic priest. The Catholic priesthood, indeed, still holds good as the last and lone stronghold of male professional privilege. How very tantalising this fact must be to those who bask in their worldwide victory! What a provoking challenge!

So their attempt is, perhaps, not very hard to understand. More puzzling, to my mind, would seem the extreme meekness with which the feminine response to this challenge is received in official quarters. At least I cannot remember having read, as yet, more than a gentle doctrinal rebuff, much less anything amounting to a definite snub; only rather timid and mild waverings, polite backings out, or even bashful offerings of clandestine sympathy. Of course this may indicate the time-honoured male strategy of beating a quiet retreat before headstrong female onslaught, shelving the question for a more propitious hour. But two more elements may be involved: <85> feminist claims which are, today, riding the crest of a wave most favourable to them; and an attitude you might call an inverted snobbishness or a wide-spread guilt-complex. In our days privilege — or what is left of it — of any kind is neither taken for granted, nor flaunted, nor insisted upon, not even vindicated. People who still retain a vestige of superiority, inherited or attained, are not feeling easy about it. They are more or less diffident and apologetic, even ashamed to make any use of it. Bounce and swagger are all on the other side — stressed by the *ci-devant* or real underdog or under-privileged. The hardpressed remnants of the privileged defer and writhe in a most undignified fashion, ready for any amount of self-deprecation to coax and propitiate their accusers. Parents towards children, whites towards coloureds, aristocrats towards commoners, educated towards uneducated, husbands towards wives, and, last not least, priests towards laymen. What a chance, for an attack by laywomen against male-plus-clerical prejudice! They may be sure of ardent sympathies.

This is all the more so, seeing that fashion tends to disparage all things traditional and historical, especially in the Church. We take almost for granted that the very age and permanence of a tradition is enough to suggest disreputable origins like ignorance, prejudice, superstition, selfish designs, ruthless manoeuvrings in maintaining itself so long. The very idea that permanence might, sometimes, imply sense and experience is unpopular.

Other questions are involved in our problem. In the wake of the assertive type trying to crash the baffling gate we are sure to find a larger number of really serious-minded women, eager for wholesale dedication to Divine service. They would not dream of seeking personal advantage, but are convinced that female priesthood would be a real asset to the Church. Viewing the sacerdotal office as an assortment of certain functions, they cannot see why they should be barred from these. Having proved long since their actual and even excellent qualification for each and every item, why should women not be able to cope with the total?

All over the world, they argue, instruction, teaching has been recognised as an undisputed feminine vocation, from the nursery to the College hall: why not religious instruction from the pulpit? Why should sermons be supposed to differ essentially from any other lectures or papers for which women are continually taking the chair? Universal priesthood permits women to baptise in emergency, and nurses and midwives probably perform the ceremony much more frequently than any laymen. Women everywhere are treated to most intimate confidences and give spiritual and other advice: <86> why not inside a confessional? Hints at female garrulity are ludicrously impertinent in the face of manifold experience of women doctors as well as Secret Service agents; male traitors have indeed made themselves a good deal more conspicuous in news headlines than women. Theologians today insist upon the fact that their 'assistance' at the marriage-service does not constitute a sacrament any more than their assistance at a burial: why should women not officiate at both? And universal priesthood, we are told, enables women as well as men to join in the offering of the Eucharist as well as in receiving it: why not advance one step further, conferring jurisdiction to consecrate? And as to confirmation and ordination: theologians tell us that Orders are, essentially, one and indivisible; if you cannot refuse them to women on any stringent dogmatic or biblical principle, does this not logically imply possible ascent in the range of hierarchy?

Priests represent and govern the Church: women, today, are in full possession of legal, economic and sociological training. Women all over the world hold their own on corporations and organisations of every kind, leading, planning and managing in as well as in subordinate positions. They run almost the bulk of the Church's organised charities. Women are civil servants, members of boards and Parliaments, consuls, ambassadors — not to mention Abbesses and Mother Superiors, even Mother Generals! Their right and ability to be sovereigns has never been disputed since the Salic law came to an end. If then, they may represent any social and political units — why not the People of God, the Church? Besides, it could hardly be contested that the female nature proves a better endowment for many of these posts than the male can offer. Her greater powers of sympathy, of wholesale devotion, of handling details, her practical commonsense, her greater facility at 'contacting' people, her finer sense of beauty, of dignity and ceremony — are all these proffered gifts to the Church to be refused and frustrated just to defer to fossilised prejudice? And there is the much discussed problem of the scarcity of priestly vocations in almost every country, waiting to be solved by such a simple stratagem.

We may frankly accept many of the single propositions detailed above. But they lead up to the real core of the question: do they in fact discuss the

authentic Catholic priesthood and not rather a somewhat vague and sketchy variety of the idea, a wishful-thinking concept, envisaging something much more appropriate to the clergy of other denominations? For the Catholic priesthood is a phenomenon of its own, unique and not derived from another, to be accounted for by the Catholic faith only, not on other lines such as comparative <87> religions or even the Protestant ministry. It can only be explained in the light of the doctrine, the history and the developing self-realisation of the Church herself. It is not simply derived from religious or organisational wants of the community needing to be provided by any qualified person, much less on a theoretical assessment of masculine and feminine qualities.

There is only one model and image of the Catholic priest: Jesus Christ Himself in His relation to His Church, in the special mystery of their total and indissoluble unity. As the only Mediator, so Christ is the only Priest of the New Dispensation. This unique 'twofold-ness', or Binity — if I may dare coin such a word — is inadequately described by the formula of Head and Body, or of marriage — two in one flesh. But even this falls short, and married partners are of separate origin, whereas the Church takes her entire existence from her Lord. The Fathers of the Church loved the symbol of the Paradise couple: Eve taken from Adam's body, his 'issue' as well as his mate. Ancient sacred art loved to depict, in various forms, the 'birth' of the Church out of the cleft side of the Crucified. This strange and unique 'Binity' conditions our Universal Priesthood: the Church as the 'flesh' and 'extension' of His Person shares His dignity and power. This 'royal nation of Priests' is the visible 'fullness' and 'development' of Christ, unfolding in space and history. The baptised believers of each age represent the 'Church' as partner of Christ, each singly in his or her own life, together in the celebration of the divine liturgy.

Universal priesthood thus belongs to every member of the Church, male and female. To be a woman was never considered an obstacle to integration in Christ as a 'new creature'. Women share every sacrament with men on equal terms, except that sacrament which deals, if we may say so, with the 'reproduction' of the person of Christ and His spiritual generative power in the Church. For the Head, too, has its visible representation on earth till He comes again. He, innate to the Church more intimately than the soul to the body, is yet, in a sense, over against and facing her, working powerfully upon her, praying, offering sacrifice, pardoning, teaching, governing, suscitating new life. And all this He does by His *ordained* priest. As members of the Church, our priests represent us, but they do more than that: they are 'facing' her too, in their office, giving her what herself she could not supply. People often call a priest the 'Vicar of God'. This is, at the very least, imprecise: you could give this

name as well to fathers, mothers, kings. The priest is explicitly representing, almost 'impersonating' Christ, z.e., God as Incarnate, and the Incarnate as Highpriest: "He prays and offers *in persona* <88> *omnium*", says St. Thomas, 'but he consecrates in *persona Christi* — in the person of Christ'. 'The priest is acting vicariously for the people', says the Encyclical Mediator Dei, 'because he stands in for Christ, *in so far as* He is Head of His members and sacrificing Himself for them . . . The priest is marked with the indelible character, which turns him into a kind of image of Christ'.

Further, he does not receive this character 'from beneath', that is, by delegation from the community, but from above, by being caught up into the stream of Apostolic Succession, descending from the origins of the Church from bishop to bishop, branching out into the entire sacerdotal body by means of the imposition of hands. This, and only this fact, would account for the amazing casualness which, up to our days, simply took for granted referring to the clergy as 'The Church': 'What does the Church say ... ?' 'The Church forbids... commends ...' This meant that, in the symbiosis — Christ-Church — the Head alone seemed to count, the Body simply fading almost out of sight. Priests were entirely and globally identified with the Head, as if an actor were mead offstage as the character he impersonates. This attitude, both among the people and among the clergy, led to the notorious and most regrettable deviations and abuses of hierarchical dominance known to history — from the terrific tyranny of Boniface VIII down to the petty arrogance of minor offenders. Today we get the impression that many priests, in a laudable effort to make up for the trespasses of their forbears, almost refuse to acknowledge even the mystical prerogative of their state.

So the pendulum, once more, is swinging gaily to the opposite extreme. For on the other hand the deep and sincere devotion, the genuine affection and respect freely and lavishly bestowed by Catholics on their priests, has no other root but their intense faith in this Christlike character of the anointed. This feeling seems to be rapidly dwindling nowadays to the verge of disappearance, the priest being considered no more than a functionary consigned to running the organisational part of the Church; and this, no doubt, might be done as well by women. This is why, priests being so diffident about it, laymen and laywomen ought, today, to stand up for the intrinsic difference between Universal priesthood and the consecrated *sacerdotium*.

We cannot squeeze symbols and similes, but they are not mere rhetoric either. If the marriage-emblem is to make sense at all, it implies two separate and different partners. Their difference constitutes the possibility of their union, their relation makes possible that *commercium vitae* — exchange of life — of which theology speaks, and on which their spiritual fecundity depends.

The essential structure of the Church involves the visible reciprocity of priest and lay man. The ring the bishop wears signifies that he is to 'keep Holy Church inviolate as the Bride of God'. When the bishop dies, his diocese is called 'widowed', not 'orphaned': '*ecclesia viduata*'. How are women to assume *this* 'impersonation of Christ'? or is it supposed to be changed till it can apply to them?

Pagan priestesses of course make perfect sense, since they im- personate goddesses. The same might even be said for the cult of a vague 'deity' like that of the French Revolution. But there is abso- lutely no room for them when it is the Person of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, human and male, which comes into the question.

Bland suggestions that the incarnation of God as a man instead of a woman might be nothing more than mere fortuity, a whim of history, are simply too stupid to be debated seriously; like the one that Our Lord had to put up with men for his apostles, Jewish women being not as yet up to the mark — unlike our times, where he would have been able to pick and choose among an unlimited supply of highclass career women and University graduates. Curiously enough, advocates for these quibbles will insist simultaneously that, in the apostolic and patristic age, women — dubbed a moment ago immature Oriental harem-creatures — were actually performing quasi-sacerdotal duties as ordained deaconesses, an office from which they were arbitrarily ousted, somewhat later, by male dominance; which implies that admission of women would indeed be no more than restitution and due reparation.

As a matter of fact, this female diaconate, much conjectured upon, seems, at the present state of research, never to have been identified nor confused with sacerdotal status, being of a different order, like, for instance, the later consecration of virgins or abbesses. Some may think it a loss that this early order of female Church office was discontinued as early as the sixth-century — much too early, by the way to be imputed, as has been suggested, to the much-decried discrimination against women by Aristotle, disseminated in the Church via St. Thomas across scholasticism. It seems more probable that this change was connected with the almost contemporary rise of asceticism. This new state of life, esteemed in the whole Church even above the sacerdotal, far from repudiating women, attracted and accepted them from the first. The magnificent ritual of the Consecration of Virgins is very instructive about it.

Besides, no one could assert that the female diaconate really disappeared together with its name. It rather split up and transformed itself into an amazing variety of feminine services inside the Church. Multitudes of monastic orders and, later on, congregations of nuns <90> took over almost the entire

range of charities, bodily and spiritual, various forms of religious instruction and missionary work, as well as the special care of sacred places and their needs, providing hosts, vestments etc. It is impossible to assess the complete scope of feminine action, service and influence achieved by dedicated women. In times of persecution women were, and are, even allowed to keep and convey the Blessed Sacrament. Possibilities in that area have not yet reached their limit — they may be extended and amplified. New dimensions have opened out for the Secular Institutes. Laywomen, too, may select from a large choice of professional Church-work, serving as catechists, parish-helps, lay missionaries, missionary doctors. Never before did the Church recognise such a profusion of patterns for the female apostolate.¹

Women, in fact, *are* already largely in possession of that ‘diaconate’ that is claimed so eagerly today as a separate clerical state for men, even for married laymen. Why, then, should men be admitted to a special consecration for it, women refused? ‘Are women unworthy of being consecrated?’ has been asked very pointedly. “What taint, what deficiency is supposed to prevent it working on us?’ But why, after all, must every differentiation be put down to unkind motive or mutual irritation? I would prefer a much simpler explanation: a woman acting as ‘deaconess’ in the above sense is representing the Church-as-Body. She is entitled to do so by baptism and confirmation, *i.e.*, through her share in the universal priesthood. No other warranting is needed.²

In face of such almost bewildering wealth of opportunities offered to every woman conscious of a religious vocation it does seem puzzling that some prefer to spurn this whole field of option to clamour for the one male form of vocation, and insisting on feeling frustrated if refused. I never yet heard of men resenting their ‘exclusion’ from ‘maternal’ joys and honours as an injury, nor of their imputing it to guileful female plotting. I am afraid such readiness to take offence, to cherish grievances, and to interpret things in terms of prestige suggests a profound inferiority complex.

¹And even long before these possibilities, from the earliest ages, the Church was always depicted — strangely enough, by her male theologians! — under strictly feminine symbols: as mother, as faithful and fruitful wife, as bride — always women as ‘representing’ the Church, existentially, as it were, independently of action.

² A man could, in fact, be content with the same authorisation. But it seems they frequently aspire to the special qualification of sharing the hierarchical diaconate, *i.e.*, they don’t just want to perform certain tasks, but to perform them as ‘hands of the bishop’, as modern theology defines it, as ‘extension of the bishop’, explicitly deputising for the bishop in works of charity, or for the parish priest in liturgical tasks. Then — and then only! — they ought actually to be incorporated into the branches of apostolic power stemming from Christ, the Head; which means consecration.

<91> We have as yet not even brushed other ‘natural’ objections to the idea of women in Holy Orders. A matter so many-sided cannot be considered on supernatural grounds only. Even if, for argument’s sake, we could assume for a moment that the coast was really perfectly clear of theological obstacles, there would still exist a lot of seriously ambiguous details. Psychology, common sense, a sense of proportion, of the decencies, even a sense of humour must have their say.

I am aware of course that the designations ‘masculine’ and ‘fem- inine’ are very much challenged today, treated as dubious and fanciful. But even if we agree that they are less definite than they used to be, with a broad margin for wavering and blending, they still cannot be simply discarded. Even the most enthusiastic champions of the Cause can scarcely claim that only the unfeminine or sexless should be admitted to the status of priestess. And even if — again for argument’s sake — we admit that the first batch of candidates would probably be rather exceptional individuals, permanent institutions must, in the long run, work with the available average. From this merely natural, down-to-earth angle men would seem a good deal more fitted to the task than women. Even many special feminine talents and virtues might prove, in this area, rather handicaps than assets.

For instance, the spiritual relationship between priest and penitent, even between the priest and the ‘souls’ confided to his care, is something unique; different, in spite of many obvious analogies and overlappings — intrinsically different — from that between doctor (or psychologist) and patient, teacher and pupil, social worker and ‘cases’. It has a quality — or can at any moment reach it — of a singular and terrifying intimacy, as touching the core of a person’s relationship to God, which is, perhaps, only tolerable if balanced by an equivalent ‘detachment’ in the priest, an impersonal attitude not easy to define. A priest must be all things to all men, open to their most shocking confidences, handling their deepest vulnerability; yet he is never on his own, always he is in the place of Christ. He must ever be ready to fade into anonymity, never grasping, never clinging, ever ready to respect the whole or partial anonymity of the other. This very special blend of real openhearted, loving kindness with an unbreakable aloofness seems to be a signal characteristic of good priests. This involves, of course, a very special kind of loneliness — not in the setting of solitude, which would be easier, but in the thick of the crowd, ever solicited by the hundredfold access of personal demands upon him, which he must simultaneously accept and refuse.

<92> This asks for a power of abstraction, in the mind as well as in the emotions, which is probably most rarely found in women. A woman’s gift for the personal, individual and intimate, her lively, often ravenous interest in

other people's lives and activities in all detail can be, like every real power, a blessing or a disaster. A woman's inclination to occupy her mind and emotions with other people's behaviour, troubles and needs, her urge to comment on them, to discuss them, to worry about them, to share her knowledge with others mean, on the lowest level, a passion for gossip and interference and, on another plane, an excellent equipment for mothers, educators, and social workers. But, in the life of the priesthood, it would probably mean a real encumbrance, involving an unbearable stress of overburdening.

You can add to this the well-known emotional possessiveness of women, our tendency to take complete charge of anyone we care for, our readiness to bully you 'for your good', which we always know better than you do — our frank ardour to rush in where angels fear to tread. A man's natural dislike to getting involved, his reluctance to meddle, his respect for other people's independence, his inclination to let human problems well alone, if not forced to tackle them, are probably a better outfit in these matters; though these attitudes are not all equally commendable in themselves and, in fact, often highly provoking. Women, too, are much more affected by their physical and psychical moods and tensions, and consequently are much more vulnerable in body and spirit; more liable to disturbance in their emotional balance, more entangled with personal ties and loyalties — even to the point of downright identification — in their opinions and judgments. Intellectual women are no exception; this is what makes them unequalled disciples and propagandists and explains their enormous role in the rise of sects and movements, religious as well as profane.

We cannot afford, in this context, loftily to ignore the central importance of 'romance' in very various and subtle shapes in a woman's life. Her very wholeheartedness and single-mindedness in devotion as well as in passion constitutes a far more troubling element than for most men. On the other hand, the simple actual average attitude of males toward women must be taken into consideration too. The best of women cannot help attraction emanating from themselves — nor can they stop nor quite control the response they may — unconsciously — arouse. With nuns, the adamant collective discipline as well as their taboo-charged dress makes a good deal of difference; so does the deliberate anonymity of secular institutes and the privacy of women working in a diaconate. But a priest <93> is never wholly private, always exposed *as* a priest. A priestess would be so infinitely more. The problem inherent to the relationship — priests-and-women — is looming quite large enough inside the Church. I don't see any point in doubling or multiplying it by adding another pattern of problems concerning priestess-and-men. No need for a nasty imagination, just for imagination quite

simply — some insight into human nature to be able to assess what a multitude of embarrassing, delicate, awkward and often outright preposterous situations would be most certainly very frequently involved.

Of course such considerations are extremely difficult to articulate, yet they carry their weight. Readers familiar with J. H. Newman's *Grammar of Assent* and/or his *University Sermons* are asked to remember — even to re-read — his most lucid and pertinent remarks on reasoning and reasons, on tacit and antecedent reasons, on the subtle nature of evidence, latent and implicit, on first principles, on reasoning on the principles proper to a given subject matter, on the 'legitimate judge, spiritual discernment', on moral perception, on the instinctive power of an educated conscience — and a lot more of a like nature. They will find an amazing amount of side-light illumination. If J. H. Newman is right that 'the presumption is in favour of the early tradition, if no argument can be brought to overthrow it' and that 'the *onus probandi* rests with those who impugn it', I cannot but conclude that in our problem the innovators have not succeeded in their attempt.

In the face of the real nature of Catholic priesthood as well as of the generous opportunities for genuine vocations — ever increasing, and open to wide development — for women in the Church, it seems a most unnecessary enterprise for any of us to persist in battering away at the one, most reasonably closed door.

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