

## Women Ministries

### What Contribution Toward A Renewed Church?

Can women ministries help the cause of Church renewal or, on the contrary, could they not bring comfort to the clerical and hierarchical system? A change in the discriminatory practices of the Church will affect not just the Church itself, but also society in general, since it is still largely influenced by male and female images promoted by the Church. Among these practices, the non-ordination of women constitutes an “anthropological apartheid” (Martine Millet), whereby only the words of men teach, sanctify and govern. It is this question that reflects the distortion between the practice of the Church and the rights of Man. One cannot talk about Church renewal without dealing equally with the renewal of society. The two are linked.

#### An old debate based on solid argumentation:

To my knowledge it was already in the 17<sup>th</sup> century that a man, a feminist before the time, Poullain de la Barre, argued in favour of women priests in a book on the equality of the sexes. Since then, we know how the status of women has changed because of medical and technical progress. The Law has followed giving women full juridical rights and, hence, full human rights. Even if the practice doesn't always follow, necessitating further measures like the law of parity in politics or salary equality, there are no juridical obstacles to the full development and well being of women. In the Church, it is not only in practice that discriminatory attitudes reside, but also in Law (Cf. Canon 1024 of the Code of Canon Law: “Only a baptised man validly receives sacred ordination.”).

In the past 40 years, renowned theologians, both women and men, have been working on this question of women ministries.<sup>1</sup>

#### Scripture:

One should know that before Paul VI wrote *Inter insigniores* in 1977 on the question of the admission of women to priesthood, he had asked the very official pontifical biblical Commission its advice on the topic. After study, the Commission unanimously concluded that the New Testament by itself could not clearly resolve the issue. A strong majority thought that one could confer to women the ministries of reconciliation and of the Eucharist without going against the original intentions of Christ. Paul VI did not follow the advice of this Commission.

The Roman texts base their opinion on the practice of Jesus who showed considerable freedom in his dealings with women, contrary to the customs of his time, and that in the

<sup>1</sup> Two book titles point to the usual arguments employed in this debate: *Et si on ordonnait des femmes* (And if one ordained women?) Marie-Jeanne Bérère, Donna Singles, Ed. Le Centurion 1982; *Tradition perpetua servata? La non -tradition des femmes: tradition ou simple fait hisstorique?* (The non-ordination of women: tradition or simple historic fact?) Hervé Legrand, O.P., in: *Rituels, Mélange offert au Père Gy*, Ed. Cerf 1991.



name of this sovereign freedom, if he had wanted women apostles, he would have chosen some. In response to this, it is said that he probably did choose women as apostles, but that the gospels did not give them this title. What constitutes an apostle? The call, the following and the sending forth by Jesus. Well, women also followed Jesus and were sent by him, for example, Mary Magdalen, sometimes referred to as the apostle to the apostles. The choice of the 12 wanted to symbolise the 12 leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel, signs that salvation had been given to the whole of Israel. Well, it was difficult for a woman in a patriarchal society to represent a leader of a tribe. Also, witnesses to the resurrection were needed; however, the witness of women was not acceptable. Did not the apostles treat the witness of the women as the “fantasies of good women”? Indeed, these women had no juridical status.

More importantly, one cannot expect that Jesus would have pronounced himself on a question that was not raised in his time. Neither was the question of the ordination of men raised either.

*Tradition:*

The Church has never ordained women and doesn't feel authorized to do so. That's the argument from tradition. The Church has been obliged to do many things that it had never done before. The early Church had to make decisions and had to organise itself without knowing the explicit will of Jesus on serious questions like the admission of gentiles in the Church. The Church has changed the number and form of the sacraments; it has changed its opinion on interest on loans, on slavery, on the death penalty...

The nascent Church set up a clergy in the manner of Judaism and a hierarchy in the manner of 2<sup>nd</sup> century Roman power. However, Jesus who was not a priest, who was a lay person, we would say today, never instituted priests in the sacerdotal manner, that is, sacred persons, separated from the profane, sacrificers, obligated intermediaries (pontifs) between God and humanity. If Jesus is called a priest in the letter to the Hebrews, it is because he put an end, once and for all, to all sacrifices. It is thus the end of priesthood. The tearing of the Temple curtain at the time of the death of Jesus is precisely the symbol of the end of the separation between the sacred and the profane. Priesthood is not a gospel reality.

Also, when one invokes tradition, one needs to ask how far back this tradition goes. We still refer today to an image of priest that dates only to the Council of Trent.

*The argument ‘in persona Christi’:*

Christ was a man and can only be represented by a man acting *in persona Christi*. This statement raises a real theological question. Is the person of Christ entirely determined by his masculinity, or does Christ carry in himself all of humanity, thus a bisexual humanity? Otherwise said, is he only *vir* or *homo*, as Pilate calls him: “Ecce homo,” *aner* or *anthropos*? It is said, in theology, that Christ saved only what he assumed. If he assumed only his masculinity, then, only men would have been saved, and not women. If he saved all of humanity, then he also assumed femininity, and therefore women can act *in persona Christi*. It is conveniently forgotten to say that the priest also acts *in persona Ecclesiae*, in the person of the Church, which is said to be “the bride of Christ,” thus, a feminine symbol. Accordingly, to be logical, only women could represent the Church. And in saying so, one touches the weakness of the above argument. Is it physical resemblance that allows one to represent Christ, as well as the ordination to that effect?



### An image of woman:

We need to see clearly the image of woman held by the leaders of the Church, and which makes her full integration into ministries quite difficult. For the most part, this image still greatly influences our secular society and encourages its sexist practices.

#### *The inferiority of women:*

Here is an argument that has been abandoned officially, but it is the one most used in history (*imbecillitas sexus*). A few quotations from the Fathers of the Church will do better than a long speech. Gregory of Nyantium (4<sup>th</sup> century): "Only men can deal with the consequences of knowledge, whereas the weakness of women, as Eve has proven, is not suitable to studies." St. Augustine: "According to the order of nature, it is suitable that woman be at the service of man because it is only just that the least endowed be at the service of the more." And for St. Thomas of Aquinas well into the 13<sup>th</sup> century: "The feminine sex can hold no superiority of rank because woman is in a state of subjection. Thus she cannot receive the sacrament of orders."

#### *New positions:*

It is in the apostolic letter on the vocation and dignity of women, *Mulieris dignitatem* (1988), that one finds for the first time from the pen of a pope new thoughts concerning the relation between women and men. John Paul 2 talks about *essential equality* and the *perfect reciprocity* between them. Thus it is that Eve is no longer Adam's assistant, but rather it is a question of reciprocal assistance, and that the submission of women in the letter to the Ephesians is no longer *unilateral but rather reciprocal*. This new vision which was characterised as 'feminist' continued through to June 1995, just before the UN Peking conference on women, when the pope wrote to all the women of the world. The pope expressed regrets and recognised the responsibility that the Church bears in the denaturalization and the reduction to slavery of women; he recognised the violence exercised against them and he proclaimed the equal responsibility of men and women in the making of history. These propositions that went so far as to recognise that the domination of men is a situation of sin and a rupture of the equilibrium desired by God, re-established the dignity of women.

#### *The nature of woman:*

Despite these wonderful efforts, "*feminine humanity*," according to a beautiful expression of John Paul II, remains abusively marked by its sexual character: its mystery is to be "*virgin, mother, spouse*." Masculine humanity, however, seems to transcend its sexual character. Nowhere is an allusion made to an innate predisposition of the male to the vocation of spouse, father or virgin. The beautiful reciprocity that was unfolding from the preceding speeches is rendered impossible by the assignation of women to a vocation in conformity "*with the plan of God*" (thus difficult to contest), in which the asymmetry of relations is rigorously held. For "*the husband is the one who loves. The wife is loved: she is the one who receives love in order to love in return.*"



In the Letter of 1995 to the women of the world, the pope exposes (and imposes) his image of Woman: an image of Woman by herself and not in an evolutionary relation to man, an image of the universal and eternal Woman and not of women diversely situated. He speaks of the “*feminine genius*” which incarnates itself in the manner of Mary in service and not in the making of decisions or the necessary exercise of power.

It is not a question of deriding the image of woman that is expressed in the pontifical texts, since, in the Letter published by the Congregation of the doctrine of the faith in July 2004, Joseph Ratzinger, not yet pope, recognises that the values said to be feminine: empathic, attentive, protective, relational, welcoming, listening, humble, faithful, attentive... are “*after all human values of man and woman [...] Every human being, man or woman, is destined to live ‘for the other.’ In this perspective, what we call ‘femininity’ is more than a simple attribute of the feminine sex. The word indicates in fact the fundamental human capacity to live for the other and by the other.*” These attitudes of Christian life “*should apply to all the baptised.*” This is the end, one would think in reading this, of the assignation to women of virtues and behaviours that enclose them in the “eternal feminine,” and the end as well of the corresponding masculine caricature that renders men incapable of emotion and relationality. But there is a glitch to this beautiful opening: “*Woman is more immediately in synergy with these values*” and “*women tend to live them more naturally and with more intensity*” (No.14).

It is difficult for the Church to let go of the idea that there exists a feminine nature radically different from that of the masculine. The official texts go on and on about the “nature” of woman, while there is usually nothing said about that of man and on the capacities with which man would be in “synergy.” Man is still considered as the prototype of humanity, about which there is nothing to say, while woman remains the other, the different, the mysterious, the one about whom one never ends talking about, especially if one is a man who is celibate by statute. Anthropologists agree today that the qualities, roles and functions of men and women are of the cultural order. That is what is called gender or the social construction of sex. Well, in this same letter of cardinal Ratzinger, talk of gender is frightening. To give value to the cultural construction of sex is tantamount to denying the difference and the duality of the sexes inscribed in biology. Any effort to bypass the biological determinisms is thus suspect. Yet, no topic today can avoid analysis in terms of gender.<sup>2</sup>

It was important to tarry a bit on the image of woman found in the official documents of the Church, because it is in the name of woman’s *special vocation* that ordination is reserved to men. Many of the inequalities that women yet suffer in our societies are due to this inadequate image.

### **Actual women ministries:**

“In the Churches women are also ministers.” Such was the title of a seminar organised 10 years ago by “Femmes et Hommes en Eglise” and by “Droits et Liberté dans les Eglises.” This seminar had favoured a pragmatic approach. It was not a question of revisiting the argumentation for or against the ordination of women, presumed known and, in any case, indecisive, but rather to give the floor to women engaged in ministerial activities. The

<sup>2</sup> The Association Femmes et Hommes en Église (Association Women and Men in the Church) set up a research and documentation unit on gender issues in Christianity at the library of Saulchoir.



witnessing came from the different Christian Churches: anglican, protestant, orthodox and catholic.

A first fact dealt with the evolution in people's awareness. These women in a ministerial position provoke sometimes wonder, rarely hostility, and very quickly welcome and the recognition of a more simple and more intimate relationship. This is important because opposition to the ecclesial responsibilities of women is often based on the opinion that the faithful are not ready for this.

A second fact concerns the vocation of these women. For some it's fidelity to a call sensed since childhood or it's an awareness arrived at through discernment, after having tried to deal with the insoluble question within the Church: "Why not priesthood?" For others, the vocation is mediated through the needs of people. It's to be of service to them that they work in the parish, at funerals, at chaplaincy... It's to listen, dialogue, empathise, assist in praying...

There is also sometimes a call from the Church. The commissioning letter of the bishop in certain cases serves to authenticate this vocation and to recognise the ecclesial service rendered. The women thus commissioned feel invested with a Church responsibility and are perceived to be officially a part of it. They are "the presence of the Church," witnesses to the hope and faith of the Church. One of them works in Africa under contract with the *Fidei donum* priests. She says that she feels herself to be "the priest" for the district for which she works.

A good number of them are aware that to succeed in the mission given to them, they would need to be ordained. Some have asked this of their bishop: "You have given me a mission that I could really fulfill properly only through ordination. I can measure the incompleteness of my task." Already, because of the shortage of priests and the urgency of the task on the ground, the juridical differences between priests and lay people are becoming blurred. This is the case for hospital chaplains, animators of catechesis or biblical study, pastoral coordinators for sacramental preparation, and liturgical animators. Their work is very often distinctly sacramental and should be able to go to the logical conclusion and not remain a pseudo-sacrament, since it is there, at the heart of a confident relational undertaking, that the sacrament realises its full meaning.

One can conclude from these witnesses that, if there is a crisis of ministries in the Church, it is less a crisis of vocation than a crisis of ordination. The Spirit continues to call, but she breathes where she wills and her call falls on people who are not acceptable according to the existing rules of ordination in the Church. The leadership prefers fidelity to a tradition rather than fidelity to the needs of the People of God. Because the leadership feels that it cannot call women to ordained ministry, it declares that there is no vocation and invites everyone to prayer.

### **Roman politics:**

#### *Three major texts:*

Three major texts have been put forth to block access for women to ordained ministries. One notes an escalation in the politics of the question, not only with respect to the practice



of ordination for women, but also of the idea itself.

- The first text dates from Paul VI, *Inter insigniores*, in 1977. It would appear that before this date, it did not seem necessary to have such a clear text on the refusal of women. The Church, like society, retained differentiated roles for men and women and this practice was integrated by general opinion without causing any great problem. But since that period, the effects of the change in the juridical status of women on the social, familial, juridical and economic levels, began to be felt. Their exclusion from certain areas and positions of responsibility is seen as discrimination on the basis of sex. The Church felt obliged to legislate on this question and to confirm the existing norms on the question of the admission of women to priesthood. The Church never did it. It's the only argument that remains.
- Then there was the Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* published in 1994, which declared that ordination was exclusively reserved to men and that the question was definitively closed. In fact, the first text of Paul VI had not forbidden the pursuit of the promotion of women in western societies and especially their ecclesial practices formerly reserved to the priest. As we have just seen, ministries were in fact being exercised with competence by women and appreciated by the communities where this was happening. At the same time, in 1992, the Anglican Church approved in principle the ordination of women. The theological conclusions of the Anglicans diverge from those of the Catholic Church. The reaction of the Catholic Church was violent, accusing the Anglicans of sabotaging ecumenical efforts. These diverse reasons most probably influenced *the apostolic Letter on priestly ordination being exclusively reserved to men* of 1994. The protests, the renewal of biblical and theological research, the reflections based on pastoral practice had the reverse effect than the one desired, since instead of closing the question, it opened it more widely.
- A few months later, it was felt necessary this time to bring out the heavy artillery by use of a note from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1995), signed by Cardinal Ratzinger, clarifying the status of *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*. This invoked the infallibility of the magisterium on a doctrine excluding women from priestly ordination that was presented as belonging to the deposit of faith and requiring definitive assent. A rule thought to be simply disciplinary and historical was made into a doctrine of faith.

#### *Other texts:*

The 'doctrine' of the exclusion of women from ordained ministry was picked up from different angles in later texts on related topics.

In 1997, it was the *Roman instruction on several questions concerning the collaboration of lay faithful with priestly ministry*. Rome, somewhat alarmed by the development of the practice and reflection of people in actual ministerial situations, once again brings precision to the distinction between clergy and laity. It does not deal uniquely with women, but as 90% of those involved in Church services are women, they are the ones intended. It proscribes the abusive use of titles such as 'chaplain' or 'moderator,' which are reserved for priests. Lay people are reminded that they have only a consultative voice in pastoral councils, that they must play a discreet role in Eucharistic celebrations, that they must not take communion themselves when they are extraordinary ministers of communion, in order to avoid the risk of



confusion with the concelebrant, that the delegations permitting the celebration of marriages, baptisms or funerals must remain limited, that the ADAP should only be temporary, that the role of lay people must remain limited in the pastoral ministry to the sick (where crisis obliges men or women to act in a quasi-sacramental role).

In 1998 an apostolic Letter (motu proprio) was published to defend the faith: *Ad tuendam fidem*. It was a question of inserting certain norms in the Code of Canon Law. A few lines added to article 750 of the Code of Canon Law speaks about some elements definitively proposed by the magisterium of the Church: "Those who refuse to hold the particular propositions as definitive are in opposition to the doctrine of the Church." The letter was followed by a detailed note, signed by Cardinal Ratzinger, enumerating as indicative a few of these elements proposed definitively that concern the doctrine on faith or morals: the infallibility of the pope, the positions of the Church on euthanasia or fornication, and, of course, the ordination of women. The people who do not accept the definitive status of these questions put themselves outside the Church and are therefore heretics. Politicizing was on the increase. This made someone say to Father de la Brosse who was at the time the spokesperson of the French episcopate: "When one cannot get spiritual assent through intellectual means, one forces it through juridical means (...). It's a constant in the history of the Church."

In May 2001 a Roman instruction was published, *Liturgiam authenticam*, that sought to avoid the great multiplication of translations of biblical and liturgical texts. This instruction from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments manifested great caution on a highly developed practice in anglo-saxon countries, namely the use of inclusive language that seeks to avoid any appearance of discrimination toward women. Difficult to put in place, in French notably, inclusive language is nevertheless designed to draw women out of grammatical invisibility, which is a reflection of their social and historical invisibility.

In the last Encyclical of John Paul 2 on the Eucharist (Holy Thursday 2003), *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, two emphases placed on the Eucharist tend to remove women from the role of presider. First of all, the sacrificial meaning of the Eucharist is strongly underlined. The image of the priest that becomes clear is that of a sacred being placed apart for a sacrificial role. One awakens there all that is opposed to this role, particularly the fact of being a woman. Woman, who is made to give life, cannot pour out the life-blood. Anthropology is familiar with the male cultures of the hunt and of war. Woman possesses her own sacredness, her own mystery, which is to give life, not only to other women like herself, but also to men, an exorbitant power that cannot be added to other sacred powers. Even if these are archaic fantasies, they remain active in the minds of many. Another emphasis is put on the situation of the priest acting *in persona Christi*. The encyclical specifies that this expression means much more than "in the name" or "in the place of Christ," and that it refers to a particular identification. Since Christ was a man, one wouldn't see him in a woman, as was already said in *Inter insigniores*.

### **Two moments of effervescence:**

It was in 1992 that the Anglican Church approved in principle the ordination of women. The theological conclusions that flowed from the research of the Anglicans diverged from those of the Catholic Church. There already were ordained women, deacons first, then priests, and



even bishops in the Anglican Communion, but it was far away, in New Zealand, for instance. The decision taken by the Church of England, the mother Church, brought the danger closer to home. The reaction of the Catholic Church was violent, accusing the Anglicans of sabotaging ecumenical efforts, without realizing that, contrary to its accusations, it was the Catholic practice of the non-ordination of women that was creating an obstacle to the ecumenical movement. This event, as we have already pointed out, probably influenced the publication in 1994 of the *Apostolic Letter on ordination exclusively reserved to men*.

Today, it is the question of the openness to the ordination of women to the episcopate that was on the agenda of the Anglican Synod of February 2005. The principle was accepted and the juridical obstacles were to be removed in July. The policy was framed in these terms: "What kind of Church do we want to be? A Church on the same wave length as the modern world so as to give it new credibility." The Church of England is lucidly confronting the risk of schism.

In 2002 Catholic women, mostly from Germany and Austria, took action. They are well educated both humanly and theologically. Their degrees (doctorate) and their responsibilities in the Church speak well for them. They had enough of the constant stonewalling. Despite their solid theological work, their will to dialogue, the Catholic hierarchy not only ignored them, but also opposed them. That is why, at their request, a bishop, not in good standing with Rome, and perhaps others, proceeded to ordain seven of them on June 29, 2002 on a boat cruising the Danube in international waters. Other ordinations soon followed. Three women were consecrated bishops. In June 2004, in the presence of 120 invited guests, six women, two from the United States and one each from Canada, Switzerland, Lithuania and France, were ordained to the diaconate. This year ten women were ordained as priests or deacons. The French woman, Genevieve Beney, was ordained to the priesthood on a boat cruising the Saone and Rhone rivers, an event that attracted a heavy media presence. On July 25, it was the St. Lawrence river in international waters. Only a handful of women were involved in the preparation in 2003. But in the following years, the requests and candidacies snowballed, such that today some 60 women are in the formation program for priestly ministry, directed by Dr. Patricia Fresen who has devoted many years to the formation of men priests in South Africa.

The reactions of the Roman Church were not tardy. On August 5, 2002, just five weeks after the first ordinations, the first seven women were excommunicated. This indicates how effectively they had touched the government of the Church at its most sensitive point, namely its ideological base. This was manifested clearly through the declaration made by the secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone) to the Vatican Radio. He justified the excommunication thus: "The behaviour...of the women [by this illegal ordination] puts in danger the structure of the Church as it was conceived, wanted and instituted by its founder, Our Lord Jesus-Christ, and that was also confirmed by the community of Apostles, as well as by the Tradition of the Church itself, namely that priestly ministry is conferred to the masculine sex!... The behaviour of the women deserves the heaviest sanction that the Church can impose in the case where one tries to destroy the deposit of faith and the fundamental rules of the Church..." As for Cardinal Barbarin of Lyon, he declared with respect to the ordination of Genevieve Beney on the previous July 2<sup>nd</sup> that "*there would be no truth in the words that would be pronounced, nor in the actions that will take place in this circumstance.*" In view of these reactions, one can judge the importance of the step taken by these women. It is clear that the arguments invoked are neither scriptural, theological or pastoral, but rather arguments of authority used to impose a tradition that is





not a living tradition.

From their vantage point, the women consider Canon 1024 of the Code of Canon Law as an immoral ecclesial law (“Only a baptised man validly receives sacred ordination”). It is in contradiction not only with the Declaration of the Rights of Man, but also with the texts of the Second Vatican Council: “*Every form of discrimination in the fundamental rights of the person [...] whether it be by reason of sexual condition or of race [...] must be overcome and put aside because it contradicts the plan of God (GS n.29).*” How can you ask women to recognise their exclusion as a “*truth that is part of the Catholic faith?*” That would be like asking them to renounce their own human and Christian dignity.

### **Diverse strategies and their interplay:**

#### *A Paschal strategy:*

Where should one begin: with the renewal of the Church or that of its ministries? It’s fairly clear that the one does not go without the other. Is it not the problem of the chicken and the egg: which comes first? As it actually exists in its hierarchical and clerical mode, ordained ministry blocks all possibility of Church renewal. That is why some rejoice over the diminishing number of priests. There are still too many priests in the old model for change to happen. “Let the situation rot.” It’s from the base of the wave that change will surge. One must pass through death in the hope of a resurrection. Thus, it is all ordained ministry that is suspect, as much of women as of men.

One can argue that this paschal strategy of passage is somewhat passive. “Let time take its toll,” for the Church has the words of eternal life, so why be concerned for it. However, when will we have reached the critical mass? The resources of traditional clericalism are not diminishing in the universal Church: African or Polish priests as well as certain young priests are not ready to jeopardize their identity as ‘persons apart’ endowed with sacred powers. If one finds legitimate arguments against the ordination of women, few people are ready to oppose the ordination of young men for the same good reasons.

#### *First reform the Church:*

The crisis of ministry is but the reflection of a Church in crisis. The hierarchy minimises this by limiting it to the western world. Unfortunately, one notices that once a country reaches a certain quality of life, religious practice and obedience to Church rules diminish. Christian faith, however, has not finished delivering its message, though it must return to its source, to the Gospel, and allow itself to re-language so that it can speak to our contemporaries. Many old dogmatic formulations, many actual Roman texts use a language devoid of meaning today. Perhaps more serious, because more insidious, are the ecclesiastical behaviours generated by the hierarchical and authoritarian organisation of the Church. It is not just words or scriptures that are messages; all behaviour is a message. Too often those of the official Church are not Christian. There is a great effort of conversion and reform needed. All Christians are involved, for one must not neglect actions in the real world that provide another image of the Church. From this point of view, one notices the emergence of new communities where other practices are being put in place. This was the point of a recent seminar by “Rights and Freedoms in the Churches” and “Women and Men in the Church,” that presented 17 different communities in the midst of the institution, though on its margins, all enlivened by the desire for renewal and practicing new ways of organising and living the



faith. Communicating these happenings, most often coming from the concrete needs of people, is already a way of “reforming the Church.”<sup>3</sup>

However, must one wait until the Church is transformed and offers other possibilities of exercising ministries that would include women? Would not the arrival of women in ministries up til now “exclusively reserved to men,” also be one of those practical actions, that might change people’s way of thinking about men and women and even about the practice of ministry?

*A strategy devised from practice:*

As previously mentioned, some women are already ministers as are some lay men. Thousands of women exercise a ministry. It’s also from this fact that mentalities change and are no longer frozen by the approach to the altar of women who are responsible for a Church service. The shortage of priests provides them at times with a real responsibility. It’s an incontrovertible path, but limited. Because, let us not be naïve, in a litigious case or even in a simple difference between priest and lay person, it’s always the priest who will prevail. Furthermore, Rome is alarmed by the slippery use of words and wants to reserve the word “ministry” strictly for ordained ministry. The happy ambiguity of the word, favourable to an evolutionary softening, seemed dangerous. Women, regularly called “chaplains” of a school, prison or hospital are asked to abandon this expression that is reserved to the priest. Lay men are also involved, but as women are usually the ones involved in these situations, they are the ones targeted. (Roman instruction on a few questions concerning the collaboration of the lay faithful with the ministry of priests, August, 1997)

*Start with the diaconate:*

Rather than demand priesthood for women, wouldn’t it be better to ask for authorization of their task by access to the diaconate? After all, it is historically verified that women deacons existed. Thus, the argument of tradition is less strong than for priesthood. It would be a soft path. It was adopted by the world Conference for the ordination of women in Dublin in June 2001, which made the request. Weary, in September, a note from the Vatican appeared, recommending that the bishops put an end to formation programs that “directly or indirectly” would prepare women for ordination to the diaconate, characterizing the illegal practice as an attempt to create an “expectation that has no established doctrinal foundation” and as “a pastoral disturbance.” At the time, “Women and Men in Church” (FHE) responded somewhat impertinently by asking if it were really necessary to continue baptising women. Who is contributing to a “pastoral disturbance,” Rome or women?

It should be added that where women have accessed the diaconate, in the Anglican Church for example, the priesthood was open to them a few years later, and then the episcopacy. It’s a sign that the strategy works and that the Catholic Church might be justified in fearing it.

*The transgression:*

This is the strategy that we are witnessing at present. We need to give the word its full meaning: “to go beyond.” First of all, it is not crossing “a white line” to put ourselves

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<sup>3</sup> Do Church differently, an alternative world of alternative communities, Parvis, hors série n.13, 68 rue de Babylone 75007, 6 Euros.



deliberately in a state of infraction, but rather to create a new path, to open a passage where none exists. This is not a fisticuff operation, a “peremptory announcement” (Barbarin), an act of defiance or a provocation, all things that were said to disqualify the operation. What is important is not the disobedience of a law, but rather, the passing beyond an unjust law that deprives freedom. Also, it must be asked who is responsible for this transgression? The women were backed into a corner by constant blocks to a reasonable request, theologically and scripturally argued and in conformity with the customs of our countries. Each time that a path seemed possible, Rome closed it. What do you do when the task already effected is that of ordained ministry? What to do when the vocation that weighs upon us and that we have so long wanted to ignore, cries out for obedience, not to a law, but to the Spirit who unceasingly calls in diverse ways? Is it not better to obey God than men?

The mobilization of the media around the ordinations of women shows to what extent the topic possesses strong symbolic and political energy. To qualify them as acts without truth is premature. Unfurling excommunication shows the importance of this course and its threat to the system. A unique path, certainly not, but, perhaps, an irreversible one. The action of a few isolated women or a gathering, irrepressible wave? A strengthening of the clerical system or a red hot iron placed at the heart of the system through its sacred components? Only the future will tell us the results produced by these pioneers.

The official Church would do well to heed the words of Gamaliel in the Acts of the Apostles (5:35-39): “Men (of the Church), be careful what you do to these (women) [...] I tell you, do not take any action against these people. Leave them alone! If what they have planned and done is of human origin, it will disappear; but if it comes from God, you cannot possibly defeat them. You could find yourselves fighting against God!”

