

# WOMEN IN MINISTRIES

By VERONICA BRADY

SOME WOMEN will have difficulty with this topic. For them as for Simone de Beauvoir and more recently Julia Kristeva, 'woman' cannot and indeed should not be defined since the word is a social rather than a natural construct. As de Beauvoir puts it, one is not born but becomes a woman, becomes accustomed to being the other, inferior to 'man'—also a metaphor but a metaphor this time for one who has power—the 'Second Sex'. At the other end of the scale some traditional Catholics will be perhaps troubled by the term 'ministry'. It does not figure in *Sacramentum mundi*, (the encyclopedia of theology edited by Rahner, Ernst and Smyth) or in the index to the *Documents of the Second Vatican Council* which passes briskly from 'Millenarianism' to 'Miracles' without a mention of ministry. True, the *Documents* do have a heading 'ministers' but that merely directs us elsewhere: 'see Clergy; Priests etc.,' that is, to exclusively masculine and institutional territory. But what we are concerned with here is different. Ministry is a theological concept not just an institutional function. Moreover, it is a concept which is present if not in crisis at least in transition—as it was also in the time of Mary Ward. The fact that she managed to open up new possibilities even in the midst of crisis, and to do so both intelligently and lovingly, must inspire and give us hope today.

First of all to clarify what we are talking about. The meaning of the word 'ministry' is a matter of sociology as well as ecclesiology, of history as well as of grace. As it is used today, it involves the notion of service, the *diakonia* of the New Testament, but of service as a participation in the priesthood of Jesus, in his redemptive work in this world. Seen thus as the sign of the saving, caring, prophetic Jesus who is present still in his Church in history, ministry involves the service of others. The ecclesiology of Vatican II insists that teaching, nursing and caring for others' physical as well as their spiritual needs are all forms of ministry, and forms which belong to the whole people of God not just to the sacramental priesthood. But the origins of ministry do not lie in the mere impulse to 'do good'. The Church is not just an extension of the state's Department of Social Service. Ministry is nothing if it is not a response to a divine call—as Mary Ward understood. Her work, she said, 'was not undertaken through the persuasion of any man living . . . but totally and entirely (as far as human judgment

can arrive), ordained and commended to me by the express word of him who will not deceive, nor can be deceived'.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, however, it is this divine vocation which makes for the tensions we pointed to earlier, tensions between personal call and church order which Mary Ward experienced in the seventeenth century as we do today. In fact, of course, she spent some time imprisoned by church authorities and the work she was finally allowed by Rome to do was something less than her original vision of a wide-ranging ministry for women in the Church. As Grisar remarked, she failed because she wanted something for which the time had not yet come. But the tension between vocation and church order which troubled her remains even today.

Our second point is thus to look at the sources of this tension and to suggest that it derives from a kind of dualism, a separation of grace from nature, revelation from history. Yet the forms ministry takes in the Church are the results of historical and sociological forces. As Schillebeeckx points out,<sup>3</sup> for example, traditionalist views which link ministry more or less exclusively with the sacramental priesthood derive from the seventeenth century, from Bérulle whose views owe something at least to the monarchical and absolutist nature of his society. At the heart of his understanding of priesthood is the belief that Jesus is a priest not by reason of his human nature but of his divinity, a belief which leads to the conversion of ministry into 'a sacred ontological entity'.<sup>4</sup> If on the other hand Jesus's priesthood is based, as Newman would have it, on his humanity, then ministry receives a different meaning, one that is no less truly christian and sacramental. This is the view we shall be arguing here, though it would hardly be true to say it prevails entirely. Yet it is important to stress the fact that much of the opposition to it arises from the dualism we have already referred to according to which:

Whatever can be understood sociologically remains outside a kind of storm-free zone in which the community of Jesus Christ correctly experiences that ministry comes 'from above', is God's grace . . . Of course, this can be a justifiable protest against a sociological reduction of ministry, but there is also a theological reductionism that places the gracious character of ministry *next to and above* its socio-historical reality.<sup>5</sup>

The middle way is surely to recognize that, 'though it constantly surpasses its appearance, grace is to be found only *in* its historical and social forms—not behind or above them.'<sup>6</sup>

So it is that the Second Vatican Council's teaching reflects a return to the scriptural notion of the Church as the people of God on the one hand and on the other an awareness of 'the joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the man [and woman] of this age'. There may not be an entry for 'ministry' in the index of the council documents, but this notion of the Church does away with hard and fast distinctions between clergy and laity and stresses the priesthood of all believers. True, the sacramental priesthood is still seen as something different in essence and not only in degree from this common priesthood. Nevertheless they are interrelated. 'Each [form of priesthood] in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ'.<sup>7</sup> All are called to share in his ministry of prayer so that all have a part in the liturgy and share in Christ's prophetic office and spread abroad 'a living witness to him, by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise';<sup>8</sup> to share in his service to humanity especially to the poor, the needy and the oppressed. When one adds to that the Council's emphasis on the rights of women, one has a charter for the ministry of women in the Church very different from the way it was conceived in the past.

Theory is one thing, however, and practice another; history may be occasion of grace but it can also be its enemy. Centuries of discrimination against women cannot be overturned with a stroke of the pen, particularly when that discrimination carries the weight of alleged divine authority. As the sociologist Peter Berger observes, religion legitimates so effectively because it relates the precarious reality construction of empirical societies with ultimate reality.<sup>9</sup> From the time of St Augustine, if not earlier, it was said that woman was not created directly in God's image but was 'auxiliary and subject to man',<sup>10</sup> the source of evil and temptation, sensual, irrational and silly and thus 'naturally subject to man because in man the direction of reason predominates'.<sup>11</sup> As a result women were treated as subordinates in the Church, 'manipulated into a range of incompetence and a bevy of useless activities' (Jan Merceer), relegated to the domestic sphere. It is true that nuns, at least those involved in teaching, nursing and welfare, had some kind of public ministry, but in general it was strictly controlled by and subordinate to the clergy whose ministry was alone seen as truly legitimate; whatever authority the sisters might have was secondary and derivative.

Yet the gospel clearly condemns this kind of subordination and division. As St Paul tells the Galatians: 'there is no such thing as Jew or Greek, slave and free, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3, 28). So the Second Vatican

Council's Constitution on The Church in the Modern World calls for recognition of women's rights in every area of social and cultural life. Even in family life, it points out that the father also has responsibilities. True, the women's role remains crucial and 'must be safely preserved [but] . . . the legitimate social progress of women should not be underrated on that account'. Some might resent the patronizing tone, but the intention is clear and unequivocal, to honour the truth of the equality of all before God and to hear the call to honour this truth evident in women's struggles for justice. The resounding declaration of the *Conciliar message addressed to women* on 8 December, 1965 implies that this call has been heard. 'The Church is proud to have glorified and liberated women, to have brought into relief her basic equality with man'. But the problem remains. Woman is still treated as somehow different, other than man who is taken to be the norm.

This, indeed, is the main reason given for women's exclusion from the sacramental priesthood. Minimising the argument from scripture on the one hand and from the socio-cultural order on the other the *Declaration on the question of the admission of women to the sacramental priesthood* issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on 15 October, 1976 rests on the argument that since Jesus was a man the sacramental priesthood belongs exclusively to the male sex. It is not part of my brief to argue the case for the ordination of women. Indeed the notion of ministry for which I have been arguing bypasses the issue. Nevertheless it must be said that this kind of argument points to the continued predominance in the Church of patriarchal thought, of the paternalism which Pope John XXIII saw 'as a caricature of paternity [which] keeps people immature in order to maintain its own superior position' and which he linked with authoritarianism.<sup>11</sup>

The new Code of Canon Law also reflects this kind of thinking. True, there are one or two attempts at non-sexist language—canon 35, for instance, declares that 'within the limits of his *or her* competence, one who has administrative power, can issue a singular administrative act'—and wives are now granted equal rights with their husbands, and children and property and women religious are removed from the supervision of bishops or of Rome, imposed on them in the past for their 'protection'. Yet implicitly the Code endorses the old hierarchical model which sets the sacramental priesthood apart as its own special order. Women may sit as judges in ecclesiastical courts, and in exceptional cases where no priest is available may act as parish administrators or even as episcopal vicars. These exceptions, however, only serve to confirm the rule that, as far as present church order is concerned,

women remain second-class citizens.

In the light of the wider notions of ministry we have been arguing for, this may be providential. True, women as much as men need to be educated to these notions and encouraged to play their part in the Church's ministry. But there is widespread evidence that many people have become increasingly uneasy with the subordination involved in the older models of ministry. The 1976 *Enquiry into the status of women in the Church* conducted by the New Zealand World Council of Churches concluded, for example, that the 'overwhelming impression was that many women are not satisfied with the present caretaking and fund-raising roles they are expected to play'.<sup>12</sup> One of the submissions from which it quotes has this to say:

I belong, I am sure, to a large number of women who see the Church as blind in its usage of them . . . I would represent, I would think, a large number of church women . . . who feel that the Church has wasted their potential and who, increasingly, are finding other avenues of service which are more challenging than the Church offered or will offer them.<sup>13</sup>

In the Catholic Church, of course, the initiatives of Mary Ward and other valiant pioneers of women's ministry mean that women religious have had a part in the official ministries of teaching, nursing and welfare. But it is still probably true to say that until recently these works have been seen as somehow lesser and subordinate to the main work of the priesthood, and it must surely be seen as one of the disturbing signs of our time that so many women religious have left their orders, frustrated by the limited role assigned to them in their ministry and by the condescension of male clergy. This is not to say, of course, that their ministry ceases. By their baptism and their continuing fidelity to its grace they are incorporated into the priestly, prophetic and healing ministry of Jesus. But it is to say that the institutional Church is the poorer for this transfer of energy. Indeed, the failure to combine service in the Church with service of the wider community represents a failure to come to terms with one of the essential points made by Vatican II: that the Church has a saving mission to all human beings, must be the champion of authentic humanity and that the human person deserves to be preserved and human society to be renewed. In this view the pivotal point of God's revelation is the person, 'whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will', so that ministry involves work for the preservation of the person and renewal of society, as well as

the more formal spiritual ministries of prayer, catechesis and liturgy. Women as well as men have their part in this ministry—as they are showing especially in North and South America where nuns and laywomen are to be found amongst the foremost champions of the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed. Not that this is surprising; their own experiences have given them understanding of oppression. Similarly, the gender patterns our society tends to impose, that women are intuitive, emotional and bodily, whereas men are rational, have made women less apt for the docetism in which the Church seems to deny its own institutional flesh and blood and to devalue the world—and this brings us to what may be woman's most significant ministry in the Church, what we may call the ministry of truth.

While it remains that grace is to be found only in its social and institutional forms, not every social and institutional form is graced. There is always a tension between God and Caesar; Christendom is not always synonymous with Christianity, the standards of the gospel are not those of this world. This is perhaps particularly so in western society today where the contrast between the secular and the sacred, between the aggressiveness, materialism, the competitiveness of power and the gospel of Jesus has become extreme. So it is not surprising that the Church has retreated from the public realm into the sphere of domesticated virtue, focussing on questions to do with the family and personal morality. Religion has thus become 'feminised' and women predominate over men in religious practice.<sup>14</sup> The result, as Rosemary Reuther wisely observes, is that:

The institutionalized Church finds itself encapsulated in the same privatized sphere of domesticated virtue where it has traditionally sought to confine women. The clergy function primarily in the sphere of men and are out of place in the 'man's world' of power and business.<sup>15</sup>

Whether or not women are drawn to the Church because they see it as legitimizing behaviour they see in themselves, or whether the Church has withdrawn into 'the world of women' on account of its opposition of the secular ethic of masculine aggression and drive,<sup>16</sup> the fact remains that this intuitive and sympathetic 'feminine mode', with conflict resolving, emotionally healing and integrating functions, is an essential part of the Church's essential mission and never more needed than today. Yet to regard it as merely 'woman's work' and thus somehow second-rate is to miss the point. The division between masculine and feminine, like that

between sacred and profane, is false to the gospel which calls all people together in the Spirit of Jesus in the unity of the one Body.

The principles of christian community are founded upon a role transformation between men and women, rulers and ruled. The ministry of the Church is not to be modelled on hierarchies of lordship but on the *diakonia* of women and servants, while women are freed from exclusive identification with the service role or called to join the circle of disciples as equal members.<sup>17</sup>

Once this is accepted, ministry becomes a matter of God's grace and God's call and the institutional Church's task is to adjudicate and provide the means of fulfilling the call. As St Paul puts it:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor 12, 4-8).

The principles, then, are clear. All, women as well as men, are called to share in the many ministries which go to make up the one ministry of the Church, its service to God and its service to humanity. It was because she understood this that Mary Ward insisted that women were not mere second-class citizens in the Church but 'would [and could] do much'. Christianity, as Don Cupitt says, can fairly claim that it has always carried latent within it the principle of the equal moral dignity of the sexes. But to realise that claim 'a very considerable effort' will be needed to throw off the weight of misunderstanding, prejudice and sheer unfaithfulness to the gospel, the weight of the past. Yet it remains that a point of difficulty is often the growing point of God's revelation. 'The hermeneutical principle for the disclosure of reality is not the self-evident, but the scandal, the stumbling-block'. The question of woman and of her ministry in the Church may be such a stumbling block for us today. In the words of Adrienne Rich:

I am the living mind you fail to describe  
 In your dead language,  
 the lost noun, the verb surviving  
 only in the infinitive.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Grewing, M. Loyola: *The nature and the end of the Institute according to the will of its foundress*, unpublished typescript (Augsburg 1976).
- <sup>2</sup> Schillebeeckx, Edward: 'The changing meaning of ministry', *Cross Currents*, XXXIII, 4, Winter 1983-4, pp 432-54.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p 436.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p 433.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p 434.
- <sup>6</sup> Abbott, Walter, (ed): *The documents of Vatican II* (Guild Press, 1966), p 27.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.
- <sup>8</sup> Berger, Peter: *The social reality of religion* (Anchor Books, 1969), p 31.
- <sup>9</sup> Quoted by Nola Ker, 'Women and church structures' in Nicol, Christopher: *Women and the Church* (Religious Studies Department, Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, 1984), p 38.
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted by Tom Sutcliffe in a review of Peter Hebblethwaite: *John XXIII, pope of the Council*, in *The Guardian Weekly*, 4/1/84, p 22.
- <sup>11</sup> Quoted by Nola Ker, *op. cit.*, in Nicol, p 43.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> Marshall, Peter: 'The domestication of the Church', *St Mark's Review*, September 1984, No 119, p 13.
- <sup>14</sup> Quoted by Marshall, *op. cit.*, p 3.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Quoted by in Brian Grenier, 'Jesus and women', *St Mark's Review*, September 1984, No 119, p 17.
- <sup>17</sup> Schillebeeckx, Edward: *Christ, the christian experience in the modern world* (SCM Press, 1980), p 35.