

# THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

## CURRENT QUESTIONS

By JEAN BEYER

**T**HE QUESTION of the ministry of women has been under discussion in the Church for some time. In the reformed churches, as is well known, women exercise the functions of pastor. Some of these are ordained by the laying on of hands; others are deaconesses, but they, too, receive ordination in order to exercise this ministry. In the catholic Church, the priestly ministry has been reserved to men, ordained as bishops or priests. As a result, the wide range of the former hierarchical 'orders' has become associated more and more exclusively with the ministerial priesthood. For many people, discussion about the ministry of women comes down essentially to asking the question: Can women be priests, and if they can be priests, why not members of the catholic episcopate?

The problem, however, is wider than this; it concerns all the ministerial 'orders' in the Church. The question, then, is: can women be admitted to 'orders'? The fact of the matter is that today women fulfil the functions of acolyte: they serve Mass, distribute communion in church and carry it to the sick and elderly and so on. Furthermore, by the authority of the bishops, religious women have been appointed 'episcopal vicars' and have been entrusted with the mission of directing parishes. Others, in the absence of priests, preside over sunday worship; they preach, confer the sacrament of baptism, give viaticum to the dying etc. Religious and lay women are responsible for catechetics, on a national and diocesan level: they train catechists and teach the christian faith in schools. They are entrusted with the preparation of catechumens for baptism, of children and adults for confirmation and the eucharist, of christian couples for matrimony. In the modern Church, then, women take on many different tasks. They assume these works by mission, in virtue of 'being sent' by the bishop – or simply because such tasks belong to their own proper apostolate and are recognized

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as such in the official approval given to their various Institutes.

One or two further features which religious life has retained may be noted as bearing on the present question. Virgins and later, nuns (*moniales*), were consecrated by the 'imposition of hands'. The same ceremonial was practised in the blessing of abbots and abbesses. Certain rights of the carthusian nuns arising from their virginal consecration are still recognized today: the right to wear the deacon's insignia of dalmatic and stole, to sing the gospel at matins and mass wearing the stole. However, in the current liturgical reform, the Church has wished to avoid any rite for abbots and abbesses which could look like a duplicate of priestly, or above all episcopal, ordination. Similarly, in the case of nuns (*moniales*), any likeness to the diaconate has been avoided.

But this is not to deny that women *have* ministries to exercise in the Church. The Council has recognized that certain *ministries* belong to them: the resistance mounted by certain bishops to the use of that term in the decree on the renewal of religious life is well known. Nonetheless, the document speaks of 'educating the young, caring for the sick and other forms of apostolate' as the 'Church's pastoral ministry':<sup>1</sup> in other words, all works of evangelization or mercy approved by the Church. The new rite of profession of religious women also speaks of their 'ministries'. 'It is yours to discharge with fidelity the ministry (*ministerium*) confided to you by the Church, to be carried on in her name'.<sup>2</sup> It is clear therefore, that the Church accepts that there are *ministries* without liturgical ordination; even though she still considers even today that ordination alone introduces a christian into the 'order', that is, into the Church's hierarchy.

Here, it would seem, we touch the nerve of the problem. Must there be ordination, with the corresponding liturgical celebration, blessing or consecration, with or without the laying on of hands, in order that a christian may be called, and 'sent', to a *ministry* other than the sacramental priesthood? As is well known, religious, both brothers and sisters, who hold the office of General in large religious Institutes, certainly exercise, in view of their apostolic responsibility, an ecclesial authority, which theology has nevertheless declined to call 'jurisdiction'. This authority is spiritual and public; it is conferred by the competent authority, though whether this is by

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<sup>1</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis* 10.

<sup>2</sup> Cf *Ordo Professionis Religiosae* (Vatican Polyglot Press, 1970), pp 77, no 77.

simple delegation or by the transmission of an authentic jurisdiction remains undecided. It may well be a hierarchical authority which the Church hesitates to designate by its true name.

The true problem, however, resides in the problem of the priesthood. The priesthood is a sacrament; but is the same to be said of all sacred orders? If the diaconate is not a sacrament, is the laying on of hands by a bishop essential for receiving this ministry? In the eyes of the Church, however, the laying on of hands is a constitutive act which carries with it permanent spiritual effects. It confers a 'power', which from then on inheres in the person as such. The power of the priesthood, whether episcopal or priestly, received in ordination, is, of course, of this kind. What appears to have happened is that the sacramental priesthood has imperceptibly become the 'type' of all the hierarchical orders, to which women are not ordained and from which their ministries are excluded. It is here that the fundamental problem lies, perhaps indeed the fundamental error.

To clarify the problem of the ministry of women, certain theological questions still need to be examined. Is it necessary to include within the sacrament of order those orders which are not priestly? Must we recognize the diaconate as a sacramental order? Can we still maintain today that the minor orders are sacramental? Are these orders participations in the ministerial priesthood, in the sacrament of the priesthood?

These questions were not taken up by the Council, providentially, in my view. Just as the Council took no definitive stand on the distinction between bishop and presbyter in the one ministerial priesthood, neither did it wish to condemn the opinion of those who still maintain that the diaconate is not a sacramental order forming an integral part of the ministerial priesthood, instituted by Christ. On the other hand, the Council did not wish to confine ministries exclusively to ordained men.

In my own view, the question of the ministry of women is bound up historically with the development of orders in the Church, and with the process of clericalization whereby every category of ministry became absorbed into the episcopal and presbyteral priesthood. Indeed, it is as a result of this that the priesthood is now in danger, for there is a tendency to exaggerate the extent to which its exercise can be diversified. There is talk of 'non-cultic' priesthood, of priests who do not celebrate the eucharist, of the diaconal priesthood, of the priesthood of the word. On the level of theory,

the priesthood as finding expression in social service is distinguished from the cultic and liturgical priesthood, the latter notion being played down by those who advocate this new diversification within the ministerial priesthood of the Church.

The question of the ministry of women – even if we set aside priestly ordination – does nevertheless raise the question of ecclesiastical ministries. We shall probably come to see that Vatican II, like Vatican I, was restricted to too limited a field of vision to discuss the ministries of the Church in their unity. Are we ready now to re-open the question, prejudiced by neither male nor female chauvinism, and in the light of the whole of tradition? Are we really sure that every power in the Church, and every mission, is conferred by the laying on of hands? Or alternatively, should we take account of the long and constant tradition which has recognized in the ‘being sent’ the possibility of ecclesial structure which today we seem unwilling to acknowledge, except in the case of ordination? Yet what is an ordination (we are concerned, of course, with non-sacramental ordination) if it is not an ecclesial act, performed by the Church in a liturgical action? But a *mission* entrusted by word of mouth, by virtue of the word, without any other ritual – is this not also a liturgy?

Before embarking on so delicate a problem, it will be necessary to study the history of the Church, the development of ministries and the meaning of ‘orders’. We shall need to assess the facts and get away from a number of fixed ideas: that every ordination is sacramental and hierarchical, that the laying on of hands should be reserved to the conferring of orders, that every significant ecclesial act has a liturgical or ritual character, that the only decisions, the only oral expressions, of the apostolic mission are those with a juridical quality.

If we consider the actual life of the Church, it would seem that the ministries of women have always existed, even if they were not conferred by ordination or the laying on of hands. Several of these ministries have surpassed in importance the functions of the diaconal order hitherto conferred upon men by the imposition of hands. It is easy to understand why abbots and abbesses, endowed with an ecclesial authority corresponding to their real responsibilities in the Church, should have constituted a hierarchical order; and that men (who were also ordained priests) should have been allowed in virtue of this power to take part in ecumenical councils and to play in them the role to which history testifies. On the other hand,

questions might well be raised about the participation in such councils of titular bishops, in view of their number, age and retirement from apostolic responsibilities. Is participation based upon ordination alone really 'apostolic'?

It is undeniable that today, as yesterday, women exercise ministries in the Church. They do this without *ordination*. The question might well be asked whether ordination is necessary for the full exercise of these ministries. If not, given that the service is the same, it is hard to see why ordination is conferred on men and refused to women.

The question which remains is that of the ministerial priesthood, received by sacramental ordination, and so far reserved traditionally to men. The merits of this position, and of the arguments on which it is based, are currently under examination by theologians. We need to await not only their findings, but the Church's declaration of her mind. For one day, through her *magisterium*, she will have to pronounce on the question in the light of a renewed vision of ecclesial ministries.

### *Postscript*

The above article was already prepared for press when the *Motu Proprio* on the Diaconate and on 'Minor Orders' was published. It is clear that these two documents are of crucial importance to any consideration of the ministry of women in the Church today.

In these apostolic letters, Paul VI is concerned with the further implementation of the conciliar decrees by introducing the reform of the liturgy of ordinations. He has suppressed the subdiaconate, the orders of exorcist and doorkeeper, and also the clerical tonsure.

Most important of all is his decision to limit the clerical state to the episcopacy, the presbyterate and the diaconate;<sup>3</sup> and a clear distinction is now made between the transitional diaconate – for those who are candidates for the priesthood, and the permanent diaconate – for those who are called simply to this form of ministry.

A further innovation, and one with far-reaching consequences, is the distinction between *ordination*, the rite of conferring the priest-

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<sup>3</sup> It is to be noted that in these two documents the holy Father steers clear of current theological controversy concerning the relationship between the priesthood and the episcopacy, whether or not the episcopacy is simply the 'completion' of the priesthood. Similarly he follows Vatican II in avoiding any statement which might indicate that the diaconate is a 'sacramental' order.

hood and the diaconate, and *institution*,<sup>4</sup> the rite of promotion to certain ministries which the Church considers as forms of ecclesial service (*diaconia*).

By suppressing minor orders, Paul VI has constituted certain ministries as belonging to the lay state (*ordo laicorum*) as opposed to the hierarchical state (*ordo hierarchicus*). These ministries are those of acolyte and of reader. The new rites for conferring these ministries will be published in the near future. These documents also speak of the ministry of the psalmist as distinct from that of lector. Other ministries mentioned are those of catechizing and works of charity.

In these apostolic letters, Paul VI follows the traditional line taken by the second Vatican Council: he therefore reserves these reformed ministries to men. It is not true, however (as certain newspapers have alleged), that he has suppressed the apostolic tasks or ministries already confided to religious and other women in the Church.

Many people had expressed the wish that minor orders be suppressed; and these documents do just that. At the same time, by reserving the offices of reader and acolyte to men only, the holy Father has left the question open concerning the vocation of women to various ministries. The initiative here is in the hands of the episcopal conference.<sup>5</sup> They can introduce rites of institution for old and new forms of ministry, permanent or temporary, which can be reserved to men only or conferred on women. The way lies open

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to understand the precise meaning and use of the word *institutio* in the context. The document says: 'It is more in accord with the true nature of ecclesial service and also with the modern mentality that the ministries mentioned above [Door-keeper, Exorcist, Lector, Acolyte] should no longer be designated "minor orders"; and that the conferral of these ministries should be called "institution" and not "ordination". Only those who have received the diaconate are truly clerics and should be considered so. This emphasizes the difference between clerics and lay-people, and between the functions which are proper to clerics and are to be reserved to them alone and those which can be entrusted to the laity - Christ's faithful'. There appears to be no English word which can properly render the Latin *institutio* (the word 'installation' used in the published English translation of the documents is misleading). *Institutio* is the delineation and the transmission of a ministry which encompasses the adequate power to exercise it and the responsibility for exercising it. Such an 'institutio' is necessarily accompanied by the public prayer of the Church - the ecclesial community, though not by a liturgical rite. *Litterae Apostolicae 'Ministeria quaedam', Motu Proprio datae quibus disciplina circa primam tonsuram, ordines minores et subdiaconatum in Ecclesia Latina innovatur* (Rome, Vatican Polyglot Press, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> 'In addition to the official ministries already obtaining in the Latin Church, it is within the competence of episcopal conferences to request the Holy See for the institution of others in their own particular region if they judge these to be necessary or highly beneficial for special reasons'. *Ministeria quaedam, loc. cit.*

for a progressive development in this field.

It may be that the future tendency will be not to ritualize the 'sending' on ecclesial mission; and to give, for all forms of diaconal service, an 'institution for mission' without an accompanying liturgical rite. In this way, those who are called to ministry would be sent by the bishop without being 'ordained' or 'instituted' by a liturgical rite or blessing. This solution, in the context of the new code of canon law, would be in accord with the principle of equality between men and women with regard to ecclesial ministries. It would simply affirm what is already done by way of indult or by the official approbation given to Institutes of consecrated life. It would remove all possible ambiguity between 'ordination' and 'institution', between sacrament and mission.

*Extract from the synodal intervention of his Excellency Samuel E. Carter S.J., Archbishop of Kingston, Jamaica.*

Half – as a matter of fact a little more than half – of the human race and of the Church are women, and in the Church they are excluded from orders. There may still be valid cultural reasons for this exclusion, though I am not sure that these cultural reasons would be valid in all regions of the world. There do not seem to be any conclusive theological arguments for this exclusion. If I know the mentality of the people of my own country, it seems to me that in Jamaica some of our people might be more willing to accept the notion of religious women exercising the priestly ministry than they would be to accept married priests. At any rate, I believe that a serious re-assessment of this matter – the role of women as deaconesses, and as co-operators in pastoral work – should be made in the not too distant future.