

# CONSECRATION AND MINISTRY OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

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THE CONSIDERATIONS I want to develop in this article are drawn from life. They arise from personal reflection, in the light of the faith, on my own experience as a woman in the Church.

For this reason, I do not intend to enter the field of current theological research or to examine its principles or presuppositions. It is well known that in theology slow and steady progress is being made towards a 'consensus' more favourable to women in general and, in particular, more sympathetic towards a possible ministry of women in the Church. On the other hand, alongside such developments, controversy still goes on: sparked off either by fear of novelty or by deep-rooted misgivings about the christian equality of women with respect to the sacraments and a more active collaboration in the responsible development of the ecclesial community. In setting forth my own experience, however, I make no claim to be speaking as a theologian.

Furthermore, I am not concerned to defend or demand specific new 'concessions' in the Church's discipline with regard to women. My purpose is simply to share the experience of a consecrated christian woman, with those members of the ecclesial community who have given little thought to what it means to be a person in the Church who is subject to very real discrimination simply because she is a woman. From this sharing, of course, certain pastoral implications may well emerge.

## *A changing status in society*

Women have long been accustomed to a silent role in the Church, imposed in the name of an apostolic tradition which has become an immutable and virtually sacred law in the eyes of the men in the

Church. It is for women to receive instructions, and in general to accept what has been planned, decided and acted upon by men. All that is expected of them is unconditional collaboration and a sense of dependence.

For many centuries, the whole social 'status' of women has been modelled on this passive conception of their rôle. Today it seems clear that this conception is breaking up, though the process is complicated by wide cultural differences and by the vagaries inherent in any process of change. With every day that passes, women become more responsible and active in the spheres of family and social life. They plan their motherhood, they make joint decisions with their husbands on the education of their children and their own work; they form wider and more open relationships than the past would have considered fitting. Our age has seen the rise of the responsible professional woman and of women in public life, deeply involved in the onward march of society. Woman's advancement is a fact; and one of its elements is her *active and co-responsible participation* with men throughout the whole sphere of social life.

*And in the Church . . .*

Meanwhile what has been the position of woman in the Church? And more specifically of the woman religious? Here the rate of change, to say the least, is far from having kept pace with society at large. Both spiritually and juridically the life of the consecrated woman has been controlled by men. Men have been responsible for her ultimate direction. They have taken the decisions; they have reserved the right to approve or prohibit in serious and sometimes even trivial matters (such as the sort of clothes religious will wear). For too long men have endorsed – though I believe, unwillingly – the setting of limits to the cultural and theological formation of religious women. As a result, many of these religious find themselves today in a position of only marginal significance either to society or to the Church. They lack both the capacity and the culture to make decisions about their own lives or their own forms of apostolic activity. It is worth noticing that a certain view of religious asceticism has greatly re-inforced this passivity by raising it to the level of a virtue.

There is no need to enumerate in detail the historical consequences of the position of women religious. It is obvious that this position is rooted in women's dependence on and inferiority to men, and in the non-acceptance of the woman as a *person*. Neither of these

situations, I believe, corresponds to God's plan. On the contrary, they impoverish the potential contribution of the consecrated woman to the life of the Church.

Will the Church retain its traditional anti-feminism, or will it prove capable, in its *actions* as well as its words, of a more faithful proclamation of the nature of the Creator's work? God made us 'man and woman'. The sexes are complementary, and a more balanced proportion between the two would bring enrichment to the Church's life. One thing is certain: the foundations of change have been laid. When the Spirit inspired a renewal in the life and structures of the Church, a new hope dawned for women. On the morning that the second Vatican Council finished its work, it sent a message to the women of the world. In this message there was much praise of woman. The highest value was set upon her qualities and the tasks that fall to her. Emphasis was laid upon her mission in the world, which looks to women to prevent humanity from destroying itself. In short, it signalled the dawn of a new era for woman. 'The time has come when woman's vocation will be amply fulfilled, when she is acquiring in the world an ever-increasing influence, importance and power'.<sup>1</sup>

Yet as a consecrated woman I found one thing to grieve me profoundly: the tasks referred to were all in the *world*, a matter of remedying the evils of society. What about the Church? It is true that the Church is the leaven of the kingdom, a sign of salvation *in* the world and to be met in the world. But that message might have provided a unique opportunity for announcing a change of attitude *within the Church* comparable to the change in society at large. We were given no such news. Our dignity as women of the Church, our equality with men were indeed defended, and we were said to be 'liberated'. But 'liberation' gets stuck all too frequently at the level of principle. Theory and practice in the Church are different things.

Since the second Vatican Council the wind of the Spirit has been blowing through the Church, and its stirrings have been strongly felt in the communities of women religious. The advancement of women in our society has not stopped short at the convent walls. In fact, women religious are playing an active role in that advance. And under the prompting of the Spirit they have brought fresh thinking to bear on the human as well as the evangelical meaning

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<sup>1</sup> *Council Messages to Humanity*: 'To Women'. Cf *The Documents of Vatican II* (ed Abbot, London, 1966), pp 732-4.

of their own lives. One result is that they have become conscious of the sometimes de-humanizing effects produced by an institutional life-pattern devised for them by men. Taking stock of their lives in the light of the gospel, they have come to see, too, that to surrender themselves to Christ and to their brothers does not require the sacrifice of their adult and responsible womanhood. They are coming to realize, indeed, that they can only live this surrender validly if they remain faithful to themselves as persons. The femininity that God has given them has its function within the Church. Hence the search, going on in every quarter of feminine religious life, towards more appropriate and personal approaches to the evangelical counsels, personal relationships, and apostolic activity. It is noticeable, too, that they are adopting a more fraternal, and hence more christian, attitude towards authority, which they see in terms of service and sacrifice, as existing for the greater unity of the members of the group. We religious are working out entirely new ways of living our commitment and meeting the urgent needs of the people of today. And the new directions are more in line with the gospel and at the same time more suited to adult women than were the attitudes and structures that governed our lives in the past.

Given that this renewal is inspired by the Spirit, rooted in the very nature of woman and patterned on the Church's guidelines for the renewal of religious life, there is every reason to believe that it will result in a new image of the consecrated woman, far removed from that of the nun of bygone days. Equally, there can be little doubt that this image will represent the authentic woman, mature both in her faith and in meeting the obligations of her evangelical life.

It is true, of course, that the rhythm of this renewal is extremely uneven. But one feature of it is remarkably consistent: the process of adaptation runs into greater difficulties (at times even becoming virtually impossible) in congregations where the 'fathers' of the religious family have continued to exercise their old patriarchal ascendancy. In many cases, misgivings about her aptitude for new forms of life and activity have been positively encouraged in the consecrated woman by a certain type of man in the Church. Where she is free of such conditioning, however, the consecrated woman today shows a marked flair for grasping reality and for finding the right means of responding to it. In her new circumstances, she may indeed look for the advice and support of men in helping her to discern the spirits and to make her choices. But increasingly she

will seek this help in the spirit of genuine brotherhood. Only then will mature relationships, founded on the complementarity of the sexes, foster in her a growing surrender to the Lord which involves no de-personalization of herself.

*Some questions*

These developments raise several questions which, for the moment, we religious must live with. Will the Church accept a development of feminine religious life marked by increased activity and responsibility on the part of women within their own particular style of consecrated life? Will it accept the participation of women at the top level of ecclesiastical government in all matters concerning feminine consecrated life? Will it accept that the reasons lying behind the choice of the active or contemplative religious life are the same for women as they have always been for men (though women may have different ideas about the cloister, the rule of life, activities etc.)? Will it acknowledge the immense apostolic and missionary potential of consecrated women in the whole sphere of ecclesial life? Or will it continue to rest content with rather trivial concessions like the introduction of 'auxiliary deaconesses'? What are the chances for the consecrated woman of being promoted from 'auxiliary' pastoral tasks to those which involve a true collaboration and co-responsibility?

But behind these questions there lies a more fundamental one. It is rare to find in today's world an institution comprising both men and women members that is governed and directed exclusively by men. The Church, however, is such an institution. Will she remain such? The question has enormous implications for the whole future of women in the Church, and it is crucial to a consideration of the future ministry of women. While this state of affairs endures, women will find it difficult to advance from the position they have traditionally held in the life of the believing community. The obstacles placed before them are not so much to do with Revelation: their true nature, I suspect, is more likely to be illuminated by the revelations of the modern human sciences. Psychologists and sociologists would certainly have much to tell us about the image of woman commonly held by the Church's men. They would have no difficulty in identifying the characteristic defences of a strongly masculine society in the Church's reaction to the onward march of women in the secular world. To press the point further, to what extent are reasons ostensibly grounded in the divine Will (for ex-

ample, Christ's personal choice of apostles) really rationalizations, enabling men to conceal from themselves those deeply discriminatory attitudes all too obvious to feminine intuition? At any rate, it is easier to find psychological rather than christian explanations of an attitude which relegates women to a second-class status in the Church, even where its sacramental ministry is concerned.

Will there ever come a day when ecclesiastical authority, made by and for men up to our twentieth century, will come to reflect in its practice the saving plan of Christ, that *in him we all may be one*? Since their experience even today is hardly encouraging, it is small wonder if women generally, and perhaps consecrated women most of all, have doubts about the prospects of change. But one thing at least seems clear. The ordinary processes of development and maturing will not alone bring the Church to the full implications of this oneness in Christ. There is a quite specific price to be paid: the acceptance on the part of the Church's men to share with women, on a basis of greater equality, the direction, tasks and responsibilities of the people of God. Without such a change of heart, women must continue to be the Church's fringe people.

*The christian woman: a paradox*

In the light of what has been said, it will be clear that the experience of the christian woman and the consecrated religious is the experience of living a paradox. The greater her dedication, as a mature christian and human being, to the Church and to the human community, the keener this sense of paradox becomes.

Let me try to develop what I mean. As a christian, every woman knows, defends and announces the central christian value of brotherhood. It is her divine mission to proclaim the fundamental equality of all human persons, despite distinctions of race, sex, social class or indeed divisions of any kind. 'All baptized in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ, and there are no more distinctions between jew and greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus'.<sup>2</sup>

Yet while she believes in this truth as a basic principle of the christian faith, her daily life is a continual experience of discrimination. She is never allowed to forget that, as far as the Church's discipline and legislation are concerned, her potential, rights and duties as a woman of the Church are limited.

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<sup>2</sup> Gal. 3, 28.

In saying this, I am not referring to the past when prejudice against women arose from the entire social context of the age. I am concerned with the post-conciliar Church. The point may be illustrated – to cite one example among many – by the latest norms concerning the possibility of the laity reading the ‘word’ in the celebration of the Eucharist. The text itself, with its carefully detailed instructions in the event of a woman performing this service, is disquieting enough. And there are no grounds for reassurance in the interpretations and further declarations at different levels of the Church which followed its publication.

An instruction of this type, revealing – it seems to me – a disregard of the equality of all who are in Christ, is offensive to the sensitivity of any woman. It appears particularly absurd and inappropriate to a woman who has been specially consecrated to live the ‘fervour of charity and the perfection of the worship of God’.<sup>3</sup> The truth is that the more a woman advances in society, as a human person possessing full human rights, the more she becomes aware that the ecclesial community fails to provide her with the scope to be herself. In that community she must still accept to live on the fringes and to play a passive role. Even before the Eucharist she is made to feel like a second-class christian. The question of the woman’s status as a reader is of course wholly trivial, and by citing it above I would not wish to imply that liturgical participation on that very modest level would suffice to meet her aspirations. Every day there are increasing numbers of women with suitable theological, liturgical and pastoral training who could preside over this celebration with dignity. When a woman, consecrated by her vocation to the Church and qualified to preside over the celebration competently, is obliged to assist at a Eucharist *badly* celebrated by a priest, the thought that she must endure this state of affairs simply because she has been born a woman has an absurdity about it which strikes at the very depths of her being.

*Is it utopian to expect a change of heart?*

I am in full agreement with the contention of Valentine Boisserel’s study, ‘Woman and the future of the Church’, that the doctrinal motives which in the past have served to justify the Church’s ambivalent attitude towards women can scarcely be maintained in the more open cultural climate of today. Certainly these motives

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<sup>3</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

have been many and various, but they are born ultimately 'of an innate mistrust of woman – symbol of an ever-possible seduction'. It is hardly possible to exaggerate the influence which this age-old image of Eve has exercised on clerical behaviour towards women.

Today, many of the traditional conceptions of woman have been rendered obsolete by advances both in biblical exegesis and in the human sciences such as biology, anthropology and psychology. Accordingly, the thought-categories which have served to maintain these conceptions must be revised. An authentic understanding of woman's nature must be rooted in her status as man's companion, sharing responsibility with him in all the works of creation.<sup>4</sup> The estimation accorded her in the Church must correspond to her steadfast witness in the gospels to the resurrection of the Lord, to the Good News as it was brought to her brothers, the apostles, in the ecclesial community.<sup>5</sup>

Since these reflections have been concerned largely with facts and feelings, I should like to conclude by registering a conviction and a hope. I believe that by his words and his works Christ inaugurated a 'new situation for woman'. But I also believe that the affective growth of this evangelical shoot into a living reality in the life of the Church requires a conversion on the part of the Church, that far-reaching process which begins from the moment we admit an idea, and is complete only when we have pledged ourselves to a way of life in which that idea is incarnated. I also believe that even for those who are open to the Spirit and aware of the basic truth of the human person in the gospel, powerful and emotionally-charged precedents still make it difficult to break away from the traditional notion of woman's incapacity to fulfil a public role within the Church. And this gives rise to questions, which are also hopes. Will the men of our Church be capable of realizing that the principles underlying these precedents are more pagan than christian? Will they be generous enough to share with women what they have so far kept to themselves as the sole bearers of the divine gifts? Ultimately, the future of the consecrated woman and of the woman's ministry in the Church hinges upon the answers to those questions.

The 'signs of the times' proclaim the advent of the 'new woman' in every aspect of the life of society. May the Spirit inspire the Church to listen to this 'word' spoken by history, so that a place may be found for a 'new woman' in its own life.

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<sup>4</sup> Gen 1, 26–31.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Mt 28, 1 ff.