

## PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION REPORT

### Can Women Be Priests?

#### PART I

#### WOMAN'S PLACE IN THE FAMILY

##### (1) "In the Beginning."

In Genesis, the "beginning" serves less to present the beginning of history than the fundamental plan of God for mankind. In Genesis 1, man and woman are called together to be the image of God (Gen. 1, 26f ) on equal terms and in a community of life. It is in common that they receive rule over the world. Their vocation gives a new meaning to the sexuality that man possesses as the animals do.

In Gen. 2, man and woman are placed on equal terms: woman is for man a "helper who is his partner" (2, 18), and by community in love they become "the two of them one body" (2, 24). This union includes the vocation of the couple to fruitfulness but it is not reduced to that.

Between this ideal and the historical reality of the human race, sin has introduced a considerable gap. The couple's existence is wounded in its very foundations: love is degraded by covetousness and domination (3, 16). The woman endures pains in her condition as mother which nevertheless put her closely in contact with the mystery of life. The social degradation of her condition is also related to this wound, manifested by polygamy (cf. Gen. 4), divorce, slavery, etc. She is nevertheless the depository of a promise of salvation made to her descendants.

It is noteworthy that the ideal of Gen. 1 and 2 remained present in the thought of Israel like a horizon of hope: it is found again explicitly in the book of Tobias.

##### (2) The Symbolism of the Sexes in the Old Testament

The Old Testament excluded the sexual symbolism used in Eastern mythologies, in relation to the fertility cults: there is no sexuality in the God of Israel. But very early, the biblical tradition borrowed traits from the family structure to trace pictures of God the Father. Then also it had recourse to the image of the spouse to work out a very lofty concept of the God of the covenant.

In correlation with these two fundamental images, the prophets gave value to the dignity of women by representing the people of God with the help of feminine symbols of the wife (in relation to God) and of the mother (in relation to the human partners of the covenant, men and women). These symbols were used particularly to evoke in advance the eschatological covenant in which God is to realize his plan in its fullness.

##### (3) The Teachings of Jesus

Considering the social and cultural milieu in which Jesus lived, his teaching and behavior with regard to women are striking in their newness. We leave aside here his

behaviour (cf. the following reports). Questioned about divorce by the Pharisees (Mk. 10, 1-12), Jesus moves away from the rabbinic casuistry that, on the basis of Deut. 24, 1, discriminated between the respective rights of men and women.

Reminding the Pharisees of the original plan of God (Gen. 1, 27 and 2, 24), he shows his intention of establishing here below a state of things that realises the plan fully: the reign of God, inaugurated by his preaching and his presence, brings with it a full restoration of feminine dignity. But it brings also a surpassing of the ancient juridical structures in which repudiation showed the failure of marriage "by reason of the hardness of hearts." It is in this perspective that the practice of celibacy "for the sake of the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19, 12), for himself and for those "to whom it is given" (19, 11) is understood. His attitude toward women should be examined from that point of departure.

Thus Jesus inaugurates in the framework of the present world the order of things that constitutes the final horizon of the kingdom of God: that order will result, in "a new heaven and a new earth," in a state in which the risen will no longer need to exercise their sexuality (Matt. 21, 31). Consequently, to represent the joy of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus can properly use the image of the virgins called to the wedding feast of the bridegroom (Matt. 25, 1-10).

#### **(4) From the Mother of Jesus to the Church**

Considering the historical existence of Jesus, son of God sent into the world (Gal. 4, 4 etc.), one might take a look at his beginnings.

The evangelists, Matthew and especially Luke, have made clear the irreplaceable role of his mother Mary. The value proper to femininity that the Old Testament presented are recapitulated in her, so that she accomplishes her unique role in the plan of God. But in the very accomplishment of this maternal role, she anticipates the reality of the new covenant of which her son will be the mediator. In fact she is the first one called to a faith that concerns her son (Luke 1, 42) and to an obedience in which she "listens to the word of God and puts it into practice" (Luke 11, 28, cf. 1, 38).

Moreover, the Spirit who brings about in her the conception of Jesus (Luke 1, 35, Matt. 1, 18) will make a new people spring up in history on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Her historic role is therefore linked to a resumption of the feminine symbolism used to evoke the new people: from then on, the church is "our mother" (Gal. 4, 20). At the end of time, it will be the "spouse of the Lamb" (Apoc. 21). It is by reason of this relationship between Mary, concrete woman, and the church, symbolic woman, that in Apoc.12 the new humanity rescued from the power of sin and death can be presented as giving birth to Christ, her first born (Apoc.12, 4-15), expecting to have as posterity "those who keep the word of God and have the testimony of Jesus."

#### **(5) Woman in the Church**

Nuptial symbolism is specifically taken up again by St. Paul to evoke the mystery of Christ and his church (Eph. 5, 22-33). But it is first of all the relationship between Christ

and the church, his body, which casts light on the reality forming the basis for Paul's approach.

Despite an institutional framework which implies the submission of women to their husbands (cf. Eph. 5, 22; Col. 3, 18; 1Pt. 3, 1), Paul reverses the perspective to emphasise their mutual submission (Eph. 5, 21) and love (5, 25.33) for which Christ's love is the source and model: charity (cf. 1Cor. 13) becomes the measure of conjugal love. It is through it that the "original perfection" (that is to say the fullness of the plan of God for the human couple) can be attained (cf. Eph. 5, 31 citing Gen. 2, 24). That supposes between man and woman not only an equality of rights and duties explicitly affirmed (1Cor. 7, 3-4), but also an equality in adoptive sonship (Gal. 3, 28, 2Cor. 6, 18) and in the reception of the Spirit who brings about participation in the life of the church (cf. Acts 2, 17-18).

Marriage, having thus received its full meaning, thanks to its symbolic relationship with the mystery of Christ and the church (Eph. 5, 32), can regain also its indissoluble solidity (1 Cor. 7, 10-12; cf. Luke 16, 18).

At the heart of a sinful world, maternity has a saving value (1 Tim. 2, 15). Outside conjugal life, the church grants a place of honour to consecrated widowhood (1Tim. 5, 3) and it recognises in virginity the possible meaning of eschatological witness (1Cor 7, 25-26) and of a more complete freedom to consecrate oneself to "the business of the Lord" (1 Cor. 7, 32ff.). Such is the background against which theological reflection on the place and function of women in society and in the church takes place.

## **PART II**

### **THE SOCIAL CONDITION OF WOMAN ACCORDING TO BIBLICAL REVELATION**

**I.** The Bible, especially the New Testament, teaches very clearly the equality of man and woman in the spiritual domain (relationships with God) and in the moral area (relationships with other human beings). But the problem of the social condition of woman is a sociological problem that must be treated as such:

1. In terms of the laws of sociology: physical and psychosomatic data of feminine behavior in an earthly society;
2. In terms of the history of the societies in which the people of God lived during and after the composition of the Bible;
3. In terms of the laws of the church of Christ, his body, whose members live an ecclesial life under the direction of a magisterium instituted by Christ, while belonging to other societies and states.

**II.** The biblical experience shows that the social condition of woman has varied, but not in a linear manner as if there were continual progress. Ancient Egypt experienced a real flourishing of woman before the existence of Israel. The Israelite woman experienced a certain flourishing under the monarchy, then her condition became subordinate once more. In the time of Christ the status of woman appears, in Jewish society, inferior to

what it is in GrecoRoman society where their lack of legal status is in the process of disappearing and in which “women handle their business themselves” (Gaius).

In relation to his contemporaries, Christ has a very original attitude with regard to woman which gives renewed value to her situation.

**III.** Christian society is established on a basis other than that of Jewish society. It is founded on the cornerstone of the risen Christ and is built upon Peter in collegiality with the twelve. According to the witness of the New Testament, especially the Pauline epistles, women are associated with the different charismatic ministries (diaconies) of the church (1Cor. 12, 4; 1Tim. 3, 11, cf. 8): prophecy, service, probably even apostolate . . . without, nevertheless, being of the twelve. They have a place in the liturgy at least as prophetesses (1Cor. 11, 4). But according to the Pauline corpus (1Cor. 14, 33-35; cf. 1Tim. 2, 6-15) an apostle such as Paul can withdraw the word from them.

This Christian society lives not only on the government of the twelve who are called apostles in Luke and elsewhere in the New Testament, but also on the liturgical sacramental life in which Christ communicates his spirit as high priest no longer according to Aaron but according to Melchisedech, king and priest (Heb. 8; cf. Ps. 110).

Sociologically speaking, in Jewish society, therefore for Christians until the break, the consecrated priesthood of Aaron (Lev. 9) assured an authentic liturgical and sacrificial life in the temple of stone. But Christ is the true high priest and the true temple (John 2, 21). He was consecrated and sent (hagiazein, apostellein) by the Father (Jn. 10, 26), and he consecrates himself in order to consecrate the apostles in the truth that he himself is (Jn. 17, 17.19). It is a fundamental characteristic of the society that is the church in the midst of other societies, that it dispenses eternal life through its own liturgy.

**IV.** The problem is to know whether in Christian society ruled by the apostles - the twelve, Paul, Titus, Timothy - and by their successors (bishops, presbyters, higoumenes) women can be called to participate in this liturgical ministry and in the direction of local communities, as the queens of the Old Testament, especially widows, were called to participate in the royal functions of anointed kings. In fact in the New Testament no text formally supports this hypothesis, even though one may note the role of widows in the pastoral epistles (1Tim. 5) and what Luke says of Anna in the Temple (latreuein). This study is no longer a matter of sociology, but of the labours of our third section (condition of woman in cult).

## **PART III**

### **ECCLESIAL CONDITION OF WOMAN**

#### **Old Testament**

In the Old Testament, the Yahwist religion was not reserved to men alone, as is said elsewhere. Women as well as men could have sacrifices offered, participate in worship. Nevertheless, contrary to the customs of the contemporary pagan peoples, the worship

of the second temple was exclusively reserved to men of the tribe of Levi (not only the function of priests, but also that of cantor, potter, etc.).

Moreover, there are women who bore the name of prophetess (Maria, Deborah, Hulda, Noiada), while not playing the role of the great prophets. Other women exercised an important function for the salvation of the people of God at critical moments of this people's history (for example, Judith, Esther) (cf. section 2).

(Amendment of Father Wambacq:) "In the Old Testament, the Yahwist religion was not a religion in which women were excluded, as is sometimes held. Women as well as men could participate in worship. Contrary to the usages of the contemporary pagan peoples, the official exercise of the temple worship was reserved to men, in the second temple to those of the tribe of Levi."

## **THE GOSPELS**

In striking contrast to the contemporary usages of the Jewish world, we see Jesus surrounding himself with women who follow him and serve him (Luke 8, 2-3). Mary of Bethany is even described as the exemplary disciple "listening to the word" (Luke 10, 38-42). It is the women who are charged with announcing the resurrection "to the apostles and to Peter." (Mark 16, 7).

The fourth gospel stresses this role of witness attributed to women: the Samaritan woman, whose mere conversation with Jesus had astonished the apostles, goes carrying her witness to Jesus to her fellow citizens. After the resurrection, the evangelist emphasises the role of Mary Magdalene whom tradition will call "the apostle of the apostles."

## **ACTS AND PAUL**

As Christianity spread, women took a notable part. That again distinguished the new religion sharply from contemporary Judaism.

Some women collaborated in the properly apostolic work. This is shown at numerous points in the Acts and the epistles. We shall limit ourselves to a few of them.

In the establishment of local communities, they are not content with offering their houses for meetings, as Lydia (Acts 16, 14-15), the mother of Mark (Acts 12, 12), Prisca (Rom. 16, 5), but, according to Phil. 4, 2, for example, Evodia and Syntyche are explicitly associated with "Clement and the other collaborators of Paul" in the community. Of the 27 persons thanked or greeted by Paul in the last chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, nine or perhaps 10 are women. In the case of several of them, Paul insists on specifying that they have tired themselves for the community, using a Greek verb (*kopian*) most often used for the work of evangelisation properly so called.

The case of Prisca and her husband Aquila whom Paul calls "his collaborators in Christ" and of whom he says that "to them are indebted not only himself but all the churches of the Gentiles" (Rom. 16, 3-4), shows us concretely an example of this "collaboration": their role in the story of Appollo is well known (Acts 18, 24-28).

Paul mentions explicitly a woman as "deacon" (diaconos) of the church of Cenchrees, who "was also," he says, "for many Christians and for himself a protectress" (Rom. 16, 1-2). In the pastoral epistles, the women indicated after the bishops and the deacons probably had a status of diaconos (1 Tim. 3, 11). Also notable is the case of Junias or Junio, placed in the rank of the apostles (Rom. 16, 7), with regard to whom one or another raises the question of whether it is a man.

## **PART IV**

### **REPLY TO THE QUESTION ABOUT THE EVENTUAL ORDINATION OF WOMEN TO THE PRIESTHOOD**

#### **(1) The Ministry of Leadership According to Jesus and the Apostolic Church**

In establishing the kingdom of God, Jesus, during his ministry, chose a group of 12 men who, after the fashion of the 12 patriarchs of the Old Testament, would be the leaders of the renewed people of God (Mk. 3:14-19); these men whom he destined to "sit upon twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Mt. 19:28) were first sent to "proclaim that the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 10:7).

After his death and resurrection, Christ confided to his apostles the mission of evangelising all nations (Mt. 28:19, Mk 16:5). These men would become his witnesses, beginning at Jerusalem and reaching to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8, Lk. 24:47). "As my Father sent me," he told them, "I also send you" (Jn. 20:21).

Upon leaving the earth to return to his Father, he also delegated to a group of men whom he had chosen the responsibility to develop the kingdom of God and the authority to govern the church. The apostolic group thus established by the Lord appeared thus, by the testimony of the New Testament, as the basis of a community which has continued the work of Christ, charged to communicate to humanity the fruits of his salvation.

As a matter of fact, we see in the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles that the first communities were always directed by men exercising the apostolic power.

The Acts of the Apostles show that the first Christian community of Jerusalem knew only one ministry of leadership, which was that of the apostles: this was the urministerium from which all the others derived. It seems that, very early, the Greek community received its own structure, presided over by the college of seven (Acts 6:5). A little later there was a question for the Jewish group about a college of presbyters (ibid. 11:30). The church at Antioch was presided over by a group of "five prophets and teachers" (ibid. 13:1). At the end of their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas installed presbyters in the newly founded churches (ibid. 14:23).

There were also presbyters at Ephesus (ibid., 20:17), to whom were given the name of bishop (ibid. 20:28).

The epistles confirm the same picture: There are *proistamenoí* in 1 Thess. 5:12 (cf. 1Tim. 5:17 "*hoi kalos proetotes presbyteroi*"), of Christian presbytery (1Tim. 5:1, 2, 17, 19; Titus

1, 5; James 5, 4; 1Pet. 5:1, 5), of episkopoi, of hegoumenoi (Heb. 13:7, 13, 24. cf. Lk. 22:26).

1Cor. 16:16 recommends "submission" to Christians regarding those of the "house of Stephanas" who were sent for the service of the saints.

Whatever this last designation may be, (verse 17 speaks of Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaikos), all that we can know of those who held a role of leadership in the communities leads to the conclusion that this role was always held by men (in conformity with the Jewish custom). (N.B. The "presbytides" mentioned in Titus 2:3 were elderly women, and not priestesses.)

The masculine character of the hierarchical order which has structured the church since its beginning thus seems attested to by scripture in an undeniable way. Must we conclude that this rule must be valid forever in the church?

We must however recall that according to the gospels, the Acts and St. Paul, certain women made a positive collaboration in service to the Christian communities.

Yet one question still always be asked: What is the normative value which should be accorded to the practice of the Christian communities of the first centuries?

## **(2) The Ministry of Leadership and the Sacramental Economy**

One of the essential elements of the church's life is the sacramental economy which gives the life of Christ to the faithful. The administration of this economy has been entrusted to the church for which the hierarchy is responsible.

Thus the question is raised about the relationship between the sacramental economy and the hierarchy.

In the New Testament the primordial role of the leaders of the communities seems always to lie in the field of preaching and teaching. These are the people who have the responsibility of keeping the communities in line with the faith of the apostles.

No text defines their charge in terms of a special power permitting them to carry out the eucharistic rite or to reconcile sinners.

But given the relationship between the sacramental economy and the hierarchy, the administration of the sacraments should not be exercised independently of this hierarchy. It is therefore within the duties of the leadership of the community that we must consider the issue of eucharistic and penitential ministry.

In fact there is no proof that these ministries were entrusted to women at the time of the New Testament. Two texts (1Cor. 14:33-35 and 1Tim. 2:11-15) forbid women to speak and to teach in assemblies. However, without mentioning doubts raised by some about their Pauline authenticity, it is possible that they refer only to certain concrete situations and abuses. It is possible that certain other situations call on the church to assign to women the role of teaching which these two passages deny them and which constitute a function belonging to the leadership.

Is it possible that certain circumstances can come about which call on the church to entrust in the same way to certain women some sacramental ministries?

This has been the case with baptism which, though entrusted to the apostles (Mt. 28:19 and Mk. 16:15f) can be administered by others as well. We know that at least later, it will be entrusted also to women.

Is it possible that we will come to this even with the ministry of eucharist and reconciliation which manifest eminently the service of the priesthood of Christ carried out by the leaders of the community?

It does not seem that the New Testament by itself alone will permit us to settle in a clear way and once and for all the problem of the possible accession of women to the presbyterate.

However, some think that in the scriptures there are sufficient indications to exclude this possibility, considering that the sacraments of eucharist and reconciliation have a special link with the person of Christ and therefore with the male hierarchy, as borne out by the New Testament.

Others, on the contrary, wonder if the church hierarchy, entrusted with the sacramental economy, would be able to entrust the ministries of eucharist and reconciliation to women in light of circumstances, without going against Christ's original intentions.

For the votes of the Commission, see above, p. 25.

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