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THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

An approach to its study

Preliminary considerations

The very complex problem of the ministry of women is often reduced to the root question: "Can women, in such or such a Church, be ordained priests?" Certainly, this question is not put so directly in the Roman Catholic Church; nevertheless the same basic attitude can be found in the opinion which takes as starting-point for the definition of woman's mission in the Church her juridical ineligibility for the priesthood. Almost subconsciously the question of the ministry of women is replaced by the question (implicit, perhaps, but not identical) of their status.

Numerous factors in contemporary history explain this approach to the study of the ministry of women. It would be necessary to analyse them in order to make a thorough study of the whole question. As this is not feasible here, let us confine ourselves to the statement that, today, this question has acquired a fundamental importance in all Christian confessions and, by this very fact, in ecumenical dialogue. It is the recognition of the scope of this question that compels us to try to envisage it in as broad a context as possible.

Indeed, the question, as I have stated it above, or as it tacitly exists in certain lines of thought, is hard to disentangle from the criterion of an undifferentiated equality with man, which has been a feature of the evolution of the place given to women in the modern world. Put thus, it immediately arouses prejudices (that of society and that of the Church where the sole criterion is masculine) and it too easily becomes the occasion for controversy, over-emotional and, therefore, of necessity sterile.

Moreover, the deepening of Roman Catholic ecclesiology as well as the new light thrown by different sciences (psychology, sociology, biblical theology) upon our knowledge of the nature of woman, compels us to review our approach by re-placing the question of the ministry of women in its whole setting. The essential problem is not to know whether woman can have the same opportunities as man in the service of the Church, but rather to seek the spheres in which lies her special contribution as a woman to the life of the Church, and also to determine those ministries which follow naturally from them.

This research must be undertaken within the frame work of an ecclesiology which, alongside a definition of the Church as engendering Christians for the Faith, gives also a description of the Church made by Christians already living in Faith.

In so far as Christians make up the Church they bring to it the spiritual and temporal truth of very definite personalities. In this definition, the fact man or woman is basic and unavoidable. Indeed, all current anthropology is not the anthropology of an abstract and a-sexual human being, but on the contrary that of a being who cannot exist save in one of the two hypotheses, man or woman (2).

The Church made up of men is thus a Church made up of men and women. It is very necessary to know who are these men and women before one can define their unique contribution and thus their functions.

Such a Church, made up of men and women, a living reality, must be a Church where every human being will be at home in the full flowering of his or her living truth. It will be a Church where there is no longer white or black, peasant or workman, man or woman, not because they will cease to be what they are, but because, on the contrary, they have been taken up in the Church, just as they really are, in their own character and in their fundamental equality as members of the Church.

We thus have before us the essential elements for the development of our theme. The Church is at the same time institution and communion, structure and life, but structure and institution themselves assume a duality which corresponds to the actual nature of things. We grasp, in this concept, not only the eschatological outlook which gives to present realities their definitive content, but also the enlarging of the solely juridical categories which serve but partially to explain the true nature of the Church.

In such an ecclesiology, the concept of ministry is enriched or, rather, placed in its true context. The ministry cannot be understood just as a "sacred power", as it very often still is.

According to the Old and New Testaments, ministry, Latin form of the Greek "dikonía", is primarily a service. In early Church the ministries cover a wide range of functions corresponding to the needs of the Christian community and going beyond the limits of the apostolate committed exclusively to the Twelve. Very often, in his epistles, Saint Paul speaks of them as activities or tasks concerning all the faithful (I Cor. 12,5 and Eph. 4,11-12). In this context the ministries have not exclusively a technical, still less a juridical, meaning.

These ministries are, moreover, very closely, even ontologically, related to the charisma. They are not given as such but flow from the charisma which logically and ontologically precede them. A close and very deep link between the charisma and the ministries (9), recognised by contemporary theology helps to demonstrate that, the charisma being "not exceptional things" it is clear that "the whole life of Christians and the operation of the institutions depend entirely upon it" (10). This same close connection has just been emphasised in the Vatican Council, by stressing how dangerous it would be "to let it be believed that the hierarchy is a mere administrative system, without relation to the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the Church" (11).

The charisma being directed towards the building up of the Body of Christ, the ministries will be the manifold and abundant means which will ensure this growth. They will be as numerous as is needed to ensure the life of the Church in all its fulness and to help her "grow in works of grace, of the Faith and of the Gospel" (12). Thus they will show forth on the plane of the organic life of the Church gifts and charisma at work in the interior life of her members.

The study of the ministries therefore of necessity implies the consideration of the totality of the Body of Christ, and not exclusively of the sacerdotal power which is exercised in this Body. This, moreover, is expressed by Pius XII when, in his Encyclical "Mystici Corporis Christi", he refers to the whole Body of Christ and to the functions which ensure the growth of this Body: "One must not imagine that the structure, harmoniously distributed, organic, as we say, of this Body which is the Church, is perfect and is definable solely through the ranks of the Hierarchy... When the Fathers of the Church speak of the ministries, ranks, conditions, states, orders, functions of this Body, they do not think only of those who constitute the sacred ministry, but of all those who having embraced the evangelical counsels, lead a life of work among men, or hidden in silence, or strive to follow both at once, according to their profession; they think also of all those who, living in the world, devote themselves to works of mercy spiritual or temporal, and also of those whose lives are united in holy marriage."

In short, when speaking of ministries, we mean thereby every service whose function, even of a non-institutional character, contributes to the growth of the Body of Christ. It is along these lines that we shall direct our research into the ministry of women.

Essential elements in the definition of woman

We cannot say that the anthropology which we need for an adequate definition of woman is an accomplished fact. Some basic lines, however, are visible, whose deep significance theology cannot ignore.

Thus, on the basis of proved scientific knowledge, one can assert that the differentiation between man and woman is unquestionable and that this differentiation does not reside on the level of capacities or qualities, but affects the entire being, his or her fundamental attitude, the way in which he or she accommodates to the world and the particular type of personal relationship there established (13).

The contribution of different branches of knowledge is essential to the elucidation of that type of relationship peculiar to woman. In her biological and physiological "make-up", the woman already reveals a "preferential orientation" in her way of life: it is directed towards a possible physical conception and, this very potential points to a special relationship towards the world and to people (14).

Psychology, in its close relation to, and in its basic interdependence on the bio-somatic structure, shows that this is a relationship of the whole being. In her way of living in the world, woman sees and "feels" this world as something imploring her affectionate attention, her solicitude, her love (15). She establishes a relationship of "concern-for-the-world" with this world - and this because she is sensitive to its worth. By this sensitiveness she creates a connecting link between events, and contributes also, in a characteristic way, to the shaping of history (16).

A long-range sociological study would be needed to give to these statements about the individual a wider scope. Let us confine ourselves to stating that, in our day, it is shown by an uneasy and laborious seeking after a right form of expression for woman in social life. This research already brings out that, once the stage of excessive feminism is over, a healthy reaction occurs in favour of the discovery of expressions of service to the community, in all the forms which the latter can take. In this service and in its official recognition by the great international bodies (17) is expressed, in social terminology, woman's specific relationship to the world, concern-for-the-world in action.

A study of the images of woman in society - a study which has scarcely begun - would also be important in this collective vision. Certain images presented by contemporary literature (18) might suggest the conclusion that, where woman has ignored her built-in "potential" of a maternal relationship, she destroys, at one blow, the possibility of normal and mature relationships either with the man or with the world and its realities. In ignoring or rejecting the putting into practice of this potential of her being, woman becomes a sub-human creature, in whom self-respect, the capacity for free objective judgement, regard for the world and for others, are totally lacking.

In spite of the embryonic state of much of this research, it is already possible to say that the nature of woman places her in an attitude basically welcoming (19), this "availability" affording the basis for relationship with other people.

These assertions are echoed by theology, - first, in the unequivocal affirmation of the differentiation between man and woman, and then in the definition of the elements in such differentiation.

In this connection it has been said that "one of the constants (of the work of God) seems to be the creation in pairs or complementary dualities... Amongst these dualities-in-unity, the main one is without doubt the division of mankind into man and woman" (20). As long as thirty years ago, the remarkable thinker Edith Stein could write: "I am convinced that mankind develops in the manner of a double species, made up of man and woman, that the character of the human being of which no single trait should be wanting, in either one or the other, shows itself in two ways and that the entire structure of the being displays this specific duality" (21). The teaching of the Church only confirms this belief: "God has not only given woman existence, but the feminine personality in her physical and psychical structure corresponds with a particular design of the Creator." (22).

This differentiation is taken up again in the light of biblical anthropology which gives to the elements of natural anthropology their significance in God's plan.

It is generally observed that the command common to man and woman to be fruitful and multiply (Gen.1,28a), begins to take on a special emphasis after the Fall. The punishment inflicted upon Eve after the Fall, begins to affect her in what is the very key to her destiny: motherhood. Gen.,3,16 is unanimously interpreted by Tradition (23) as a punishment given first historically to Eve and then, through her, to all women. This collective destiny implies, so to speak, the recognition of an existing situation common to all women, a situation which is exclusively their own.

It is much more difficult to know whether this existing situation has a decisive meaning in the history of salvation. We cannot say that there is absolutely incontestable evidence on this subject. We shall confine ourselves to indicating what could eventually be a pointer to it.

All Catholic Tradition has pored over Gen.3,15, moved in the conviction that this verse corresponds with the intention of the Yahvist who wanted to establish "the primordial prototypes of the fundamental problems of the age" (24), and so to turn the nation's thoughts towards the understanding of the promise of the Messiah. Thus we seem to be led to see in Gen.3,15 a reference to the messianic rôle of woman through her motherhood (25). This gives new strength to other passages in the Yahvist narrative where woman plays a decisive part in the transmission of the inheritance.

Recent studies reveal the scope of motherhood in the history of salvation throughout the Old Testament. To begin with, individual cases which speak for themselves: Hannah (Isa.1,4-20; 2,1-5), Ruth (Book of Ruth), the mother of the Macabees (II Mac.7,1ff.). Even childless women become, at the moment when they play a decisive part in the history of the nation, "mothers in Israel" (26), for instance, Deborah (Judges 5,7). Those whose actions are crucial at a turning-point of the life of Israel, thereby ensuring victory, are called "blessed among women" (Judges 5,24; Judith 13,18). On the threshold of the New Covenant, Elisabeth was to apply the same words to Mary (Lk.1,42). In her and through her, the salvation of God's people was irrevocably accomplished.

The evidence for God Himself governing motherhood is implicit all through Sacred History. Already Eve is rejoicing to become a mother "with God" (Gen. 4,1) (27). And the whole lineage of "mothers-with-God" (motherhood flowering where was formerly sterility), such as Sara (Gen.17,16), Rebekah (Gen. 29,22.A.V.29,31 and 30,22), Elisabeth (Lk.1,13), was to end at last in the Virgin Mary bearing a Son because "the Holy Ghost shall come upon her and the power of the Highest shall overshadow her." (Lk. 1,35).

The rôle of motherhood goes, however, beyond individual cases, even that of Mary, to cover the whole history of salvation and to become the pledge of the birth of the new age. (Is. 67,7. A.V.66,7ff; Mic.4,9-10). In the apocalyptic vision of Saint John, the Messiah, the whole Christ, is born of the Woman, the new people of God, the Church (Rev.12,1-9). So the new Israel, the Jerusalem which shall come down from above, is truly "our mother". (Gal.4,26).

Motherhood is thus, in God's plan, like the fabric through which a new order of grace (28) seems to be revealed, the territory through which Salvation advances (29). It is blessed even beyond sin. And this is the reason for this blessedness: maternity "traces out what will be the way of salvation", that is to say, "a fruitfulness which cannot exist unless it is looked upon as subordinate and, therefore, dependent" (30).

The natural orientation of woman towards a personal relationship is thus enlarged, and acquires in the light of the Mystery of salvation the deepest significance. Since this Mystery is accomplished in time and so gives birth to history, one can say that it is on the historic

on the "maternity-historic-reality" relation that the whole significance of this relationship hinges.

Indeed, "in contrast to fatherhood, motherhood is not a simple statement of origin. It presupposes an identity, a preliminary inclusion. It is rooted in a community, indeed a radical oneness of being, without which there could be no autonomous existence. This is where motherhood reveals its historical quality. A mere chain of events, albeit co-ordinated by bonds of strict causality, is not history. A series of lives, even with a paternal relationship, would not constitute historical existence in the full sense of the term. Historicity implies more than that: not only an ordered succession from the present to the future, but a certain embryonic pre-existence of the future within the present, not that the future is pre-contained in it as such, but rather that there is a former existence, before the autonomous existence and necessary to it. However difficult it may be to define and to disentangle, this relationship is the concept of motherhood. It is a germinal interiority, the differentiation taking place in time of an existence which began not by being identical with another, but interior to it. Our race, after sinning, remained capable of being redeemed, just because it remained blessed with this indwelling potential. And the original benediction, thus present in the heart of the sinful condition of man, has sprung up, and prevailed over it. For this benediction was the divine plan for God's insertion into the history so made"(31).

Woman is thus linked, in her whole being, with the shaping of history, supplying the very tissue of it, the possibility of "germinal interiority", and by guaranteeing its vital core makes possible the divine plan for God's entrance into history (32).

Can we then speak of a particular gift of God to woman? It seems to us that all the factors mentioned converge towards one hypothesis: that of the attribution by God to women of a charisma, linked to, and implicit in, their very condition as women. That which, on the natural plane, is only grasped as a preferential orientation becomes, on the plane of the realities of the Spirit, a charismatic gift and, in consequence, a mission to accomplish, a ministry to fulfil.

TENTATIVE APPROACH TO A DESCRIPTION OF THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN

The ministry of women in the Church can now be described in an attempt to integrate all the elements which we have just assembled. This ministry rests on a previous gift, which appears to be for woman her capacity to establish a maternal type of relationship with people and the world. This capacity, having a natural foundation, but assuming a central rôle in the unfolding of the Plan of Salvation, furnishes the most important contribution to a study of this ministry. Given the reality of the Church, the ministry must be considered first in the Church-as-institution (and, in her, conformably with the two-fold aspect of act and of duration), and then in the Church-as-community.

The ministry in the Church-as-institution

Let us consider, at the very outset, the ministry which is performed by the woman's whole being and not only by this or that aspect of her activity or personality.

By her motherhood, by her child-bearing relationship with the world and people, woman gives to the Body of Christ, moving towards completion in history, the substance of the world. Through her, a link of historicity binds one to another the events which determine what the world is to become. Motherhood which, in the Old Testament, was preparing for the new era, was directed afresh, after having reached its historical and personal summit in Mary. It is now poured out over all women, in forms which embrace all creation, and it will appear anew when the woman clothed with the sun shall have generated the fulness of the messianic age and when all mankind shall reach "that perfect man, unto the measure of

the fulness of Christ." (Eph.4,13).

Woman provides the Church with the human conditions for her very "historicity." That which in her is the link between one generation and another, safeguard of permanent values, ceaselessly transmitting a reality incorporated in her deepest being (33) that is the very background, the very tissue, the permanence on which the effectual signs of grace can be inscribed. This idea has been developed many times - by her very being and previous to any specific contribution woman should stand in the Church as a safeguard of essential human values.

The main emphasis of her irruption into the history of the world and of the Church should not be laid specifically in the sphere of outward activities and the exercise of authority. On the contrary, in an ideal and balanced civilisation where there were no practical problems concerning equal rights of woman and of man, the intervention of woman in history should bear the marks and so much the more in that woman would be free to be herself, of that "germinal interiority" by which history is made. (More than thirty years ago, Gertrude von le Fort (34) expressed the same opinion by developing the theme of the veil, as the sign of woman's presence in history and culture.)

The same dominant features met with in the Church, mother of all living ("mother chaste, fruitful, universal, patient, considerate, loving, clear-sighted, fervent, wise, sorrowful, strong") (35), are potentially present in the maternal attitude of every woman (36). It would surely be a profitable task to see how these traits are mutually reciprocal and therefore, what the maternal attitude of woman towards others can signify in the unfolding of those attributes of the Church in her historic development. We shall only, however, recall two aspects which, in some way, afford a basis for historicity in both space and time.

Motherhood reveals itself in time in the guise of fertility. From this fertility flow the streams of grace. Countless examples reveal this fertility dispersing itself in fruits whose influence is always easy to detect, for the only sociological study that one could make is that of the influence of women's Religious Orders. In fact, these Orders were until the beginning of our century the only groups of women in the Roman Catholic Church. It was precisely concern for the concrete, for the immediate needs of men and nations, that called forth the increase of women's communities. If it is true that the motherhood of most of these communities is chiefly expressed in very definite aims within the domain of works of mercy, it is also true of some that their very existence has borne fruit of universal significance in the Church of their day, such as the Poor Clares or the Dominicans in the movement towards poverty in the XIIIth. century (37).

This would, however, be to minimise the contribution of woman so as to reduce it only to those institutional terms which history permits us to know. Indeed, the situation of woman in centuries past, does not permit us to know, save in this or that isolated case, the contribution of fruitfulness for the building up of the Church made by the mothers of families of all times, of all the single women living with their families, and creating, through the extent of the family circles of those days, a true climate for the spread of the Gospel.

Our century is, in this respect, quite different. Women are associated in all sorts of groups which meet both the basic needs of the human family, and the spiritual demands of the contemporary world. Their existence itself bears witness to "concern-for-the-world" felt on a wider scale than that of the individual or the family. The novelty of this type of influence does not yet permit of a clear definition of its total import nor the conditions in which that influence may be deployed. (38).

Ecclesiastical authority itself ascribes to the presence of woman this fruitful quality, giving continuity to the operation of grace. Is this not, in effect, what contemporary missiology recognises when it refuses to baptise the candidate whose family circumstances

render perseverance in the faith unlikely? The importance attached in missionary countries to woman, especially with regard to her role as mother, is also a clear sign of such recognition (39). More and more the Church is aware that woman brings to the embryonic Christian communities in the mission field an element of stability, of permanence, and of continuity, which is the sociological reflection of her own nature, echoing the maternal care of the Church for all races. If through the centuries, the missionary activity of the Church was the work of men, we can say that in our day the presence of woman as an essential element of the establishment of the Church is an undisputed fact.

Moreover, this awareness is, so to speak, tied up with the most tangible sign of motherhood in space - its universality. Already, in apostolic times, women shared unremittently in the work of evangelisation (40). In Saint Paul's writings, women acquired the same importance as men as fellow-workers. Of them Paul says that they have laboured much in the Lord.

In the Middle Ages, the influence of women in the conversion of the heathen is undeniable. In the modern era, after the pioneer work of the XVIIth. century, it is in the XIXth. century that we see this universality finds expression in an immense flowering of women's missionary work, bringing to it their special skills (of teaching, nursing, etc.), but new institutions were founded with the specific intention of working in missionary lands.

In our days, the participation of women in the missionary work of the Church has taken on an unforeseen importance. The advancement of woman and her social emancipation have allowed women to bring to the missionary service of the Church their gifts and capacities, in the performance of very concrete and indispensable tasks. In the mission field proper, new fields of action are opening - laywomen are helping to spread the Gospel, taking advantage of a social situation where their complete liberty of action is recognised. Different groups send young women to missionary countries, either under modern forms of life commitment or under a clearly-fixed temporary contract. In the still-developing countries their contribution is manifold: medical and health work, social programmes for community development, education of the young and of adults, collaboration with the local press and other cultural bodies. In countries where the Church is still at the missionary stage, because of its minority character in a pagan environment, but where the people's elementary needs are already met, the contribution of these women is more in the cultural field and in the activities which flow therefrom, trying to express by spiritual creative work the fundamental readiness for Redemption which exists in the world and in the various cultures and civilisations.

In this missionary endeavour, the women of the XXth. century are right in the tradition of the women of the apostolic community. Before every other task they have an obvious and indisputable duty of religious instruction which is given outside the official teaching in Church. They share, that is to say, in the 'Kerigma' by proclaiming the Gospel in a pagan setting. This role is becoming particularly important today, for the whole Church realises that the worlds to convert are not only the worlds enclosed in well-defined geographical regions, but every sphere of Man where Christ is not known - in short, the Church is acutely aware of her "dispersion" (diaspora) situation (42). As in the apostolic age, the presence of woman in a Church in dispersion will manifest itself in the performance of tasks which are the extension of the 'Kerigma': the catechumenate, teaching the Faith in all its stages, even spiritual direction among women.

In this broader concept of the Church's missionary situation, the presence and work of women in the mission field (in strict sense) will mainly depend on the deep conviction of belonging to a world for which one is responsible and to a Church which has no frontiers. Mission then becomes, not so much a special vocation, as the striking materialisation of the universality of the Catholic situation. This truth, which has pricked the conscience of many young girls in our day, offers a deep challenge to woman's capacity for universality.

The very way in which the Gospel is presented can, up to a certain point, bear the stamp of the fundamental approach of woman. It is perhaps still too soon for an adequate study. We can, however, already say that her essential characteristic is the creation of an atmosphere where Christian values can be expressed and grasped. Such a creation will be the rightful feminine

way of sharing in Church's concern as "mother of all living", for the world which knows not Christ. As contemporary philosophy discovers the "feminine" as a basic value (43), one becomes more conscious of the need of poles from which the values implied in the feminine may radiate. That is why one has been led to say that, alongside the signs of man's work, by which the masculine side in humanity is disclosed, and which are at the root of progress, the modern world requires, for its essential balance, some "sense of home" (44). A ministry peculiar to woman could consist in the creation of this "sense of home", by multiplying in the world opportunities for welcome, recollection, loving-kindness, without which society cannot survive. Moreover, modern catechetics (45) only give fresh weight to the foregoing statements, by pointing out, as powerfully aiding the "process" of conversion - the committed grounding in the faith - the possibility of a preliminary experience of the Kingdom where Christian values can be grasped in their essential unity (46).

We see that the ministry of woman in the Church-as-institution is exercised in a level deeper more ontological than that of definite activities. What is more, whenever this ministry is expressed in concrete functions, it proves to be varied and covering a wide range of aspects. To select from these aspects what amounts to the "powers" of the Church is not easy. Neither history nor the present state of things furnish very precise information. These powers being, moreover, rather entangled with the material situation of certain functions, it is not possible for us to make a systematic enumeration of them. We will consider for the sake of clarity, the powers which flow from the kingly, priestly and prophetic functions of the Church, belonging to certain members of the Church in relation to others (47).

More or less approximately, we can say that a woman in the Roman Catholic Church is categorically excluded (48) from the priesthood for the offering of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, while she has a recognised share (with some fine distinctions) in the powers of teaching and government.

In teaching, it is usual to consider three aspects: the pastoral, the doctoral, and the exhortatory. The pastoral side is closely linked with the power received in ordination to the priesthood, and so is forbidden to women. The prohibition, however, is less serious than appears at first sight, given the manner in which this pastoral teaching is usually carried out (50).

The doctoral aspect, denied to women by Saint Thomas, seems to depend only on sociological factors. Indeed, in a society where woman has attained her legal majority and where she is engaged in every aspect of human activity, there can be nothing in principle against her exercise of this teaching power. The Hierarchy itself encourages more and more this participation of women in the official teaching work of the Church. The foundation of the Regina Mundi Institute in Rome, devoted to the study of advanced theology by Religious (today open also to lay-women) was conceived with this in view. In certain countries, likewise, (Germany for instance) women take a degree in theology, mainly with the aim of giving religious instruction. In the same frame of the apostolate of laity, a theological curriculum is pursued, entrusted not seldom to responsible lay-people. In the female groups, and sometimes even in mixed groups women provide instruction which goes far beyond mere exhortation (51). So it is not an utopian idea that women's ministry includes doctoral teaching, albeit sporadic, in the Seminaries.

If there are still reservations in certain circles about the recognition of women in the doctoral faculty, there are none with regard to exhortation. We must not, indeed, under-estimate, on the ground of an euphoric advancement of woman in the Church, the immense part which is played by this type of teaching, of which the scope can never be fully realised. It is a question of the teaching given by woman in her own family circle, in her parish, in little local communities where she is placed. The new emphasis on these realms, as important parts of "public life" (52), will doubtless help to put in right perspective teaching so traditional and vital for the Church.

In what concerns the power of government, the most notable instance is that of the Religious communities, where the Superior, through the prerogatives which she holds, has a real "share in ecclesiastical jurisdiction." It is true that today the internal government of these communities is rather different from what it was in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, the

Superiors continue to have a very important role in the solid exercise of the government of the Church over those million members who are Religious. A realistic view of things will lead naturally to saying that "there is no reason why those who are charged by the Church with helping those under them to reach perfection and exercise in her name the works of mercy, should not receive from her the necessary authority"(53).

Again it is perhaps too early to apply without qualification this statement to the groups of the lay apostolate which have grown up in the last forty years. But, in fact, commitment to the lay apostolate also implies an avowed desire for sanctification and for co-operation with the Church's apostolate. The laity's apostolate is genuinely of the Church only in so far as it is concerned with spiritual life. It is what Pius XII meant when he said that "more than problems of internal organisation or those of action on society, the spiritual life constitutes the very heart of the Christian apostolate"(54). Concrete situations where responsible members of these groups find themselves confronted with this concern for the spiritual life of all the members could not be envisaged in all their fullness and significance without a real participation in the government of the Church. One could not yet, however, adequately define their status.

It is much more difficult to show what in fact is woman's share in the exercise of sacerdotal power.

A pertinent study (55) has shown that the exclusion of women from celebrating the Eucharist is rooted in Tradition and in Scripture with "impressive unanimity." We sum up here the main content of this study. On the one hand, the Didascalia of the Apostles stresses that, in spite of the presence of many women among those around Christ, there was no question of their inclusion in the College of the Twelve, nor of their being given the powers attached thereto. On the other hand, the study of the Treatise of Epiphanius confirms these statements with scriptural proofs. Indeed, the Old Testament shows us no instance of a woman offering sacrifice and, in the apostolic age, in spite of the rights allowed to women of prophesying, or of assisting in religious functions, they could not exercise the priesthood.

The same study stresses that the function of helping priests and bishops in the performance of certain religious acts, in relation to women, was very important in apostolic times. The writer goes so far as to believe that all the minor masculine Orders would have had correlative feminine orders without any opposition in principle. However, they did not reach the same degree of institutionalisation in the West as in the East.

These assistant functions depend on the needs, the material conditions in which the ministry was exercised (such as baptism by immersion) and the general atmosphere prevailing (anti-feminism in the West at the time of Tertullian, for instance). Such assistance comprises very varied tasks in the apostolic age: helping the bishop during the baptism of women, doorkeeping at services (superintending groups of women, leading the actions of the congregation), the right of placing the chalice, pouring out the wine into it, of reading the Gospel in the absence of the priest, of censuring the book, of ascending the "ambo" (pulpit), of administering communion to women and children, of helping sick women (to whom on occasion they were allowed to give what was in embryo the present Sacrament of the Sick).

The exegesis of Saint Paul's writings concerning women in the liturgical assembly is far from being quite clear. To resolve the controversy on the subject of apparently contradictory Pauline texts (on one hand, I Cor. 11, 4-5, which allows women the possibility of an official role in the assembly, and on the other I Cor. 14, 34-35, forbidding women to "speak" in the assembly), the same writer suggests that it could be a question of different activities. Thus, "to speak" is the preaching of the Word to the assembly, associated with solemn tone and emphasising the sacred, cultic, character of preaching - an expression taken up elsewhere by Saint Paul in I Tim. 2, 11-12, where the Apostle forbids women to "teach". In contrast, the activity envisaged in I Cor. 11, 5 is that which refers essentially to prophesying, that is to say, praying aloud, -an interpretation confirmed by I Tim. 2, 8-9. This distinction is clear in the Didascalia of the Apostles which speaks both of the ban on teaching in the assembly, and also of participating in the prayer

of the assembly.

There still remains the difficult question of knowing what, in Paul's teaching, was shaped by the customs and prevailing mentality of his day - and meant, therefore, primarily for his contemporaries - and what had, by contrast, an universal application. The prohibition on "speaking", embodied in the assertion, in I Cor.14,37, that it is a commandment of the Lord, presents more difficulty. Even if this last verse refers to the whole ordering of liturgical worship, the verse concerning women could not be excluded. It seems difficult, therefore, to offer a balanced explanation of Paul's real meaning.

It is necessary, however, to note that Paul, in the Epistle to the Corinthians, "strives to justify each of his decisions by placing it in a much wider doctrinal setting, by making it a corollary of some basic principle".(56). Indeed, Paul places the "commandment that he received of the Lord" in the order of creation. This order He unfolds in Eph.5,31, using it in the context of his most profound teaching on the significance of the differentiation of the sexes. This was equivalent to saying that the distribution of functions between man and woman is a consequence of the order of creation in the original design which governed it:: that of "revealing the image of the relations between God and saved Humanity."(57).

Moreover, to make the meaning still more difficult, Paul not only links this first order with the new, but explicitly introduces the fact of sin (I Tim. 2,14). It is thus that the term "submission" which he uses in many references to women- I Cor.14,13, in the context of liturgical gatherings, as well as in Eph.5,32 and Col.3,28 (A.V.3,18), in the context of conjugal relations - is wholly imbued with the punishment meted out to the woman after the Fall (Gen. 3,16) in relation to her husband. This domination, in the conjugal connection, even in different situations such as the liturgical assembly, would largely account, for most of the difficulties of interpretation. Let us note that the teaching of the Church seems to take into account this dominance, by using, in support of the unity of marriage, expressions employed by Paul in the context of the liturgical gathering (58). But this does not exclude the ~~unambiguous interpretation of the Roman Church of seeing~~ in Paul's statements the formal prohibition on women's receiving the priestly power in all its fulness.

Allowing the distinction made in the article quoted, we must, side by side with the consideration of the meaning of the ban on "speaking" in the assembly, study the contents of prophesying. In the apostolic age, when it was specially apparent in the case of deaconesses (59), this rôle is a prerogative as well of women as of men. As it had been the occasion of abuse, the Church was careful to indicate its limits. In the second century, it is widows who will play this part. In the early Church, they will become an ecclesiastical Order, going beyond the ordinary meaning of their title, as we see in the famous phrase of Ignatius of Antioch, "virgins called widows". Their essential role is that of teaching other women and also the very spiritual task of oblation, praying for those who are in great trial, which demands of them (I Tim. 5,9-10) an ascetic life, serious and drenched in prayer. Later, the institution of Virgins, with the beginning of female monasticism, will see the disappearance of the order of Widows, and it will be these, who, from the IVth. to the XIXth. centuries, in general will sustain the prophetic rôle allotted to women in the first Christian communities.

The history of the Religious Life for women is paradoxically strewn with attempts to revive this prophetic rôle in its lay form, in continuity with the women of apostolic times (60). The social and legal situation of woman has in practice hindered all the attempts at restoring their original sense.

In the prophecy of which Saint Paul speaks is essentially prayer, it is clear that this rôle has been exercised over the years first of all inside women's communities, where the Religious (especially contemplatives) were deputed to sing in Choir, thus performing an official function in the prayer of the Church has been enlarged by provisions of the Constitution on Sacred Liturgy, of the Second Vatican Council. For another, the Church is gaining in experience of community prayer, more and more rooted in and supported by the Bible, and

revolving round the actual conditions of life of every Christian. These changes will doubtless afford women new possibilities in this sphere so vital to the life of worship.

The ministry in the Church-as-community

It is in the Church-as-community that the rôle of man and woman becomes clearer. There is in the Church, as the communion of saints, a masculine and a feminine character(61). Through the masculine character - (Eph. 4,13) "we all come... unto a perfect Man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ". - the Church is building up the whole Christ, the new Man whom every Christian must "put on" (Eph. 2,15). This is, moreover, the meaning of the Liturgy, where the mystery of the communion of saints is also unfolded by attributing to men the claims to sanctity which derive from the masculine aspect of the Church. In contrast, the Church is also the woman (II Cor.11,2 - "I have espoused you to one husband, as a chaste virgin"; Rev.21,9 - "the bride, the Lamb's wife"), and the Liturgy so stresses it in glorifying the saints under the figure of betrothal with Christ, or in praising the woman as bride. Although the masculine and feminine aspects are present in the reality of the Church, the Fathers preferred rather to lay stress on her traits as bride and virgin.

Now it is under this aspect of bride or virgin that woman "makes up" the Church. Both the married woman and the virgin take part, each in her own way, but both in the most radical fashion, in this two-fold reality of the Church as virgin and bride of Christ. Thus we can say that, in the two existing situations through which her life on earth is expressed, woman is an evocative token of this feminine aspect of the Church. Inasmuch as she is human, she shares in her own right, in a personal way, in this aspect of the Church. That is why we could speak of woman being the "matter and sacrament" ("res et sacramentum") of the Church (62), both a sign and the reality signified.

We should, however, be aware that it is either the married woman or the virgin who assumes, this character of "sign and thing signified", of the Church as bride or pure virgin. We are confronted with non-universal situations which help to reveal, in a sign-perspective, the mysteries of the love of God, but which do not fully exhaust the destiny of woman in its deepest religious sense. It is in their non-universal character that these situations acquire their intensest meaning. The specific feminine contribution brought by each bride to the nuptial relationship becomes a sign of universal value, seen against the background of the reality of salvation. In the same way, it is the specific incidence of the single woman's position which helps virginity the sign of a universal reality of a supernatural order. But the Bride of the Lamb is also the Woman in travail, the Virgin who will bear a Son. It is the child-bearing which is the universal reality giving to the signs bride and virgin their full meaning for salvation.

Like all Christians, woman in the Church-as-community is characterized by the "form or dignity of life" which the royal, priestly and prophetic functions assure her. The married woman and the virgin will assume this dignity in accordance with their proper condition.

The priestly dignity which consists essentially in a life of "prayer, charity and mercy", assumes for the married woman that day-by-day influence of which Scripture (Prov. 31, 10-31) speaks to us so eloquently. This priestly role has without doubt been stimulated in our era by the rise of groups for married spirituality, and family movements which have developed a whole practical concept of marriage, by making the man and woman more conscious of being the ministers of the sacrament which united them, not only at the moment of their mutual self-giving before the altar, but which continues to be active in their life.

The prophetic rôle which comes to the married woman concerns her unity with her husband - the unity which is the sign of that between Christ and His Church. Her royal dignity, Tradition has always preferred to think of the married woman that this royalty of love becomes most clearly understood.

The woman-as-virgin whose praises are always sung in the Liturgy under the theme of

betrothal with Christ, is the sign in the Church-as-community, of the final union when Christ will be "fulfilled" in all. She already accomplishes in her personal life and in a special way what each soul, and the whole Church, are called upon in the end to accomplish. She takes already as her way of life what will be the eschatological climax for the whole Church.

The oblation of her life is the most complete expression of the sacrifice which is implicit in the priestly office. But this sacrifice is fruitful because it is redemptive and will bear maternal fruit. It is not a partial oblation nor a particular sacrifice, it is the guarantee of an inexhaustible motherhood. "It is in order to consecrate themselves wholly to the birth of the new creation, wherein the old is to be saved, that virgin souls will forego a part in prolonging and extending the old. In the total offering of themselves to the work of this new birth of a humanity regenerated in Christ, they make of their virginity not a refusal to love, but an act of supreme love" (64).

The life of the virgin is, in itself, an irreplaceable prophetic and kerygmatic witness, for she well expresses that "the form of this world passes", whilst the things of God are for eternity. By total surrender to Christ, her royal dignity in the world, in its deepest significance, will be perfected. Utter poverty and unlimited obedience help to bear witness to belonging wholly to Christ, in the voluntary detachment from all creatures. Thereby is re-affirmed the power of Christ over all things - "all is yours, but you are Christ's, and Christ is God's." (I Cor. 3,22-23).

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Final remarks

Two remarks should still be added. We shall first notice the "fluidity" (65) of the ministry of women, what might be called its anti-institutional character which can appear deceptive. Various factors account for this fluidity. Perhaps the major factor is the confusion which arises at every point in history between the ministry of women considered in itself, in the bosom of the Church, and the social status of woman (66). Only a period when woman's social status is no longer the object of prejudice and counter-prejudice will be possible to draw up an outline of greater precision for the ministry of woman in the Church.

This fluidity is also the outcome of what might be called dissipated effort, with no collective quality. On one hand, mothers of families were, due to the conditions of society, bound to their families and not to one another. On the other hand, women's service in the city was difficult to conceive. We must not be too surprised that only Religious communities seem to show discernible and recognisable women's ministries through the ages. They were, in fact, the only groups of women of which sociological studies could be made.

It is only with our era that the feminine world becomes associated, and that its collective behaviour can be studied. The fact that women's status is being "purified" of the prejudices of centuries, and that her choice of interests and activities is becoming more deliberate and free, gives to this collective demeanour a very deep significance in the elucidation of the "preferential orientations" of woman and, with regard to the Church, of her true functions.

The second note concerns the undeniable existence of the dialectical character of history in every study of the ministry of women. On the one hand, we have God's plan for the salvation of the world, the gifts which, in this plan, belong to women, the mission which is entrusted to her, and, on the other, we know that redemption is, at the same time, the result "of a painful, life-giving experience of human freedom" (67), a continual conquest and choice (68) of the whole being, to be made and re-made all through life. In this conquest and in this

choice is rooted the constant tension between the refusal of a nature fallen through sin, and the receptivity of a child of God already placed at His disposal by the saving power of the Cross.

This dialectic between sin and the Cross, which is characteristic of the whole history of salvation, has its repercussions on the intervention of women in sacred history. Woman, either individually or collectively, is, in spite of her high calling, a fallen creature in need of salvation. Her ministry will always reflect this fundamental nature. Whereas for man (masculine), it is his relation to the field of labour that most adequately reflects this inherent quality, for the woman it is her maternal relation to the world that is attained. In the field of labour, harmony will only be achieved when the work of man is re-united to the creative power of God, and is obedient to it, in full acknowledgement of his mediatory rôle through work; likewise, for woman, harmony must be reached between God's plan and woman's deliberate free choice of her relation-with-the-world, which is for her the condition of personal fulfilment and of communal influence.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS QUOTED

-(4): We make use, in this paragraph, of expressions taken indiscriminately from the following authors and works:

-(14): This is the phenomenological thesis remarkable presented in

Cf. also the chapters mentioned, in the following books:

-(17): Note the following passages in..... a statement made at..... sponsored by UN: "...women can themselves contribute to the solution of educational problems and in particular of the financial problems by their confronting the public powers, and and notably local authorities, and non-governmental organisations and benevolent bodies. In so doing, they are in fact sharing in public life." The intervention of the Polish delegate in..... is also very enlightening in this respect -an intervention as a result of which the request is made that an International Institute for Research be set up for the study of the "functions and the services really carried out by women".

-(32): By this one does not mean that woman alone shapes history. That would be to fall from the extreme which denies her part in history, to another extreme equally false! For a balanced view of things, we must look at history also in its dynamic growth, in its "quanta" of development, that is, in the elements of progress and of innovation which derive rather from a relation of origin, a fatherly and masculine relation.

-(38): We know that many studies have been made of the contribution of woman to public life. It is not yet possible, however, to draw clear-cut conclusions from them. The lack of sufficient material has led UNESCO to include, in its programme, research on new methods of social science which could help the study of woman's contribution, on the basis of the existing elements.

-(46): The Grail movement is, to some extent, involved in this new trend, trying to make of its centres a focus for the spreading of Christian values, and using them as a proper apostolic contribution of woman to the surrounding society.

-(50): The preparation for the sessions of the Second Vatican Council has, in fact, thrown light on the way in which the bishops listen to the faithful, once decisions are

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being prepared, so giving reality to that community of thought which ought to distinguish the people of God.

- (51): This fact is not perhaps very widely known, for it happens mainly within groups in Latin countries. In these countries women are not so acutely aware of their promotion as in other places, accepting, therefore, as a matter of course, situations which in fact derive from that very promotion.

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