

Department on Cooperation  
of Men and Women  
in Church, Family and Society

Division of Studies  
Commission on  
Faith and Order

THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

by the Rev. Archimandrite Georges Khodre  
(Patriarchate of Antioch, Tripoli)

In the pagan world women were priestesses, as a result of the naturalistic concept of womanhood. Women played a leading role in the cults of fertility. St. Epiphanius accuses the Collyridians of having offered sacrifices to the Virgin Mary, and mentions that they were in favour of the ministry of women (Haer. 1, xxix, 4). Women certainly played an important part among certain ancient sects.

But what is the place of women in the Church? In order to answer this question the only thing we can do is to examine the Word of God, regarded as a final revelation. There is indeed a temptation to interpret it in the light of a naturalistic claim which ignores or minimises the mystery of womanhood, and wants to make woman the equal of man in the sense that all their functions are interchangeable. There is certainly an anthropological question at the root of the problem of the ordination of women. If one adopts an equalitarian anthropology, one is tempted to interpret the Bible to mean anthropological relativism. But it would be a mistake to abandon what the Bible affirms about human nature because of the mistakes which may have been made by St. Paul owing to his Jewish background. Any attempt to draw a distinction between Paul's own ideas and the biblical revelation (apart from the passage where he expressly mentions it) is doomed to failure, just like any attempt to separate the historic Jesus from the other facts of Scripture. The distinction can only be arbitrary; it can only spring from the philosophical or theological concepts of the exegetist.

Furthermore, anthropology cannot be dissociated from the Bible like cosmogony. Any attempt to do so would be prejudicial to our understanding of God's Word, because mankind was created in the image of God, and because it is through our human nature that we know God. The resemblance between the image and the prototype is so strong that man is called through grace to become deified. The created order reflects the uncreated order and is drawn by it into the movement of redemption.

On the plane of natural anthropology, is the feminist movement well-founded? Does it not express the dissatisfaction of those women who suffer from the Diana-complex? As Dr. Pichon said, "most feminists are really hominists". Clearly, it is difficult to distinguish between what is due to nature and what is due to culture in our concept of womanhood. But one thing is certain: the biological rhythms fluctuate more in women than in men and their moods are affected by these rhythms. Maternity seems essential for a woman who lives in the world. Experience shows that public activity, however extensive, can never fully meet the need that women have to be loved. There is a specifically feminine quality which eludes definition. But between man and woman there exists a complementariness, a reciprocity, which has its roots in human nature. It is not necessary to define the particular nature of each sex; their polarity - both physical and psychic - cannot be ignored. They can never behave as if they were a-sexual or independent. The nature of each is fixed through their encounter with the opposite sex. There exists a correspondencæ between

them, an encounter and a history orientated towards liberty, which excludes all possibility of levelling-down; their physical union is incompatible with any confusion of their functions and tasks.

In the Christic order this unity is assumed in accordance with the words of Paul: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28). Paul's intention was clearly to stress the dignity of women, and of slaves, in the world of antiquity. There is no reference here which could be understood as a contradiction of Ephesians 5:22, which sums up Paul's ideas on the question. The words "neither male nor female" are not a concrete expression of emancipation, because Paul rejects the very temptation to emancipate women in the Church (I Cor. 11:2-16). The human dignity shared by men and women does not imply equality in the sacred functions. In Moslem countries Christian women were fully aware of their dignity as compared with the status of Moslem women; but none of them were socially emancipated owing to the fact that (according to the legal precepts of Islam) the purpose of woman's existence is to give pleasure to her husband. However, the Christian woman was free within herself.

The diversity of tasks is preached by Paul, especially in I Cor. 12. In verse 13 of this chapter he defines the unity between Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, as a unity in the Spirit through baptism. "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman." (I Cor. 11:11). Through obedience to Christ we shall get beyond sexuality completely in the Coming Kingdom. In the meantime we are living on the plane of the first Creation, and this must be expressed in the Church through a diversity of functions corresponding to the anthropology of the Bible.

Basing his arguments on the primacy of man in the natural order (I Cor. 11; I Tim. 2), Paul is opposed to the participation of women in the priesthood (I Tim. 2:11 ff.; I Cor. 14:34 and 27). Women can prophesy and participate in prayer (I Cor. 12), but they cannot speak liturgically as teachers. In Paul's view, this is one of the Lord's commands (I Cor. 14:37).

The natural primacy of man springs from the fact that he is "the image of God, and the mirror of his glory" whereas "woman reflects the glory of man". According to Paul the fact that man was created first establishes his primacy in the hierarchy of nature. Is not the submission of the wife to her husband "as to the Lord" an acceptance of that hierarchical order as a divine order, in which the wife regards her husband as the mediator of God's splendour? The idea is somewhat similar to monastic obedience. As the superior is the representative of God, by obeying him one obeys God. So that if women are not called to be mediators in the natural order, they should not assume the role of mediator in the supernatural order either, through the priesthood. The scale of functions described by the Bible as regulating the relation between the sexes cannot be destroyed by the supernatural order.

The question of the ordination of women should be considered in the light of the Bishop, who carries the fulness of the priesthood and of his Church. The Bishop is not the delegate of the congregation; he is the representative of Christ. He holds the power of Christ to preach, celebrate the Eucharist, prophesy and guide God's people. He is the living image of the Lord, His sacrament, the head which renews the members. The Church is the Bride of Christ. The Bishop carries out the functions of the Bridegroom towards the Church. That is why in principle he holds office for life. It is therefore normal that the charisma of representing Christ in relating to the Church (the Bride) should be borne by a man.

These few lines taken from the teaching of the Bible are confirmed by the canonical tradition of the Church, which excludes women from the ministry. The sole ministry which they exercised as deaconesses was that of charity, and some other minor liturgical tasks. With the exception of the Nestorians and the Monophysites, women did not take part in the sacred functions; they simply introduced the women-candidates for confirmation (Canon 12 of the Fourth Council of Carthage). Admittedly they were consecrated by the laying on of hands (xeirotoveisthal) (Canon 15 of the Council of Chalcedon, and Canon 14 of the Trullan Synod). But the First Council of Orange (Canon 26) and other Councils of the Eastern Church (Epaon and the Second Council of Orleans) prohibited the ordination of women. The laying on of hands is thus to be interpreted simply as a blessing. In speaking of the Order (Tagma) of Deaconesses, St. Epiphanius says that "they were only women-elders, not priestesses in any sense, that their mission was not to interfere in any way with sacerdotal functions, but simply to perform certain offices in the care of women" (Haer. 1 xxix, chap.3).

Balsamon, commenting on Canon 11 of the Council of Laodicea, which prohibited the appointment of Presbytides (women who presided over the work of deaconesses) says: "for a woman to teach in a Catholic Church ... is, in the highest degree, indecorous and pernicious".

Deaconesses assisted the Bishop in certain acts of his ministry (catechesis, charity, home-visiting, immersion at baptism), but only when women were involved. It seems that the canonic tradition should be interpreted in the sense of a special ministry for women exercised only among women, and excluding any form of ministry within the Christian congregation as a whole.

Although the Church has not yielded to the temptation of feminism in the form of its ministry, it extols certain women as the equals of the Apostles. The Holy Women were the first to see the Open Tomb and to announce the Resurrection to the Apostles. They received the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room. And one of them was considered worthy to bear the Word of life. The ministry of virginity is particularly theirs. They share with men in the glory of martyrdom. Woman is the sign of the religious life, because womanhood means sacrifice and self-surrender. The advent of woman is the advent of sainthood, which is a life hidden in God (Col. 3:3). If she removes the veil behind which she lives a secret life with the Bridegroom, this does not constitute a progress of the human person within her.

+ + + + +