

## WOMEN PRIESTS: NO CHANCE *By JOANNA BOGLE*

But everyone agrees that the Catholic Church will one day ordain women. Surely it's just this pope who is holding things back? The next one is bound to change the rule!"

The point is made frequently and always with the same confidence. There is a general assumption, at least in Europe and North America, that the Catholic Church's insistence on a male priesthood is an obscure anomaly, which endures only because a Polish pope has, in the 1990s, refused to move with the times.

Yet the times have often favored a female priesthood and never more so than when Christ ordained his first priests, nearly 2,000 years ago. Virtually all the pagan religions of his day had priestesses, and it would have been entirely normal and natural for him to choose women for this task. He had, moreover, a number of excellent potential candidates, from his own Mother, who accompanied him at his first miracle and stood with him as he suffered on the cross, to Mary Magdalene or the women of Bethany. Instead, he chose only men, and he remained immovable on this, continuing right to the end to exhort and train them all, leaving thus a Church which turned out to be safely founded on a rock. From those twelve men a direct line of apostolic succession has given the Catholic Church the bishops and priests it has today.

In the Church's latest statement on this matter, Pope John Paul II, using his full authority as the successor of Peter, states categorically that the Church cannot—not *will* not, but *cannot*—ordain women, now or in the future. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* sets it out clearly, quoting the decree *Inter insigniores*:

"Only a baptized man [ *vir*] receives sacred ordination. The Lord Jesus chose men [ *vir*] to form the college of the twelve apostles, and the apostles did the same when they chose collaborators to succeed them in their ministry. The college of bishops, with whom the priests are united in the priesthood, makes the college of the twelve an ever-present and ever-active reality until Christ's return. The Church recognizes herself to be bound by this choice made by the Lord himself. For this reason the ordination of women is not possible."

We need to understand that Christians believe God to be the essence of divine omnipotence. To put it crudely, he doesn't make mistakes. When he became incarnate as a human being, he did so at a precise and exact moment in human history, which had been planned from all eternity. From the beginning, God had chosen that there would be a Jewish people, among whom his divine Son would be born. Their own priestly traditions would form part of the background and culture which would help them—and others—to see and know him. Every detail about the Incarnation was known in the mind of God. He was born into the fullness of time.

He didn't say: "Oops, sorry—I made a terrible mistake! I should have been born into the latter half of the twentieth century, so as to have benefited from the We are Church movement in Germany, or the feminist workshop sessions of America, or the Equal Opportunities legislation in Britain." On the contrary, he was and remains omnipotent. He knew exactly what he was doing.

It is worth pointing out that, in choosing his apostles, Christ was not awarding them the priesthood as a reward for good behavior, courage, intelligence, or skill. On the contrary. One—the rock on which the Church was to be founded—denied him, another doubted his Resurrection, and one even betrayed him. The priesthood is not a badge of good-conduct (although, like eleven out of the first twelve, millions of Christ's priests down the centuries have led heroic and noble lives). Rather, just as bread and wine are the essential "matter" of the Eucharist, so are men the "matter" of the priesthood.

If we wish to explore fully this question of the Church and the priesthood, we can start with Christ's actions when on earth. But in a sense we must go further back and see the covenant bond that was established right at the beginning, and the male/female imagery and nuptial meaning that goes right through salvation history.

At every Catholic wedding you will hear the beautiful, scriptural, and profound statement that the relationship of a bridegroom and his bride is like that of Christ and his Church. Of course, we are mostly not listening. We are looking at the bridesmaids and reflecting that they look charming in blue, or admiring the graceful way in which the bride has managed her train, and soon we'll be enjoying the cake and the confetti and the champagne.

But the words nevertheless convey a profound truth. Notice the order of things. Christ and his Church came first. They were an idea in the mind of God from the very beginning. And we, as human beings, when we unite together and marry, are an image of the ultimate Bridegroom and Bride.

Catholics are used to this imagery. The Church is often described as being the Bride of Christ. We also speak of her as being our Holy Mother Church. She is indeed a Bride who has become a mother—and we are all her children, the fruit of that union she has with Christ. Perhaps because we are so used to his notion, we do not think about it very deeply. But it is all part of the nuptial imagery that goes all through Scripture and explains much to us.

Christ began his public ministry at a wedding. Perhaps many of us think this is not very important: We are intrigued by the story of water turning into wine, but we think it could have been a birthday party or just a local harvest supper. But no—the wedding is a central part of the event. It was a genuine wedding. We don't know the names of the young couple getting married, but they had invited Jesus and Mary, and it was evidently a happy and important occasion with food and drink and plenty of guests. But it was more. The whole story has a great significance. When Mary told Jesus that the wine was running out, he answered, "My time is not yet come." Whenever Christ mentions his "time," he means his passion and death. Already, we can hear the drumbeats of that event in the distance. And Mary told the waiting servants, "Do whatever he tells you." That word "do" also will be heard again, when Christ's time indeed has come. At Cana, they do as he tells them, and water is turned into wine. At the Last Supper, once again there is a commandment to "do," and this commandment also has been obeyed down the centuries, with another transformation—wine into Christ's own blood. The nuptial message from Cana is not an optional extra; it is central to the event. Pope John Paul II echoes this link between Cana and Calvary when he speaks of the "nuptial meaning" in the Eucharist.

We see this male/female imagery going right through our redemption history. It is at the heart of Christ's being born among us as a man. When he founded his Church, it was with the love of a bridegroom for a bride, and when he gave us the Eucharist, it was as a nuptial banquet. This nuptial imagery was completed on Calvary. We are speaking here of holy things at the very heart of our faith. Paul speaks of this as being "a great mystery." It gives a meaning—and a great dignity—to the human reality of male and female. It is in this context that we can see not only the significance of a male priesthood, but also the importance and beauty that the Church attaches to purity, to fidelity in marriage, and to the fruitfulness of married love.

There is an important sense in which the current debate about the ordination of women, even if it is sometimes couched in terms which Catholics find offensive, is going to be useful in the development of our understanding these things. Invariably, in the history of the Church, it is only when a doctrine is seriously challenged that its truth is proclaimed in greater fullness. Only when a heresy arises does it become necessary to proclaim truth to end the heresy.

Thus we will not find the word "Trinity" in the New Testament. Yet Catholics and most Protestants unite in professing that there are three Persons in one God and that God the Son walked this earth and was present among us and told us that God the Holy Spirit would descend upon his Church. It was only when the Arian heresy arose, effectively denying Christ's divinity, that it became necessary to defend and explain the Trinity in authoritative and definitive terms. The Council of Nicæa gave us the Nicene Creed, which we say Sunday by Sunday at Mass, proclaiming Christ's divinity in unmistakable terms: "God from God, light from light, true God from true God."

Catholic women have played a central role in the life of the Church, from Lydia in the Acts of the Apostles, through Margaret of Scotland and Jadwiga of Poland and other great queens and women of influence, to the Englishwomen at the Reformation who arranged secret places for Mass, down to Edith Stein, whose quest for intellectual and spiritual truth led her to convent life and did not spare her Auschwitz. In no sense is there any authentic tradition of "If you're not a priest you simply don't matter," despite fashionable attempts to present this as a standard part of Catholicism.

We can expect that, as the question "Why can't Catholic women be priests?" is further explored, the Church will provide richer testimony to the unchanging truth of a male-only priesthood. There will be no change in this teaching—rather, the more it is discussed and debated, the more its scriptural and theological basis will emerge. The male-only priesthood of Jesus Christ and the bridal nature of the Church are spiritual realities of which our two human sexes, male and female, are profound and deeply important images, made in the flesh. Ours is an incarnate faith, centered on the great fact that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Nothing has been left to chance.

This debate about the priesthood will shed light on other issues, especially those surrounding questions of sex and gender, about which there is so much tortured re-evaluation in our times. In a society riven with doubt about homosexuality, transvestites, the idea of "same-sex marriage," the legitimization of sado-masochism as an "alternative lifestyle," and so on and so on, the Church's affirmation that God has a meaning and purpose in the way he created us is a voice of reason and of sanity. It offers for a confused people a compass-point of truth. In this, as in so much more, the Church holds the truth for which so many in these days are aching. We may find debating feminism and the priesthood tedious at times, but God calls us to do it, and we will find that presenting his truth will produce multiple blessings.