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Development and Reception: a Key to Disputes about the Ordination of Women[1]

COLIN CRASTON

Fifty-two bishops have declared that the Anglican Communion does not 'have authority to change the historic tradition of the Church that the Christian ministerial priesthood is male'. Almost the same number of North American bishops have signed a statement of conscience indicating their refusal to preside at a eucharist while in England, unless at the Conference itself, in protest at the Church of England's unwillingness to allow legally ordained women priests from abroad to exercise their sacramental ministry on visits here. It remains to be seen how representative of their fellow bishops at Lambeth these two opposing groups are. What possible meeting of minds can there be? Indeed, in those most widely separated on this issue is there that openness of mind necessary for *mutual* seeking of God's will for the Communion? No doubt in arriving at their current positions they have diligently sought the Holy Spirit's guidance. But it is at least possible that on either side some considerations have been overlooked, or not given sufficient weight. The stronger the convictions, and feelings, the more likely is that possibility.

The contention of this article is that on both of these 'wings' of the controversy there are considerations to be pressed. They fall for one group under the heading of *Development* and for the other under *Reception.*

Opponents of the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate range their arguments mainly within the areas of Biblical teaching, Tradition and Ecumenical relations. The Scriptures are interpreted as establishing male leadership or 'headship' as a divinely ordained principle of the created order, confirmed by the incarnation in male gender of the Son, the Word expressing the Father. That the incarnation should have happened when cultural factors made maleness inevitable is of primary and lasting significance, it is argued. It establishes that human representation of God in the ordained ministry, and particularly in the presidency of the eucharist, must be male.

No assessment of the various interpretations of the biblical evidence will be attempted here. Suffice it to say that Christians intent only on holding positions consonant with Scripture reach different conclusions. The ACC-7 report, *Many Gifts, One Spirit,*[2] attempts a balanced presentation of the

1 This article was given as a paper at the Conference on 'Communion and Episcopacy' at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, 12-15 April 1988.

2 ACC, London 1987. For a fuller examination of the Scriptural evidence see the author's 'Biblical Headship and the Ordination of Women', Grove Books, Pastoral Series No. 27, reprinted 1988.

contrary views. It is with Tradition and Ecumenical relations that this article is mainly concerned. And it is within those areas that the issues of Development and Reception arise.

A substantial change in the historic tradition of the order of the Church is indeed a most serious matter. Part of the role of order in the Church is to safeguard its faith. For eighteen centuries or more the three-fold order of ministry has remained essentially the same, even if there have been changes in its practical outworking. It is an impressive length of time, but what appears to us in our day as longevity should not be given undue weight. As David Edwards has suggested in his *Futures of Christianity*[1] we may still be in the spring-time of the Church, if the human race continues for ages to come.

Tradition has to be seen as living and dynamic, not static. It began as the Church from its earliest days interpreted the foundation events of Christ's teaching, death, resurrection and ascension in the context of each succeeding generation. With the emergence of the New Testament writings it was the interpretation and application of them under the Spirit's guidance that constituted and developed the living Tradition. As new situations arose, presenting new opportunities and problems, the received Tradition had to be tested according to current understanding of Scripture and reaffirmed or modified. While due reverence had to be paid to the Church's inheritance from the past, understanding of God's revelation could never be complete. It is not a closed system of belief or practice that Tradition presents to each generation.

The development of the three-fold order must be seen within that context. Its pattern did not spring directly or inevitably from the post-Pentecost explosion of ministry, still less from the actions of Jesus prior to his death in his choice of the twelve, or the mission of the seventy. Without doubt, in the ministry of the apostolic band and in the untidy proliferation of ministries evident in Acts and the Epistles there are principles of primary importance for the pattern of ordained ministry that eventually emerged. The need for oversight and leadership, pastoral care and discipline, ministry of word and sacraments, maintenance of unity and administration, continued as from the beginning, but the way the Church gradually shaped its ordained ministry was influenced by changing circumstances, including evolution from a Jewish movement to a multi-national fellowship, the impact of cultural forces and changed expectations as the Parousia appeared less imminent. To recognize these factors is in no way to minimise the Holy Spirit's guidance, for it is in response to new situations and in new understandings of God's truth, discovered in Scripture and in the created order, that the Spirit leads the Church.

If Development played such a part in the emergence of the three-fold order, and Tradition is a living force, the possibility of further change has to be recognised, particularly so in times of profound changes in societies in which the Church has to minister. Both opponents and supporters of the

1 H & S, London 1987.

ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate acknowledge the far-reaching effects of the emancipation of women in modern times, enabling large numbers to share fully with men in all areas of human society, as a result of advances in medical science, technology and education. Where they differ is in their perception of the relevance of this revolution to the pattern of the ordained ministry. As the Archbishop of Canterbury in his letter to Cardinal Willebrands in 1985 acknowledged, those Anglican Churches that have ordained women have done so in the sincere conviction that the historic tradition is open to this development and that no departure from the traditional understanding of the apostolic ministry is intended. To opponents of the change the step is at worst a break with the Tradition, and thus not true Development at all, at best ill-timed and premature, and certainly the case is regarded as not proven.

If opposition stems from an unshakeable conviction that the biblical revelation bars women from the priesthood and episcopate for all time, argument is at an end. Development in Tradition must be consonant with Scripture. But if, as the Archbishop's letter to Cardinal Willebrands says, 'Anglicans would generally doubt whether the New Testament by itself alone permits a clear settlement of the issue once and for all', argument may continue. As it does, it is increasingly apparent that the crunch issue is the possibility or propriety of any part of the Church Catholic settling the matter unilaterally, and indeed of any member Church of the Anglican Communion doing so without the agreement of the whole. The Open Letter of the 52 bishops focusses on this issue.

In addressing the ecumenical or, more correctly, the ecclesiological debate two questions appear relevant. First, what is our understanding of catholicity? Is it to be restricted wholly or mainly to those episcopal Churches that have maintained the three-fold order of ministry, or should it include all Trinitarian Churches? Taking the restricted view would imply that the three-fold order represents a *sine qua non* factor in the apostolic tradition, a position the non-episcopal Churches, and possibly the majority of Anglicans, would dispute. The apostolic tradition is generally recognised as comprehending the faith, witness, fellowship, worship and ministry coming to us from the earliest days. And, however strongly Anglicans contend for the historic episcopate as a sign and instrument of the apostolic tradition and value of the three-fold order, seeing such ordering of the ministry as one of the bases for the unity of the Churches, it should not be a restricting factor in the definition of catholicity. If that definition must include all Trinitarian parts of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church, the women's ordination question embraces other Churches as well as the Roman, Anglican and Orthodox. Nor may the question be closed by reference to numbers. It is said that 'three-quarters of Christendom' opposes women priests and bishops. But numbers alone have never been a sure guide to the truth. If they were, the sixteenth century Reformation in England would not have been carried through. Again, if it is argued that outside the episcopal Churches with the three-fold order no claim is made for 'ministerial priesthood', it must be remembered that an Anglican consensus on that matter is hard to achieve.

The second question touches the relation of a part of the Church Catholic to the whole. Granted that a part, either the Church of England, say, or the Anglican Communion, were convinced that women's ordination is a right step in Development within the three-fold order, should it take it without a General council of the Church universal? Even a Council of the Roman, Orthodox and Anglican Churches – which it would be presumptuous to describe as 'General' – must be a distant possibility. Given then the present multiplicity of divisions in the one catholic Church of Christ, is each part to be paralysed in this or any other aspect of Development? The answer will depend on how each part understands what it means to belong to the 'true and apostolic Church of Christ', as the Church of England claims to do.

That understanding must include not only looking to the past, to what has been inherited, but also looking forward to the realisation of the Church united as Christ wills. Michael Ramsey in *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*,[1] speaks of the Anglican Church as 'pointing through its own history to something of which it is a fragment'. With all that implies in discussions and consultations with other Churches in the search for unity, must belonging to the 'true and apostolic Church of Christ' prohibit action without comprehensive agreement? One answer could be: 'Only if "belonging" meant simply being "a part of a larger whole".' Stephen Sykes in an article in *The Independent* in February 1987 offered a fuller meaning of 'belonging', as 'fully participating in' the apostolic Church of Christ. This understanding would imply the right of a Church to do whatever it perceived the true and apostolic Church could and should do. Sykes illustrates the point from the Reformation, 'The failure of another Church to reform itself could not be a reason for the Church of England's dereliction of its duty, as Hooker himself urged in the sixteenth century'. It falls within the authority of any part of the one Church to act as it believes the whole should.

The issue, however, is not as simple as that. And here we come to the North American bishops and their attitude to the Church of England. Development in understanding of the faith or in Church order is not finalised simply by legal processes in any one part of the catholic Church, or by synodical decisions even by special majorities. The Anglican tradition emphasises the place of Reception in the process of Development. New insights and their implications for the whole Church need to be assessed, tested and generally accepted before they can be regarded as 'received'. A report to the 1948 Lambeth Conference laid emphasis on the *consensus fidelium*, which 'does not depend on mere numbers or on the extension of a belief at any time, but on continuance through the ages, and the extent to which the consensus is genuinely free'. In the divided state of the catholic Church and in the absence of any magisterium or over-arching authority over the several parts Reception will be a slow and untidy process. Any

1 Longman Green & Co., London 1936.

Church, therefore, making a change in the historic order must regard its action as provisional, however firmly convinced of the rightness of the step.

Undoubtedly in the Episcopal Church in the USA a large majority approves the ordination of women, and over more than a decade their ministry has been generally well received. The Church there has done what it firmly believes the whole Church should do. The integrity of its decision can be recognised. But this and other parts of the whole Church that have ordained women to the three-fold order must recognise the provisionality of the development. And so must the Church of England, if and when it follows suit. As yet, however, this Church has not decided, and so in the process and concerns of Reception should not be pressurised by any other parts of the whole Church, in the way the North American bishops seem to be doing, and some in this country are welcoming. In Church history some developments strongly advocated and pursued have eventually come to nothing. It may be almost impossible for supporters of women's ordination, of which the writer is one, to envisage a reversing of the development. But behaviour towards others, Church or groups, taking contrary views must be based on a recognition that one's own judgment is fallible and understanding partial.

In the North American scene justice and equal rights for women are a significant factor in the cultural context in which the Church has had to try to interpret God's will for its ministry – many supporters of women's ordination in this country may lean more heavily on other factors – and so it is understandable if some bishops coming to Lambeth feel strongly that England's bar to the exercise of their women priests' ministry has an element of injustice. But they must be asked as Anglicans to take seriously the inevitable restraints and provisionality of actions that Reception in the process of Development entails. The ordination of women debate must not be reduced merely to a crusade to right injustices. It is more complex than that, with certainly strong and positive arguments based on Kingdom theology to be deployed in its favour.

If the Kingdom God is establishing a realisation through Christ of his original purposes in creation we must look for the fullest partnership of man and woman in that essentially priestly service which was given to mankind as vice-regent over the created order. Male and female, together made in the image of God, were to act in his name towards, and to offer articulate praise on behalf of, all creatures. Today, as never before, the possibility of women sharing fully in all aspects of the Church's particular ministry is opened up. The credibility of the Church as a Sign, earnest and instrument of the Kingdom is directly related to the issue of women in the ordained ministry.

Many prayers will ascend for the bishops at Lambeth. Among them let there be prayer for an openness of mind, not least where convictions are strongest.

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