

The Ordination of Women and its Impact on the future of the Church of England (*)

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In November of 1992, shortly after the General Synod of the Church of England voted to permit the ordination of women as priests, the Bishop of Washington was joined, like his counterpart in Boston, by a female suffragan. Most traditionalists now believe that no hope remains for them in their church and are seeking for alternatives.

The Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches have never authorized the ordination of women as priests and have repeatedly said that theology and tradition forbid them from ever doing so. The reason for this is scriptural -- the fact that Christ chose only men as his disciples and apostles, not to mention the writings of Saint Paul -- and also based on the role of the priest in the celebration of the central service of Anglican, Orthodox and Catholic worship: the mass, or eucharist, or Divine Liturgy, namely the re-enactment of Christ's passion, death and resurrection, in which the priest takes on the role of Christ, or in traditional theology assumes the "persona Christi" becoming the "Icon" of Christ himself. The priest at the altar not only represents the person of Christ in his human, male form, but he transforms the element of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Thus, as Mother Theresa of Calcutta recently reminded a group of women, it is impossible, and in its implications heretical, for a woman to say the words of institution, "this is

my body", because her female body is not the male body of Christ.

The fact that the Church of England has decided that this is not a criterion, just as the Episcopal Church in America did fourteen years ago, either ignores the role of the priest as the icon of Christ or else denies that His incarnation as a man, rather than as a woman, was of any significance. Their arguments are basically sociological and political -- it is unfair, they said correctly, to deny anyone a job on the basis of his or her sex (and some would add to this sexual orientation), and the position of priest is just another job, like a teacher, diplomat, stockbroker or race car driver. Traditionalists would counter-argue that the priesthood is not just another job, but a peculiar calling to which by Christ's example only men are summoned -- a one-off situation that should not be governed by contemporary views of sexual equality in all other instances. To the Traditionalist argument that Christ chose only men to serve as his associates those in favor of women's ordination counter that this reflected the times in which Christ lived and times are now different. Traditionalists reply that God chose the time (and the fullness thereof) of His son's incarnation and ministry, and given that Christ overturned nearly every other rule of His day He could just as easily have overturned that taboo as well while He was at it, had He wanted to. To say that He did

not because He could not (which is what the women's ordination camp implies) is to say that He was not God, a denial of one of the basic tenets of Catholic and Orthodox traditionalist faith. Thus for many Anglicans who believe in traditionalist teachings, the Church of England by action of the Synod last November has become just another Protestant sect with no ties to the ancient Christian traditions it used to espouse. And of course in the Protestant tradition there is no reason why a woman cannot be a minister, since the job is strictly pastoral and administrative -- tasks a woman often does exceptionally well -- and not sacramental in the Catholic and Orthodox sense. The minister in the Protestant tradition is not changing the elements of the altar into anything other than symbols of Christ's body and blood, not the actual corpus et sanguine of the traditional doctrine of transubstantiation. Therefore, the argument of the icon of Christ does not apply. No Catholic or Orthodox priest will argue that a woman cannot be a Presbyterian minister, because a Presbyterian minister does not do what a Catholic or Orthodox (and many Anglican) priests do, or at least believe they do. And until the position of the Catholic and Orthodox churches officially changes -- and do not believe for a minute that there is not considerable pressure on the Catholic church, especially in the United States,



Canada and Northern Europe, to do just that -- a large number of Anglicans do not accept the idea that their church, the smallest of the three, has the right to act unilaterally.

The upshot is that the Anglican Communion, including the Church of England, will probably split, with many of the faithful leaving to join the Roman and Orthodox branches of Christendom, to set up or join existing break-away Anglican-type independent churches, or just leaving period. Now that there are bishops in several churches of the Anglican Communion -- The United States and New Zealand for example -- it is no longer possible for traditionalists to avoid the issue or the consequences. While there were women priests only, traditionalists could ignore them, sure that all male priests were validly ordained. But since bishops ordain priests, there are now male priests who have been ordained, invalidly according to traditionalists, by

women, and therefore the sacrament of Holy Communion which they offer to the faithful is also invalid. The irony is that many of those Anglicans who are now faced with the imminent prospect of leaving their church are among the most devout and dedicated. Not only are they upset at the prospect of women priests and bishops, they are doubly horrified at the modern, trendy theological baggage that comes inevitably in their train -- the ordination of homosexuals of both sexes as priests (not that this is anything new in the case of men, but in the past they maintained celibacy or else kept their sexual activities very private) and the 'marriage' of same sex partners in church. In addition whole new liturgies have grown up which are barely Christian from the traditionalist view, but rather embodiments of 'New Age' transcendentalism and politically correct environmentalism. Those who cannot accept this -- and they

are many -- see themselves as being forced out of the church by radicals.

The Anglican Communion meets as a group every ten years at something called the "Lambeth Conference", named after the palace which is the Archbishop of Canterbury's London residence, attended by all the communion's bishops worldwide. The next meeting is scheduled for 1998 and it will be interesting to see how the issue of women's ordination would have evolved and/or what remains of the Communion when it convenes •

(*) taken from a lecture given at the Near East School of Theology on January 28th 1993

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