Tradition and the Status of Women in the Catholic Church

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Abstract: This submission by a woman to the Australian Bishops, for the Women in the Catholic Church in Australia Report 1997, epitomises the call of many Catholic women worldwide for a more meaningful role in the Church. Despite evidence to indicate that Jesus strongly promoted the dignity and equality of women and that early Christians gave leadership roles to women, the influence of prevailing cultural norms has historically caused the role of women in the Church to be diminished. Even today when cultural bias against women has to a large extent been overcome in secular society, the Church maintains a male-dominated culture which excludes women from ordination and decision making within the church and lacks inclusive religious imagery and language.

Key Words: women’s ordination; Jesus and women; women and early Christianity; New Testament – portrayal of women; women and the Catholic Church; Christian feminism

Many of us are restless and dissatisfied with the knowledge that no matter how much we are prepared to give to the Church — the Church is only prepared to take limited service from us. We know the Church needs all the help it can get ... but it seems that major potential providers of human resources available to the Church...- women - still aren't good enough to fully participate.

In this essay I will examine the attitude of Jesus to women, the evolution of the early Church's attitude towards women and finally examine the current position of the Church. In doing so I will show that the discrepancies between the Church's practices and the Gospel message continue and that the Catholic Church is out of line with its own principles.

Jesus’ Attitude towards Women

The status of women in Palestine during Jesus' time was decidedly that of inferiors. Women were subordinated first to their fathers, then to their husbands. As pointed out by Leonard Swidler, according to most rabbinic customs women were; not allowed to study the Scriptures (Torah), were greatly restricted in public prayer, were not counted when determining the number necessary for a quorum to form a congregation to worship communally, were separated in the synagogues from men, were not allowed to read aloud

1 As is evidenced in the first article of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights as well as in many counties equal opportunities legislation.
3 Leonard Swidler, Jesus was a Feminist, http://home.swipnet.se/~w-32278/fem1.htm
or take any leading function in worship, could be divorced for the flimsiest of reasons and were not allowed to bear witness in a court of law.

The attitude towards women is perhaps best reflected in Jewish men’s daily prayers that included a threefold thanksgiving:

Praised be God that he has not created me a gentile; praised be God that he has not created me a woman; praised be God that he has not created me an ignorant man.\(^4\)

Despite these attitudes and norms, according to the Gospel accounts, Jesus attitude towards women was one of love and respect.

As pointed out by Schnackenburg:\(^5\)

Jesus did not differentiate in his preaching between men and women; women were to hear the word of God, experience messianic salvation and participate in the future kingdom of God in complete equality with men. Jesus welcomed women into his closest discipleship:

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women... Mary, called Magdalene, ... Jo安娜, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means (Lk 8:1-3; RSV).

Jesus allowing women to be his travel companions was highly unusual since women normally didn't speak to men in public, much less travel around the countryside with them.\(^6\) In addition, Jesus ignored ritual impurity,\(^7\) talked to foreign women,\(^8\) taught women students,\(^9\) expressed concern for widows\(^10\) and condemned the practice of divorce.\(^11\) It was women who remained at the cross (Luke 27:55-56) and were present at his burial (Luke 27:61). Furthermore, according to the Resurrection accounts, Jesus chose women to bear witness to his resurrection (John 20:11-18; Luke 24:1-12; Matthew 28:1-10). This choice reflects women's equal call to discipleship, for it was upon the testimony of women that the proclamation of the Resurrection depended.\(^12\) This equal call to discipleship is also reflected in the fact that the spirit of prophecy was given to both male and female disciples (Acts 2:17).\(^13\) As such, Jesus vigorously promoted the dignity and equality of women in the midst of a very male-dominated society.\(^14\)

\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Mark 5:25-34 describes Jesus’ cure of a woman who suffered from menstrual bleeding for 12 years.
\(^8\) John 4:7 to 5:30 describe Jesus’ conversation with a woman of Samaria. She was doubly ritually unclean since she was both a foreigner and a woman. Jesus also helped a Canaanite woman, another foreigner, in Matthew 15:21.
\(^11\) In Jesus’ time, a man could divorce his wife, but the wife had no right to divorce her husband... In Mark 10:11-12, Jesus overthrows this tradition and states that neither spouse can divorce the other; he treats the wife and husband equally.
\(^12\) Schenk, Jesus and Women, http://www.cta-usa.org/wicl/4jesusandwomen.html
\(^14\) Swidler goes as far to say in fact that Jesus was a feminist, and a very radical one. (See http://home.swipnet.se/~w32278/fem1.htm).
Women in the Early Church

Following the death of Jesus, the early Christian Church continued to live out Jesus’ example of equality by giving leadership roles to women. Paul’s letters in particular provide strong historical evidence for the leadership roles of women in the infant church. According to his writings, St Paul had a number of women as his co-workers in ministry. In Romans 16:1-15, Paul lists a number of Church leaders. In Romans 16:1, Paul refers to Phoebe, a woman, as a deaconess of the Church at Cenchreae; in 1 Romans 16:3 he refers to a married couple, Priscilla and her husband Aquila as his "fellow workers in Christ Jesus"(NSV); in Romans 16:7, he refers to a male apostle, Andronicus and a female apostle, Junia, as "outstanding among the apostles "( NRSV);¹⁵ and again in Philippians 4:2, Paul refers to two women, Euodia and Syntyche, as his co-workers who have "laboured side by side with me"(NSV). According to Dr. Helmut Koester (in reference to 1 Romans 16:1-15),

Most of the persons named in this list are not simply personal friends of Paul in the church of Ephesus, but associates and co-workers. This is shown by the repeated references to their functions. The fact that such a large number of women appears in this list is clear and undeniable evidence for the unrestricted participation of women in the offices of the church in the Pauline congregations."¹⁶

This attitude of equality for men and women is reflected in Galatians:¹⁷

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; RSV)

In addition to Paul’s writings, artwork in the catacombs appears to indicate that women took an active part in leadership in the early Church and also in the celebration of the Eucharist.¹⁸

However, as time progressed, the early Church quickly became misogynistic. This is evidenced in later New Testament writings such as 1 Timothy ².¹⁹ In these writings it is clear that women were being excluded from roles that involved teaching and authority over men.

Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent (1 Tim 2:11-12; RSV)

As pointed out by the Catholic Theological Society of America, the reasons that are given for this exclusion have nothing to do with Jesus’ example or his teachings,²⁰ rather the reason given for the above exclusion, is based on role of Eve in the Fall:

¹⁵ It is interesting to note that the NSV of the bible instead refers to Andronicus and Junias as being "men of note amongst the apostles". As such, this translation appears to impose male gender on a person recognised in other versions of the bible as female. An early form of gender bias perhaps? See http://www.ibiblio.org/bgreek/test-archives/html4/1996-07/13740.html [a discussion thread on the topic of Junia] for an interesting discussion of this issue.


¹⁹ Whilst this book is attributed to St Paul there are many scholars who have dated it at a later point in time after Paul’s death and therefore question his authorship of it.

For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor (1 Tim 2:13-14; RSV)

As such women were impliedly inferior to men and were considered to be more easily led astray.

This misogynist attitude persisted after New Testament times. In the second century Tertullian, said of woman: "You are the devil’s gateway"; in the 3rd century Origen wrote: "What is seen with the eyes of the creator is masculine, and not feminine, for God does not stoop to look upon what is feminine and of the flesh"; in the fourth century Epiphanius said: "The devil seeks to vomit out his disorder through women." 21 Harsh words indeed!

So where did this attitude, so very remote from Jesus’ attitude of love and respect for women, come from? Christine Schenk in her article Jesus and Women 22 suggests that as Christianity gradually became more mainstream, women’s leadership became less and less acceptable in the patriarchal Greco-Roman world. 23 In addition, Ranke-Heinemann 24 argues that Gnostic rigorous antisexual and antimarital tendencies greatly influenced early Christian thinking.

As a consequence of these influences, over the centuries the church continued to be shaped by cultural bias that women were inferior to men both by nature and by law. St Thomas Aquinas reflects this attitude:

As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active power of the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of a woman comes from defect in the active power... (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Q92, art. 1, Reply Obj. 1) 25

Current Views towards Women

The teachings in relation to women did not to a great extent change over the next few centuries. As pointed out by Christine Gudorf, even in the late 19th century, encyclicals proclaimed the inferiority of women, condemned as heretics those who taught the equality of the sexes, and insisted on the headship of men over women in marriage. 26

With Pope Paul VI the traditional teachings began to change. He condemned sex discrimination in public life and made it clear that the church would not support the subordination of women in the social world.

Any kind of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, colour, social conditions, language or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God’s design (Gaudium et Spes, §29.2). 27

21 Quotes taken from Leonard Swidler, Jesus was a Feminist, http://home.swipnet.se/~w-32278/fem1.htm
23 J. Wijngaards in The Exclusion of Women from Priestly Ordination - Its Cuckoo Parentage, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001) argues that in fact it was the influence of Roman law that resulted in women being viewed as inferior. According to Wijngaards, “since Church leaders took Roman Law as the norm for what is right and just, negative rules regarding women found their way into Christian thought, practice and law”.
Pope John Paul II went even further in his support of the equality of women in society. Specifically, in his 1988 apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, he rejected the long-standing teaching on the headship of men in marriage - a monumental move.\(^2\) In 1995, Pope John Paul II, in his *Letter to Women*, admitted that "women’s dignity has often been unacknowledged" In March 2000 he acknowledged the Church’s historical acquiescence to that discrimination.\(^2\) Pope John Paul II has also decried domestic violence and sexism, called the role of women in the Church "necessary and irreplaceable,"\(^3\) called for the Church to increase the role of women and gave approval to female service at the altar.\(^4\)

One of the major criticisms of the Church’s current position however, both internally and externally, is that of adopting a double standard when it comes to the role of women within the Church. Whilst the Church preaches justice and equality for women in the social world, the Church itself practices injustices. Firstly it alienates women through the maleness of the Church. According to WATAF (Women and the Australian Church), failure by the Church to use inclusive imagery of God and inclusive language (eg in the liturgy, Church documents, Papal communication and the Catechism) represents a serious barrier, especially for younger women.\(^5\)

Secondly, the Church has failed to live up to its own principles by excluding women from the priesthood and therefore from decision-making and leadership within the Church. This contradiction is I think summed up best by Sister Theresa Kane who in her intervention to Pope John Paul II said:

> As women, we have heard the powerful messages of our Church professing dignity and reverence for all persons. As women, we have pondered upon these words. Our contemplation leads us to state that the Church in its struggle to be faithful to its call for reverence and dignity for all persons must respond by providing the possibility of women as persons being included in all ministries of our Church.\(^6\)

**The Debate over Female Ordination**

On what basis does the Church justify the distinction between its own practices and that of societies?

In 1976 Pope Paul VI, having previously demanded the eradication of discrimination in *Gaudium et Spes*, approved, confirmed and ordered the publication of *Inter Insigniores*, a Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood by the

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\(^3\) See Pope John Paul II, *Universal Prayer: Confession of Sins and Asking for Forgiveness*, March 12, 2000;  

\(^4\) Apostolic Letter, *Odition Sacredotalis of John Paul II to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Reserving Priesty Ordination to Men Alone*;  

\(^5\) C. Smith, *Women and the Jubilee Year*, (Knights of Columbus 2000),  

\(^6\) See WATAF,  

\(^7\) One of the most celebrated cases of dissent was that of Sister Theresa Kane’s intervention to John Paul II in October 1979. As president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, she addressed the Holy Father during his visit to Washington. He refused to address her. *Origins* (18 October 1979), 285, Human Rights and Women’s Ordination,  
[http://www.womenpriests.org/theology/discrim.htm](http://www.womenpriests.org/theology/discrim.htm)
Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In this document the Church’s opposition to the ordination of women was confirmed.

The Catholic Church has never felt that priestly or episcopal ordination can be validly conferred on women...by calling only men to the priestly Order and ministry in its true sense, the Church intends to remain faithful to the type of ordained ministry willed by the Lord Jesus Christ and carefully maintained by the Apostles.\(^{34}\)

In addition the Commission suggested that there needed to be a "natural resemblance" between Christ and his minister and as such, the minister must be a man.

As such, the Church no longer excluded women from the priesthood on the basis of traditional arguments of inferiority or lack of legal standing on the part of women, but rather justified it on the basis that Christ did not call women to the apostolic ministry since he selected only men as members of the twelve; that the apostles themselves, faithful to the practice of Christ, chose only men for priestly offices and that only a male could "resemble" Christ.

In Ordinatio Sacerdotalis, Pope John Paul II, who as I have discussed above also condemned discrimination against women, reaffirmed the Church's position against women's ordination and attempted to end the debate.

Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church’s divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren, I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful (No. 4).\(^{35}\)

In refusing to ordain women the Church claimed that it was not discrimination.

...the non-admission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them. Rather, it is to be seen as the faithful observance of a plan to be ascribed to the wisdom of the Lord of the universe.\(^{36}\)

However, many feminists and theologians have questioned how refusal to allow women admission to the priesthood could not be discrimination. As the Human Rights and Women's Ordination point out, whilst no individual can claim the right to ordination, it is wrong to refuse ordination because that person belongs to a particular group, class or nation.

Should we not speak of discrimination if all Chinese, all Mexicans, all New Zealanders were excluded from the priestly ministry simply because they belong to those nations? Excluding women because they are women is a similar act of discrimination.\(^{37}\)

\(^{34}\) Inter Insigniores, Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (October 15, 1976); http://www.newadvent.org/docs/dl76ii.htm

\(^{35}\) Note: The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith clarified the authority of this teaching by stating that it is founded on the written Word of God, has been constantly preserved and applied in the Tradition of the Church, and has been set forth infallibly. The issue as to this teaching's infallibility has been subject to much debate (and is an essay in itself). For contrary views see Peter Burns, SJ, Women's Ordination and Infallible Teaching, An Inquiry Was the Teaching Infallible? http://www.womenpriests.org/teaching/burns.htm, Elizabeth A. Johnson, Disputed questions: authority, priesthood, women http://www.womenpriests.org/teaching/johnson.htm and Ann Elizabeth O'Hara, ‘Infallibility complex: Have we heard the final word on women’s ordination?‘ http://www.womenpriests.org/teaching/ohara.htm


As also pointed out on the *Human Rights and Women's Ordination* website, arguing that there is no discrimination because it was Christ's will, does no more than shift the blame on to Christ who, as I discussed earlier, promoted the dignity and equality of women.

In addition, theologians have questioned the theological basis for the Church's exclusion of women from the priesthood. The argument that Jesus intended to exclude women from the priesthood, as evidenced by his choice of only men among the Twelve and that it was only to them that he said at the Last Supper, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24) is disputed. Whilst Jesus did choose the Twelve, as pointed out by Bokenkotter, we have little information of their role and there is no evidence that they acted as heads of local churches. The first local administrators mentioned in the New Testament are not the 12 but seven Hellenist supervisors (Acts 6:5). In addition there is nothing in New Testament literature about Jesus or the apostles instituting a regular process of ordination, nor is there a distinction between 'laity and 'ministers.' As the majority of the members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission concluded in 1976:

It does not seem that the New Testament by itself alone will permit us to settle in a clear way and once and for all the problem of the possible accession of women to the presbyterate (PBC, 96).

In terms of the ongoing tradition of appointing male priests, as discussed earlier, historical studies show that the very early church did include women in leadership roles and the later practice of not ordaining women was based on social and theological beliefs. These beliefs no longer stand up to scrutiny and the fact that this discrimination has been a part of the Church's tradition does not make it right. As pointed out by *National Coalition of American Nuns,* the persistence of a wrongful practice over time does not legitimate its continuation. Historically many firmly held teachings in the past have been reversed (eg, the church's position on slavery, burning of witches etc) and are not now considered part of the Church's authentic tradition. Even Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, a strong opponent of women's ordination, has stated in his commentary on *Dei Verbum*,

Not everything that exists in the Church must for that reason be also a legitimate tradition, in other words, not every tradition that arises in the Church is a true celebration and keeping present of the mystery of Christ. There is a distorting, as well as a legitimate, tradition. Consequently, tradition must not be considered only affirmatively, but also critically.

In terms of the argument that priests should be male as a symbolic value of the masculine image for acting in *persona Christi*, this can be criticized in that there is a natural resemblance between women and Jesus Christ in terms of a common humanity and participation in divine grace. Also worth noting is the point that what is represented by the priest at the Eucharist is not Christ's male or female gender, but his sacrificial love.

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40 It should be noted that all of the twelve were Jewish. Using the Church's rationale Jesus must have deliberately excluded Gentiles and in keeping with Jesus example should not all priests be Jewish?  

41 *National Coalition of American Nuns,* *This Teaching Cannot Be Infallible* (December 8, 1995)  
http://astro.temple.edu/~arcc/nuns.html


43 Taken from the Women Priests Catholic Internet Library, *What is it all about - in a nutshell?* http://www.womenpriests.org/summary.htm
Pieper\textsuperscript{44} also points out that if the requirement of being a priest is to “image” Christ, then all priests should be Jewish, thirty something men.

I think John Wijngaards in his article \textit{Discerning the Spirit's New Creation},\textsuperscript{45} sums it up best when he points out that ultimately the demand for the ordination of women stems from the equality of men and women in Christ's universal priesthood (as acquired through baptism) and from the nature of the Church as the People of God in which women as much as men are full and equal members.

\textit{Conclusion}

There is no doubt that the Church has come a long way from the days when women were considered “the devil's gateway”. The Church has condemned the subordination of women in the social world and denounced discrimination on the basis of gender. Women can now participate in the Church as Eucharistic assistants, lectors, altar servers, theologians, administrators and on Church councils. However, whilst there has been considerable progress towards including women in liturgies, as well as some lower level Church management, much more remains to be done. In the Church, misogyny is still being expressed subtly though male exclusive language and symbolism (e.g., God the Father, Mankind, etc.)\textsuperscript{46} as well as obviously through the exclusion of women from the priesthood and hence from decision and policy making in a patriarchal church run only by the ordained. This is no longer appropriate in a new cultural context where the equality and rights of women are not only recognised but are in fact demanded.

So how should the church move forward? In Galatians, Paul proclaimed that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.\textsuperscript{47} As pointed out by Elisabeth Tetlow,\textsuperscript{48} despite Paul’s theology, all three dichotomies have existed within the history of the Church. The first was overcome in the first century, by Paul himself and others in the early Church. The second was overcome in the nineteenth century. It is time now for the Church to overcome the final dichotomy and to follow Jesus’ example of treating women with dignity and equality by allowing women full participation in the Church and celebrating that their being is made in the likeness and image of God.


\textsuperscript{46} The need to include female imagery of God and to use inclusive language is an essay in itself! For further information on this see: E. Pagels, “What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity” [http://www.womenpriests.org/body/pagels.htm](http://www.womenpriests.org/body/pagels.htm), J. Wijngaards, “Two ways of relating to God: The ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ in our perception of God” [http://www.womenpriests.org/body/godmfem.htm](http://www.womenpriests.org/body/godmfem.htm), I Raming, “Male discourse about God in the liturgy and its effects on women” [http://www.womenpriests.org/theologe/raming1.htm](http://www.womenpriests.org/theologe/raming1.htm) and Marie-Thérèse van Lunen Chénu, “Marie-Thérèse is definitely not a ‘son’ of the Church!” [http://www.womenpriests.org/body/lunen2.htm](http://www.womenpriests.org/body/lunen2.htm).

\textsuperscript{47} Galatians 2:28.

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