Part 7: The Catholic Church and a Male-Only Priesthood - I

Why can't women be ordained priests in the Catholic Church? We are aware of how women's roles have expanded, with many assuming leadership roles, such as in the military and corporations, once considered the prerogative of men. Having a male-only priesthood seems to be an outmoded practice in comparison. It opens up the Church to the charge of being misogynistic and chauvinistic, which many women and men find abhorrent, not to mention unjust.[1] Critics argue that Jesus' selection of only men to serve as apostles was determined by the cultural norms of his time and not for any theological reason. Freed from those constraints in this modern era, they argue that the Church possesses the authority to ordain women. They ask what is holding back the Church from doing what should be obvious.

Where to begin? For starters, we can begin by acknowledging that Jesus was not beholden to the cultural norms of his time. He broke many of them by eating with tax collectors and sinners, touching lepers when healing them, and including women in his inner circle. He was very familiar with Israel's history, including female prophets and judges (leaders). Jesus had no compunction about criticizing the lax attitude toward divorce and remarriage among the Jews of his time, upholding the indissolubility of marriage. He insisted on the need for his followers to eat and drink his body and blood lest they have no life within them. Upon hearing that, many of his disciples left him. Finally, he knew about the Roman religious cults that had women priestesses. That is one cultural norm that Judaism and Jesus refused to sanction. Still, Jesus has a record of challenging his day's cultural and religious norms. Permitting women to serve as apostles would have been another example of his refusal to be hemmed in by those cultural or religious norms. However, he deliberately chose not to do so. The question is, why?

Here is a hint. We are not looking at the priesthood as an occupation or a job. It is something else and something more. Priesthood is a vocation. That is why the Church will speak about vocations to the priesthood and the consecrated life, marriage, which includes fatherhood and motherhood, and the single life. The reason that only men may be ordained priests is that the priesthood is connected to spiritual fatherhood. Fatherhood isn't something we should understand in occupational terms but in relational and vocational terms.

That insight explains why priests are called Father. It is because they are associated with celebrating the sacrament of baptism. In that sacrament, infants and catechumens are born again into a new life in Christ. In this sense, priests are spiritual fathers; hence, the title Father.

Note that the Triune God is referenced by masculine imagery, with the first person of the Trinity called God the Father. He is the father of all creation. He is also eternally Father through his relationship with his son. In his preaching and prayer, Jesus revealed to us, "Our Father who art in heaven." God does not reveal himself as God Our Mother.

God established a male-only priesthood in the Old Testament, beginning with Moses. God assigned the tribe of Levi to serve and assist the priests, who were from the tribe of Levi. However, they could not enter the sanctuary or perform sacrifices. Those were explicitly reserved for the house of Aaron within that tribe. Note that the Old Testament all-male priesthood was a divinely created institution, not a cultural practice.

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[1] No one is entitled to be ordained a priest be they male or female. Ordination is a calling from God who will call whom he wills to the priesthood.

So the real question is, why does God reveal himself as Father and use masculine imagery consistently when referring to himself? In his trilogy, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI recounted how mother deities surrounded the people of Israel and the New Testament Church. He pointed out that the pagan religions created a picture of the relationship between God and the world that was completely opposed to the biblical image of God. In paganism, the relationship between creator and creature disappears. Why is that problematic?[2]

Pope Benedict XVI points out that pagan goddess religions are fascinated with Mother Earth. Everything springs from her womb. The child's relationship with its mother is so intimate that the infant still remains connected by an umbilical cord upon birth. With Mother Earth, the mother's radical intimacy is in the infant. God and creation blend into one. That is the problem.[3]

The Judeo-Christian vision of God is radically different. Pope Benedict XVI puts it this way. "The image of the father was and is apt for expressing the otherness of the creator and creature and the sovereignty of his creative act. Only by excluding the mother deities could the Old Testament bring its image of God, the pure transcendence of God, to maturity."

At the same time, we do not want to lose the incredible intimacy with God or nearness with God. God's immanence is often expressed in feminine imagery, even in the Bible. However, we're never permitted to lose sight of the truth that God is radically set apart from creation. He's not within creation. He's the creator of it. He stands outside of it, even though he brings himself into it. That's what's being communicated using masculine language when referencing the Triune God, and certainly when calling upon God Our Father.

Even at a time and place in which feminine language about the gods was widespread, the Israelites and the early Christians insisted on using masculine language and imagery when speaking of God. They did not believe God was literally a man. But they recognized that masculine imagery expressed the otherness, independence, strength, risk-taking, assertiveness, transcendence, sovereignty, and kingship of God.

Then, the understanding is that the priest acts "in the person of Christ." It is essential to say that the priest does not represent someone who is absent. Instead, "in the person of Christ" means the very person of the Risen Christ makes himself present through the priest's actions. This signifies a specific, sacramental identification with Christ, the eternal High Priest and Head of his mystical body, the Church. The priest acts in the person of Christ when he presides at the Eucharist, consecrating the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, and when he absolves sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. These actions are made possible because the priest identifies his own "I" with that of Christ by virtue of the Holy Spirit. Since the Second Person of the Trinity was incarnated as a male; it follows that to act in the "person of Christ" as High Priest and Head of the Church, one should also be male.[4]

All of these reasons are why the Catholic Church does not have the authority to ordain women priests. Joe Heschmeyer, a Catholic apologist, refers to Pope St. John Paul II, "[He] was completely clear about this point, where he said that the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone. [That] has been preserved by the constant and universal tradition of the church and firmly taught by the magisterium

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[2] Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Vol 1, p. 139, https://pilgrimsofchrist.com/pope-benedict-xvi-why-god-is-our-father-and-not-our-mother/.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Today, people will argue that being masculine or feminine is not dependent on one's body being either male or female. People argue that they can choose their gender. If that were true, why hasn't Jesus affirmed that by doing so himself? In Jesus' resurrection appearances throughout the centuries, he is revealing the opposite is true.

and its more recent documents. He says this isn't just a mere discipline but a church practice that could change. Rather, this is at the level of a dogma. He throws his whole papal authority behind it and says that, in virtue of His 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 faithful.' So, as a Catholic, you have to believe that the church cannot ordain women."[5]

This last sentence is likely to stir up some reaction. Our modern bias against "being told what to believe" by an authority usually doesn't go very well. If that describes you, you have a kindred spirit in Thomas the Apostle. You will recall he was not present when Jesus appeared to his disciples. Having learned of this appearance, he famously replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25).[6] Yet when he did see the Risen Lord, he did not hold onto his disbelief but believed.

None of us like to be told "no." That applies here when the Lord says "no" to ordaining women as priests. I should say that God said "no" to men when Mary conceived the Son of God. Next, we will look more closely at that "no" and what God is saying "yes" to when speaking about the role of women in the church.

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Note my previous comment about the risen Christ appearing in a female body that would not have the wounds of the crucifixion. "If Jesus did not suffer and die on the cross, we have not been redeemed and our faith in him as our savior would be in vain. Surely we would reject such an apparition as being false and untrustworthy." We are in basic agreement with the apostle Thomas.