Part 8: The Catholic Church and a Male-Only Priesthood - II

There is sufficient evidence and good reason for Catholics to let go of opposition to an all-male priesthood. I am not saying this is easy, especially when emotions are involved. Some may remain reluctant to give their consent, especially if the conclusion contradicts their long-held opinions. Some may even prefer not to make a decision when considering nya long-term or lifelong commitment. They want to keep all their options open without committing to any of them. Sitting on the fence when it comes to following Christ does not sit well with him, "Because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth (Rev. 3:16).

Here is how Mary can help us. When the Archangel Gabriel revealed to her that she was to be the mother of God,[1] she asked, "How can this be since I do not know man?" Tradition holds that Mary had taken a vow to remain a virgin. When viewed in that context, Mary wasn't doubting that God could do this. She wasn't saying God got it wrong. She was curious about how God would accomplish this, given her vow to remain a virgin. The technical term for this line of questioning is faith-seeking understanding. It differs from seeking to undermine the faith (specific beliefs) to prove our preferred position.

As Marists, we are to ponder God's decision only to ordain men in the spirit of Mary, which Fr. Colin described in this way, "*…let them (Marists) continually strive to draw upon her spirit and breathe it: a spirit of humility, self-denial, intimate union with God, and the most ardent love of neighbor…."* What does that look like?

Regarding the matter before us, we humbly admit that we don't have all the answers and that our objections are insufficient to veto the Church's teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved for men alone. "This teaching has been preserved by the constant and universal tradition of the Church and firmly taught by the magisterium and its more recent documents. That isn't just a mere discipline but a church practice that could change. Rather, this is at the level of a dogma."[2]

To accept this teaching will require the practice of self-denial, which, in this case, means letting go of a dream of women's ordination to which some have been attached since "forever." All the evidence suggests that the Holy Spirit inspired this teaching of a male-only priesthood. To embrace that teaching is humbling and requires an act of obedience, which now becomes a sacrifice to God. Such sacrifices become the stuff from which an intimate union with God is nourished and deepened.

As I mentioned earlier, there is considerable criticism regarding a male-only priesthood. The lack of unity around this issue makes it difficult to promote vocations. Suitable men may never entertain becoming priests, believing male-only priesthood discriminates against women or depends upon a system of thought that is misogynistic and chauvinistic or simply behind the times.

All of the above is a lead-in to my suggestion that I think it is time for Catholics to rally around this teaching and to humbly accept God's will in this matter. To women who may have their hearts set on

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[1] Jesus possesses two natures, both divine and human. Jesus is one person, the second person of the Trinity who is both truly God and truly human. To say that Mary is the mother of God is to affirm the divinity of Jesus. To say that Mary was only the mother of Jesus' humanity is to deny his divinity.

[2] A dogma is a truth revealed by God, transmitted from the Apostles through Scripture or Tradition, and proposed by the Church for the acceptance of the faithful. It can be described as a revealed truth defined by the Church. *Magisterium AI, "What is dogma?"*

being ordained to the priesthood, recall the man from whom Jesus expelled demons. They were named Legion[3]. This poor man desperately wanted to follow Jesus, but he was told to go home and tell his family how God had shown him mercy.

Jesus had another mission for him. He was to return to his village and tell his family and friends what God had done to him. Jesus knew that word would spread like wildfire, with many coming from the surrounding area and beyond to see for themselves and hear first-hand his account of this miracle. He would be more useful to Jesus there. To his credit, he accepted this new role, went home, and undoubtedly became a successful evangelizer.

Many men and women who had considered a vocation to the priesthood or religious life realized that the Lord was calling them to take a different path in their lives. Accepting that new reality was not always easy, but it was necessary. What did not change was the desire to do God's will, which was fueled by their love for God but was given a new direction and purpose.

I suggest the Lord has other plans for women that do not include ordination to the priesthood.[4] It has nothing to do with men being superior to women. It has everything to do with God wanting women to take a different direction and serve Him in other ways. It also has everything to do with trusting God when he says, "For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11). For Marists religious and laity, it means being able to pivot at a moment's notice, should God's path for us lead us in a new direction. That was the case with Mary at the Annunciation. Her response, "Let it be done to me according to your word," is a model for how her son's disciples should respond in similar circumstances, including accepting the teaching of an all-male priesthood.

[As an aside, that could very well describe Mary's acceptance of not being called by her Son to serve as an apostle and to what we refer to as the ordained ministry. Given all that I have said about her in the previous reflections, there was no man or woman more qualified for such a ministry than her. Yet, Our Lord had another mission for His mother, which is captured in what M. Corveille heard her say interiorly at Le Puy, "I was the mainstay of the new-born Church." That is more accurately translated from the French into English as "I was the mainstay of the Church in the process of being born."

Her role is to serve as a protector, teacher, advocate, consoler, and intercessor on behalf of the Church struggling to be born at any place and at any time. Jesus gave her this new mission or vocation when, from the cross, he entrusted her to the beloved disciple, John, when he said, "Woman, behold your son." (John 19: 25-27) She was to direct her maternal instincts toward the Church. I suspect that few, if any, would see that as a "demotion." The Society of Mary was to be a means of fulfilling her mission.]

As we have already seen, the Triune God favors those traits associated with masculinity to define God's relationship with the created order. Those traits include strength, assertiveness, and independence. They safeguard God's transcendence to protect God from becoming identified with his creation.

As I mentioned at the conclusion of the previous reflection, men were excluded in favor of a woman relative to the Incarnation. Recall this quote from Karl Barth, the renowned Swiss Protestant theologian,

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[3] The figure of how many men made up a Roman legion varies from 4,200 to 5,500 soldiers and maybe more!

[4] Adam and Eve were allowed to eat from all the trees in the Garden but one. Only one tree was denied them out of hundreds or thousands of trees available. Yet, they became fixated on one tree, that being the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. By focusing on this one tree, Adam and Eve wasted their time pursuing it rather than exploring and enjoying so many more delights the Garden had to offer. Some may focus on this one issue, a male-only priesthood, and lose sight of the many other facets of the Catholic Church that are spiritually uplifting and beautiful.

which emphasizes how Mary's role in the Incarnation reinforces the dignity of women. "World history is the story of men! However, *in order to give God alone all the honor* in the greatest work of world history, here *God excluded the man* and his doing."[5]

Here, the Triune God also favored the Holy Spirit, identifying with feminine traits, including nurturing, empathy, cooperation, and building relationships. The most important feminine trait that God values is docility. This virtue is essential for making progress in the spiritual life. Our contemporary culture will view this negatively, equating docility with being easily manipulated or controlled.

Docility enables one to be taught, coached, or led by others who possess more knowledge and experience. Don't teachers and coaches praise a student or an athlete for being willing to take correction or to follow directions? They praise their students for being teachable and their athletes for being coachable. That is what it means to be docile.

Jesus stresses the importance of being docile when he says, "If you love me, you will keep my commands" (John 14:15). Joe Heschmeyer, a Catholic apologist, put it this way: "The highest sacrifice is the sacrifice of obedience. We can offer God everything we have, but if we are not willing to be obedient, to obey Him, all of that comes to nothing."[6] Some have said that God favors being obedient over offering material things as a sacrifice to God.

Mary's interior life reflects her being docile (meaning teachable, coachable, cooperative, or selfless) to the promptings of the Holy Spirit):

> In preparation for her role as the Mother of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, and in anticipation of the graces from Jesus' death and resurrection, a special grace was given to Mary so that her very being was in complete harmony with God's purposes from the moment of her conception. In other words, God could ask anything of Mary, and she put up no resistance. Try living like that for one hour or a minute! St. Maximilian Kolbe observed: "The nature of the union of the Holy Spirit and Mary consists in the union of wills. Mary identifies so thoroughly with the will of God that one can speak about a quasi-incarnation of the Holy Spirit."[7] The Evangelist Mark describes this union of wills between the Holy Spirit and Mary as the power of the Holy Spirit "overshadowing" her. This enabled Mary to accept what is "impossible with men, but not with God" (cf. Mk 10:27). (*Part 5: Mary, Icon of the Holy Spirit*, p. 2)

When it comes to holiness, after Jesus, the Fathers of the Church attributed Mary's original holiness and subsequent *consecration* into a Temple of the Holy Spirit to the *sanctifying* work of the Spirit—no other saint, whether a man or woman, can equal or surpass the Blessed Virgin Mary. As the Mother of God, she enjoys a unique and exalted position among all creatures. She is "endowed with the high office and dignity of being the Mother of God" and is "the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit."[8]

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[5] *Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf,* 1927, p. 278.

[6] Heschmeyer, Joe, podcast, *Does the Crucifixion Do Anything,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nULsSCGl2wI.

[7] Anne Marie of Jesus, O.C.D., podcast, Trinity Talks: *Mary, Icon of the Holy Spirit*.

[8] *Lumen Gentium*, Pope Paul VI, 1964, Dogmatic Constitution, #53, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

A woman, not a man, has been chosen by God to be the icon of the Church as the bride of Christ, Holy Mother Church, and model of discipleship. The woman who is this icon is the woman we know as Mary, the mother of our Savior, our mother in faith, patroness of our school, and founder of the Society of Mary.

In her, who is also the New Eve, the dignity of all women is affirmed. Because of her, men and women follow her lead to respond to the promptings of the Spirit with magnanimity and selflessness so apparent in her response to the Archangel's presentation of her mission (vocation) in life to be the mother of our Savior, "Let it be done to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

Mary calls Marist laity and religious to lead the way, which is her way revealed to our founder Jean-Claude Colin: "…*let them (Marists) continually strive to draw upon her spirit and breathe it: a spirit of humility, self-denial, intimate union with God, and the most ardent love of neighbor…."*

Let me conclude these reflections by recalling my earlier reference to Julian Barnes, who grew up in post-Christian Britain.

> "He never went to Church, had no religious experience, no religious identity, and has not received any religious formation at all. In 2008, he published a memoir entitled *"Nothing to Be Frightened Of."* About three times in the book, he says, "I don't believe in God, but I miss him." Three times.
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> At one point, he says, "You know, I'm sometimes haunted when I'm in front of these works of art or when I'm listening to these works of art (music, concerts) by this question, "What if I believed they were true (right)?" Taylor expands on this, "He realizes that the beauty that captivates him has been generated by a people who believed it (that Jesus was raised from the dead) was true."[9]

A Marist education is unsatisfied with equipping our students to live the good life here on earth. It is about how to live a holy life, which, by its very nature, is a beautiful life. Bishop Robert Barron attests to the power of beauty to evangelize this secular age when he said, "The beautiful does not merely entertain. Rather, it invades and changes the one to whom it appears."

That describes what life looks like when lived in the spirit of Mary. Our lives are to become a work of art whose beauty will have the power to captivate the Julian Barnes of this secular age. Realizing such holy lives were fashioned by the belief in Jesus raised from the dead, the unbelievers of this secular age may begin to doubt their doubt and admit that while they don't believe in God, they miss him. They will be only inches away from stepping into the space of St. Augustine, a kindred spirit of the Julian Barnes of the world, and come to realize, as did this great saint, that "Our hearts are restless until they rest in God."

Mary, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us.

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[9] *Reflection 3: "Jesus So Loves This Secular Age That He Sent His Mother*," p. 2