

In the sacrament of penance we have a very special kind of presence of our Lord. We need with the visible priest to see the invisible High Priest. Over the door of the confessional is written the name of the priest—Father so and so. What should really be there is the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We see our Lord as the Good Shepherd, who loses one of his hundred sheep, and leaves the other ninety-nine to search for the one that is lost. When he has found the sheep he lays it on his shoulders and takes it back home again. The Good Shepherd shows no anger towards the disobedient sheep, only love and joy at its recovery, and the child is quick to apply this to God, and his loving attitude to sinners. This parable helps to strengthen the child's love for God, as he realises that God, the Good Shepherd, loves him personally so dearly, that he actually goes to look for him when he has gone astray, and rejoices greatly at finding the lost one again.

## Women in the Church

ELISABETH WANGERMANN

There is a characteristic attitude towards women in the Church which expresses itself in certain customs and regulations. I have tried to find out something about the assumptions behind this attitude and have thought it worth reporting and commenting on what I found, because I suspect that much of it will be as surprising to others as it was to me.

The customs which set apart the sexes in the Church begin to impinge very early in life. The little girl sees her brothers having fun serving on the altar, initiated and 'in the know', while she has to stay in her pew, bored, an outsider. The boys usually have precedence at first communion and confirmation, and even on her wedding day, the only day in her life when a woman is allowed in the sanctuary, she comes second throughout the ceremony. Now that lay people are sometimes asked to read the epistle and gospel to the congregation, it is always a man who is

chosen, sex being a much more important criterion than competence.<sup>1</sup> These are all trivialities of no importance in themselves, but they do create a sense of inferiority of women in the house of God, which is reinforced from the cradle to the grave.

This sense of inferiority is of course epitomised by the all-maleness of the clergy, for (rightly or wrongly) the clerical state is seen as of higher rank in the Church than the lay state. I thought therefore that finding out just why it is that women are debarred from taking Orders might throw some light on the general question of the position of women in the Church. It will be helpful to discuss first what kind of official work women have, in fact, done in the Church at various times.<sup>2</sup>

The New Testament already indicates that in the early Church women participated much more widely in official Church activities than they do now. St Paul mentions quite a number who 'laboured with him in the gospel' (Phil. 4. 2; Rom. 16. 1 ff). This was missionary work, as St Clement explains (Strom. III. 6. 53): 'The Apostles, giving themselves without respite to the work of evangelism as befitted their ministry, took with them women, not as wives but as sisters, to share in their ministry to women living at home: by their agency the teaching of the Lord reached the women's quarters without arousing suspicion.' Their apostolate cannot have been strictly confined to women, however, for Prisca did not hesitate to instruct the learned Apollo after she heard him preaching in the synagogue (Ac. 18. 24).

'Prophecy' was another activity in which women took part. Unlike missionary work, this seems to have been carried out within the community officially gathered together. Philip of Caesarea 'had four daughters, virgins, who did prophesy' (Acts 21. 9), and in 1 Cor. 11 St Paul makes regulations about how men and women are to be dressed when they prophesy. This is an extremely important text because in the same epistle a few pages further on (1 Cor. 14. 34) occurs the well known

<sup>1</sup>According to the Instructions of the Sacred Congregation of Rites (1958) 'Lay persons of the male sex . . . when deputed . . . to the service of the altar . . . exercise a direct, but delegated, ministerial service . . .' 'Women must never fulfil the office of commentator, but this one thing is allowed, that, in case of necessity, a woman may lead the singing or the prayers of the faithful.' Reading aloud by women during mass is not forbidden in so many words, but appears to be ruled out by the context.

<sup>2</sup>I got most of my information about this from J. Daniélou, S.J.: *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*. (Translated by the Bishop of Llandaff, London, 1960).

passage which is always quoted to illustrate St Paul's supposed attitude to women: 'Let the women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but let them be in subjection, as also says the law. And if they would learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church.' This apparent contradiction in the directions given by St Paul to the Church at Corinth has been explained in different ways. There is no doubt that 'prophesying' and the speaking referred to in the second passage were something quite different, but Daniélou seems to me to be forcing the text when he concludes that 'prophesying' was part of liturgical worship rather than preaching, while by 'speaking' (*λαλεω*) St Paul meant preaching the word to the congregation (official teaching). It seems better to accept the view that prophesying was a special kind of edifying preaching under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 14. 2: 'Speaking with tongues is speaking unto God, for no man understandeth; but he that prophesieth speaketh unto men edification, and comfort, and consolation; he that speaketh in a tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth, edifieth the church'). The speaking forbidden by Paul might mean merely chattering or making a nuisance of oneself. The prohibition would be in the interests of good order in the congregation. (Cf. Paul's prohibition of speaking with tongues when there is no interpreter available).

In later documents we can follow the development of the ministry of women along two lines. One of these is represented by the 'widows'. In Acts 'widows' simply means women who have lost their husbands, and the community are exhorted to care for them. In 1 Tim. the class of widows has become something more official; they are to be inscribed in a roll, and for this they must be sixty years old at least, only once married, and have various virtues as well. In early ecclesiastical literature the word 'widow' seems to have lost its ordinary meaning altogether, for St Ignatius speaks of the virgins called widows; and by the third century they have become an order of the Church, mentioned in official lists (e.g. by Tertullian, who places them with bishops, priests and deacons under the heading 'Church Order: the Clergy'; cf. many others quoted by Daniélou). The widows' job was above all official prayer, but they also had a varied ministry to women, including evangelising the heathen, instructing children and catechumens, assisting the bishop at baptism and anointing the sick. The order of widows was instituted by prayer, not by laying on of hands.

By the fourth century it was declining, and another order was taking

its place, the order of deaconesses. Their increasing importance was paralleled by the increasing importance given to the ideal of virginity. They seem to have taken over most of the functions formerly carried out by the widows, but had a better defined and more official position. Real ordination of deaconesses (laying on of hands, clothing with the deacon's robe, handing over of the chalice) started in the east and spread to the west, and it is possible that deaconesses were a real minor order and part of the official clergy; their place at mass was fixed behind the bishop and priests on the left, the deacons standing in the same place on the right, and they went to communion immediately after the deacons; besides the duties they took over from the widows they also had duties connected with worship, and in some communities could prepare the chalice and give communion to themselves and others.

As the Church emerged from her missionary period the evangelising part of the women's ministry became redundant, and with the spread of religious communities other parts of the office of the deaconess seem to have been gradually taken up into that of the abbess. By the early middle ages abbesses had become very powerful and influential. They often had enormous responsibilities for the administration of estates, and in double monasteries supreme authority over both men and women, on account of their superior social background. Perhaps the most famous of them was St Hilda of Whitby, who was made a member of the Council of Whitby (664), held there because of the fame of the monastery. In the later middle ages women ceased to be in the public eye of the Church, with a few notable exceptions, such as St Catherine of Siena.

One can conclude with Daniélou that all the duties of the minor orders have been performed by women at some place or other and at some time or other. But it is certain that nowhere have women ever been part of the consecrating priesthood. This is taken so much for granted that there seems to have been very little discussion of the reasons for it. I expected to find it discussed in terms of the character of the sacramental priesthood: in so far as the mass is Christ's sacrifice offered by himself, the priest acts as the minister of Christ, as it were his hands and his mouth; Christ chose to become incarnate as a man, and he chose twelve other men to 'do this'; it does at least seem fitting therefore that their successors in this office should also be men. But the theologians discuss this in rather different terms.

St Thomas (Suppl. 39. 1) asks whether the female sex is an impediment to Orders, and replies that even if a woman were made the object

of all that is normally done in conferring Orders, she would not receive them; for just as in extreme-unction you need a sick person to signify the need for healing, so in conferring Orders you need someone to signify elevated status (*eminentia gradus*); but in the female sex it is not possible to signify elevated status, because women are in a state of subjection: hence women cannot receive Orders.

I find it difficult to understand what is meant by 'subjection' in this context, what is the significance of this tradition which gives an inferior place to women as a class of humanity. It does not imply that they are not fully human; rather it seems to be a sociological judgment, a question of assigning inferior rank or status in society; and it does imply that there are certain positions which women may not hold, because it would be unseemly for them to exercise authority over their social superiors.

I can see some striking parallels to this notion in the idea of the colour bar and the doctrine of *apartheid*. In both cases the sociological judgment is based on physical characteristics: some are *born* into an inferior category of humanity, and no matter what kind of person they are, they can never transcend it. In both cases the attitude to the 'inferior' group is certainly basically due to a primitive fear of and revulsion against the mysterious and 'other', as is obvious from the customs of many primitive societies today. This is later rationalised in various ways, e.g. by appeals to authority. In both cases the authority of scripture is invoked.

The writer of 1 Tim. (probably not St Paul) appealed to Genesis: 'Let a woman learn in quietness with all subjection. But I permit not a woman to teach, nor to have dominion over a man, but to be in quietness. For Adam was first formed, then Eve; and Adam was not beguiled, but the woman being beguiled hath fallen into transgression: but she shall be saved through the childbearing . . .'. This version of Genesis 3 was used by some of the Fathers to support their jaundiced view of women. Tertullian, for instance, writing on women's dress, tells them they ought to go about meanly dressed, mourning and repentant like Eve: ' . . . You are the devil's gateway . . . you led astray him whom the devil did not dare attack . . . it is your fault that the Son of God had to die . . .'. And according to St Ambrose 'Adam was led to sin by Eve, and not Eve by Adam. It is just and right that woman accept as lord and master him whom she has led to sin.' On this view the 'subjection' of women is a direct consequence of the Fall. But there is another tradition in the Church according to which it is in the very

nature of things. St Thomas takes this view, being a great believer in authority, and it fits into his hierarchical social system: 'A social life cannot exist among a number of people even in the state of innocence unless under the presidency of one to look after the common good' (Ia. 96. 4). 'Good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates'. (Ia. 92. 1). For St Thomas this relationship is signified in the second creation story ('... for the woman should neither use authority over man, and so she was not made from his head; nor was it right for her to be subject to man's contempt as his slave, and so she was not made from his feet') and actually has a biological basis, for according to Aristotelian biology a woman is a 'misbegotten male'; something went wrong at her generation, or the union would have produced a man.

Obsolete biology and a literal reading of Genesis need not necessarily detract from the truth of what St Thomas is saying here. It is obvious that even in today's conditions of much greater social equality, in the courtship and marriage situation most women enjoy becoming dependent and relinquishing responsibility, and most men enjoy taking the lead and assuming responsibility. It is open to discussion whether or how far this is the natural basic human relationship, and how far it is merely the result of differences in education and a desire to fulfil group expectations. However this may be (and there is no space to pursue this topic here) women are no longer exclusively wives and mothers, and it will no longer do to discuss their place in the Church and in society exclusively in terms of the unique marriage relationship.

To do so is certainly in Old Testament tradition. In Jewish society a woman had no value in herself; any value she had was derived entirely from her husband and children. Hence the disgrace and even calamity of being unmarried or childless (cf. Is. 4. 1: 'In those days seven women will say to one man: we will bring our own food and wear our own clothes; only let us be called by your name and take our shame away from us'). By the time of Christ, the value placed on women had reached a low ebb. I get the impression that the position had deteriorated from earlier Old Testament times. The Jewish code of law was in fact pretty fair to women, as we can see from the regulations on divorce and sexual morality. Although only a husband and not a wife had the right to divorce his partner at all, this right was strictly limited. A man was heavily punished, for example, for pretending that his

newly-wed wife was not a virgin in order to get rid of her, and obliged to keep her for good. By the time of Christ, however, a man could get rid of his wife on the flimsiest pretext, and the divorced wife had no right whatever to her children or any property. (This is reflected in the consternation of the apostles on hearing our Lord's teaching on marriage; if you have to be saddled with your wife for the rest of your life, it is better not to marry at all, they imply (Mt 19. 10).)

As a punishment for adultery, both partners were to suffer the death penalty; but there is rather a charming rider saying that if the offence occurred in the country, nothing was to happen to the girl, for, who knows, she might have cried out and no one had come! (Dt. 22. 25). Yet we read that only the *woman* taken in adultery was brought before our Lord: the man had unaccountably disappeared.

In the Rabbinic writings the state of near slavery of women in New Testament times becomes more explicit. For many purposes women, children and slaves are usually lumped together; they are exempt from most religious duties; sons but not daughters are to be instructed in the Torah. But to be a good Jew *was* to keep the Torah; to keep it one had to know it; to know it one had to study it. And so women, kept in ignorance of it, were then despised for their ignorance, and no self-respecting Jew would be seen talking to a woman in public, even if she was a relative; a Rabbi seen talking to a woman would have caused grave scandal. Upper-class women were virtually prisoners in their own houses, and if they went out without being completely hidden by veils they were liable to instant divorce without any compensation.

I have mentioned all this because it shows how very revolutionary our Lord's attitude to women must have seemed against this background. He allowed women to follow him wherever he went. He never gave the slightest hint of excluding women from either his promises or his demands. He talked to them directly as people with their own special personalities and problems; the apostles 'were astonished to see him talking to a woman'. The Samaritan woman was the first person to whom he revealed himself as the Messiah in St John's gospel, and Mary Magdalen was the first witness of the resurrection. All this must have had a wonderfully liberating effect, and we can see its fruits in the early Church, where women appear as persons in their own right, working, suffering and dying for Christ along with the men in the Christian community. Christ, by his resurrection, has abolished all the former divisions between people. Barriers of race, class and sex have no relevance in the Kingdom of God, as St Paul states so clearly and

uncompromisingly: 'Baptised into Christ, you have put on Christ: there can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be neither male nor female: for you are all one man in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3. 28).

But the Church was born into certain social conditions which could not be changed all at once. And so St Paul asks slaves to be subject to their masters, and wives to be subject to their husbands. Nevertheless a new relationship is envisaged between them, for all Christians have been asked to serve one another, husbands are asked to love their wives as Christ loves the Church, and the master of the runaway slave is asked to receive him back not as a slave, but as a son.

It took the Church a very long time to make explicit the wickedness of keeping up the barriers of race and class, and the barrier of sex is still tolerated if not encouraged. The early Church was obviously in advance of social custom in this respect, and I wonder whether she did not *have* to go through the early period of giving what seems to us a very exaggerated importance to virginity, just to get out of her system the Jewish tradition of evaluating women. But social custom has long since overtaken the Church (at least in western countries), and social psychologists have warned us that too rigid a definition of spheres of action and occupations as exclusively male or female is likely to damage personalities and impoverish society. This problem has not been a very urgent one for the Church in recent centuries because the laity as a whole has played such a passive rôle anyway, and I suppose that is why she has given so little attention to it. It is bound to become much more urgent in the near future, for if only half the laity are going to be allowed to play their full part in Church affairs, the other half will feel more frustrated than ever. The time is ripe for theologians to take a new look at the traditional arguments about the place of women in the hierarchy of being.