

of prayer and the major feasts of Easter and Pentecost likewise have roots in Judaism and have parallels in synagogue worship to this day. It is therefore right and fitting that we acknowledge that one of the great influences on our sacramental system and our modes of worship has been Old Testament Religion.

- 1 The case for this has been well presented by R. Patai, *Man and Temple in Ancient Myth and Ritual* (Ktav 1967) and M. Barker, *The Gate of Heaven* (SPCK 1991).
- 2 Thus understood for example by the author of 2 Enoch 8. 3-4 and by Philo (Sic M. Barker, *The Gate of Heaven*, p. 92).
- 3 M Barker, *The Gate of Heaven*, p. 113.
- 4 See R. Browne, *The Gospel of John*, Anchor Bible (Doubleday 1966), ad. loc.
- 5 *The General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, art. 33: "In the readings, which are interpreted by the homily, God speaks to his people, reveals to them the mysteries of redemption and salvation, and Christ himself, in the form of his Word, is present in the midst of the faithful".
- 6 The lighting of the lamps "is almost certainly pre-Maccabean in origin" and the other two rites (the *qiddush* and the *havdalah*) are traced by rabbinical tradition to the Men of the Great Assembly (c. fifth century B.C.) sic C. Di Sante, *Jewish Prayer: the origins of Christian Liturgy* (Paulist Press translation 1991), pp. 154 & 157.
- 7 C. Di Sante, *op.cit.*, p. 41.

Sacraments and Society An Anthropologist Asks, What Women Could be Doing in the Church?

Mary Douglas

The sacraments raise controversy at every turn, no matter which one of the seven we think of. There is no end to hot debate on pastoral issues.

For example, why has Penance taken a back seat of late? Is it because we sin less? Or do we have less sense of sin? If so, why should it be so? Or are we more forgiving and therefore take it for granted that God is more forgiving? As to the Eucharist, why cannot any one receive communion, whether they are baptised Catholics or believing Christians or outright pagans? Would it not do them good, whatever their condition? Does Marriage really matter? Why does Ordination rule out Marriage? How often can the Last Sacrament be given? Why is Ordination the only gender-exclusive sacrament? I have left out Confirmation and Baptism, but we can ask why the Catholic Church

institutes seven sacraments, while some Christian congregations just have Baptism, and others, Baptism and Confirmation, and some take everything in the world to be a potential sacrament?

I want to take the last two questions together, women priests (why not?) and the seven instituted channels of grace (why seven?), together with the claim of the Church to be universal. Universal means standing above local bias, resisting temporary pressures, recognizing a passing fashion for what it is, and thus standing for permanent truths for all times and places. The universal Church is old, but not a fossil, she must develop; truth is revealed gradually, the doctrines have to be unfolded. I understand that the work of the Holy Spirit is to safeguard doctrine and practice.

The professional anthropologist has to turn these questions into ones about the organisation of religions in general. At the turn of the century comparative religion took a new turn at the hands of French scholars at the Sorbonne who were looking for a formula to explain the meaning of sacrifice in Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity (Lévy, Mauss, Hubert, Loisy). Expanding the scholastic distinction between two worlds, one of natural events and the other of the supernatural, they developed what we can call the lightning conductor theory of sacrifice, which adapts quite well to sacraments in general. On this theory the profane world of human activity is distinct and separate from a sacred world invested with tremendous powers. On the one hand the Sacred is dangerous, its powers can be unleashed for untold destruction, on the other its powers are beneficent, and humans cannot do without harnessing them to their purposes. This two-way mediation between World 1 and World 2 is the object of religious organisation. Apollo carries a quiverful of plague-bearing arrows, Jupiter is equipped with thunderbolts, the God of the Bible wields flood and fire and plague; the chastisements from World II strike the denizens of World I when they misbehave; the cult fends off the dangers and protects the innocent. This is what the equivalents of sacraments do in all religions. Calamity is warded off, good health and good harvests, regular seasons, prosperous times, these are channelled by sacrifices, blessings and other cultic rituals.

Nowadays we have no trouble in believing in the dangers all right, flood, famine, fire and earthquake are all around, but we are much less impressed by the power of cult to ward them off. The disbelief may be due to secularism, or to the coming together of different cultures. I suggest it is also due to a new way of life introduced and encouraged by advanced capitalist industrialism. We have been sucked away from our local origins; our primordial ties of family and township have weaker claims. We are on our own, no community umbrella is offering to shelter us; no one is trying to make us conform to community standards, nor are we ourselves trying to make a community cohere around ourselves or persuading anyone else that their moral code needs tightening up. On the contrary, we are bending over backwards to be tolerant. In other words, there is no scope for us to warn each other

against thunderbolts or plagues sent from heaven to punish our misconduct. Punishing is illiberal. The old tie between conduct and nature depends on a self-conscious, punishing community, and once that is dispersed, the lightning conductor model of divine intervention makes no sense.

This is what the theologians have to consider. The sacraments are not justified by their making a channel between World 1 and World 2, because those sacred and profane worlds are not so distant as they used to be, nor is the sacred so powerful; they are both lodged in the consciousness of the believer for whom the sacrament is a solace more than a protection. When the Church of Rome is asked to make an apparently minor adjustment to modern times, in respect of admission to communion, or confession, or ordination, this is the context. Will the change make it easier to dissolve the ties of community? And would that be a good thing? The meaning of the sacraments depends on the form of the social life that is being lived. I do not think that anyone nowadays would seriously argue that the meanings are in words and ritual actions and have nothing to do with the institutional background. The feminist critics of Rome have rightly drawn attention to constitutional problems. To support their case I need to say more about the forms of social organisation in which religious ideas are fostered, for I believe it is by rearranging constitutions that problems such as that of the exclusion and subordination of women can be resolved.

The Missing Place for Women in a Hierarchical Community

The complaint is that the Catholic hierarchy is male, and there is no place for women in it. Polite verbal expressions of esteem for women are not relevant, and if the Church of Rome is hierarchical it would be irrelevant to mention that individual women have played important parts. Individuals as such do not figure in hierarchical constitutions. It is inconsistent to point to Hildegard and Teresa and other famous influential women without saying what supporting institutions they could rely on at the time. There is a real crisis for the Church, a radical challenge as to how to honour women and give them a voice.

I can understand that the feminists should think that some dismantling of hierarchy would help their cause, but I disagree. Hierarchy is a system of buffers and protected areas, if they are dismantled the women are in the same case as they were before, but exposed to unbridled competition. The world of the individualist is much harsher on the weak, and by definition, women will be relatively weak in it so long as it is normal for most of them to be pregnant, to give birth, and to nurse and rear infants. For the same kind of reasons I do not think that ordaining women as priests will improve their general condition. Even if they were to take over the whole priesthood and feminise its organisation, the men would be complaining of oppression. The situation could go on being very fraught.

My own idea is more radical. We, the women, should look carefully

at the reasons given for rejecting ordination of women. When we do this, we find the defence of hierarchy is a paramount concern. That being so, we are merely setting off the alarms by demanding equality. Instead we should see whether we cannot do better for ourselves by asking for a higher quality of hierarchy. There are many different kinds, and hierarchies tend to fall into traps of their own making. The worst for a Church is the trap of setting up a monolithic top-down command.

When we read the 1976 Declaration on the Ordination of Women (*Inter Insigniores*) we see that the authorities are much attached to the gender symbolism by which God is presented as masculine, and the Church herself as feminine. The three main arguments of the 1976 Declaration against the ordination of women were:

- i) respect for the ancient tradition of the nuptial mystery, Christ as the Heavenly Bridegroom, the Church as the Bride.
- ii) the idea of the 'natural sign'; the teaching must be based on signs which are readily interpretable. The idea of biological procreation and the union between male and female are signs of God's intimate and loving relation to his Church. A man is an exemplar of masculinity which enables the priest to represent Christ in the mystery of God-made-man.
- iii) the nuptial mystery is the way the Church has always seen her own identity. This links her identity with the Israel as the Bride of God. Israel was feminine, the Church is feminine, therefore the priest representing Christ has to be masculine. Their gender precludes women from being ordained.

The theme of the nuptial mystery is evidently a major myth, and it would be a mistake to argue with its details. Anthropologists would never ask for a myth to be tested against any facts at all: first, it is impolite, and second it is unproductive. If a myth claims to have continuity with the Bible it is pointless to show discontinuity. Never mind that the idea of the Church as the Bride of Christ was favoured by the medieval Church. Never mind that Israel in the Bible was continuously denounced by the prophets, as an unfaithful bride, (Jer. 3.12, 14,22; 23.37; 3.18-20; 31; Isa. 42-43; 51; 65-66; Hosea 14). Admittedly this is not the advertised model, the Church as the spotless bride of Christ is represented by the Virgin Mary, but Israel is portrayed as a fallen woman, always about to fall again, and continually being forgiven by her Lord. And never mind the subversive claim that Magdalen gives better New Testament continuity with Israel than Mary. The time has come to be constructive.

As to the facts of sexual reproduction, we would not deny that the female role is to receive the seed and the male role to give it, we only need to know what these selected facts are doing in the argument. When we know that, we can use the myth for our own purpose.

The essential is that the universe in this myth is gendered: World 1 is female, World 2 is male. This is very commonly found in nonwestern

religions, but not necessarily with the effect of relegating the feminine gender to the humblest position. Nor is it necessary for the gender assignments to be fixed to biological sex: masculine can change places with feminine, according to context. For anyone who is unfamiliar with this way of thinking, I strongly recommend Marilyn Strathern's book, *The Gender of the Gift* (1988) for an account of the dilemmas of post-modern feminist politics and her astute strategies for writing a book about relativising that escapes being relativised. The Papuan people she describes use gender as their main organising principle, but she explains that this does not involve exploiting the female sex. According to their local theory the person is composed of multiple gendered parts which come to the fore or retreat into the background according to the stage of interaction. In every exchange the donors are male, the recipients female and in every exchange a person has to be engaged first as a same sex actor, but sometimes the mobilisation is initiated in the male and sometimes in the female mode. In this case it is absurd to talk about gender as if it was only about the relations between men and women.

We could be creative in trying some such strategy for ourselves. 'Come on! Gender is only a mode of comportment, a convention, that is all', we might say, were it not for the attachment expressed in *Inter Insigniores* to the idea of procreation as a natural sign. This is a myth in a different sense of the word, not a narrative to live by, but a wrong idea, a fallacy. We have to say bluntly that there is no such thing as a natural sign. It is an oxymoron, because the idea of nature is a cultural artefact. No sign conveys the same meaning to all peoples at all times, and any sign can convey many different meanings at any time. Signs are open; they only get a closed and stable meaning from the way they are institutionalised. The stabilising of the sign and the stabilising of the institutions are one interaction.

But when all this is said and done, it has to be admitted that procreation comes near to the ideal of an eminently universal natural sign, which everyone can understand. Instead of cavilling we have to attend to what this natural sign is being used for. The Church is saying that she has long seen herself as a gendered hierarchy, that this is an essential part of her identity. The task for the women seeking to reform the Church in their own regard is to make use of the myths of gender, of natural signs, and of hierarchy, to achieve their ends.

Hierarchy and Sect

A comparison of forms of organisation is essential to our topic, since the Women's Movement in the Church has complained bitterly against the blindness and constraints of hierarchy. To develop my thesis that hierarchy is not the enemy I revert to my favourite scheme (1970) which compares four kinds of viable social organisations. They are extreme types:

Structure

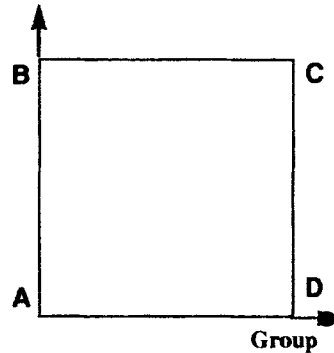
Diag.1.

a) entrepreneurial individualist competition

b) isolated individuals

c) traditional, complex structured group

d) simple, egalitarian group



One dimension gives structure, the other gives corporate inclusiveness. The scheme can be used to compare business organisation, or academic, or professional, or types of farming community, and the extreme positions renamed according to context. For comparing religions we can rename them thus:

- a) charismatic radio evangelist,
- b) the private religion of the loner
- c) the hierarchy of the Catholic Church,
- d) sectarian groups.

We can leave a) and b) out of what follows, because in a social environment of individualists there is not much interest in permanently instituted sacraments. Their religions generally take them to God without intermediary institutions. The contrast we shall examine is between the two kinds of communitarian religions, the complex, traditionalist, highly structured organisation of the Church of Rome or the Church of England, and any egalitarian dissenting Christian minority group or sect. What I am going to say is highly speculative because, to my own chagrin, not much comparison of doctrines has been made along these lines.

First a caveat: each of these contrasted forms of religious organisation is valuable. No outsider can use this scheme to say that one is right or the other wrong. But we will surely find that the adherents are deeply convinced that their form is the only right way to God. We will also find that in their history each of the extreme opposed types wobbles in its loyalty to its principles: the sect can find itself becoming hierarchical and the hierarchy can become quite sectarian. The Catholic Church behaves quite differently when it is well-established and not in fear of losing its young to other faiths, than it does when it is a dissident minority. Richard Griffiths' account of French Catholicism at the turn of this century gives a painful picture of a sectarian religion fighting a losing battle against secularism, heroic, violent and absolutist (1966). The comparison has to be careful. Each has its strengths, which make it specially fit for survival in specified conditions, and each has its weaknesses which may bring

about its downfall.

The hierarchy tends to spring up spontaneously whenever people come together to organise some task that needs coordination. They do not necessarily have to subscribe to a particular set of ideals. It develops specialised roles, makes rules for sequencing, spacing, prioritizing, and in the course of the work, ideals take hold, of order, balance, symmetry and the integrity of the whole task. The sect also tends to spring up spontaneously, but it starts the other way round, with principles. A community develops around its ideals, which tend to dissent. It espouses equality in defiance of the stratified hierarchical community; simplicity, in rebuking the alleged artificiality and complexity of the hierarchy; sharing, in contrast to individual profit seeking in the individualist culture. And in being true to these principles, it develops a characteristic form of organisation.

If both are present in any community they play contrapuntal roles, the sect attacking the hierarchy for its inequities and pomps, the hierarchy fearing the sect's subversive influence. Such a community may be fortunate in that the dialogue of opposed cultures takes the usual normative debate to a high moral and religious plane; the debate polarises ideals and each culture, by attacking the other, articulates its own identity and principles. We shall take them in turn, but what I will say below is highly speculative, because the comparative research on styles of thought and behaviour as between sects and hierarchies, which I ought to have put in hand twenty five years ago, has not been done.

Among the strengths of hierarchy are effective delegation and mobilisation. Everyone has an assigned place, in a crisis every one knows what to do, (and no one has an identity crisis). Within any of the constituent units everyone knows their place and ambiguity is reduced to a minimum; but most hierarchies normally have multiple peaks of authority, and between the peaking subsystems there is ambiguity. Ingenious formulae are found for preventing conflict: what is lower in one context, becomes higher in the other. Pope Gelasius in the fifth century had a formula for the mutual respect between the separate and balanced spheres of Pope and Emperor, the *auctoritas* of the priest, and the *potestas* of the king (Dumont 1983:52). Something of the kind is spontaneously repeated in many multi-peaking forms of hierarchy. For example, the relation of wife to husband is expressed in demarcation of spheres, the same for the King and Commons, territorial chief and lineage chief: when the context shifts the precedence rules change. We can hardly insist too much that this experience of hierarchy is different from the common idea of hierarchy as a linear top-down command system (monolithic like General Motors was once supposed to be). At the end of this essay we shall raise it again, because the question of what the Church should be doing about its women has been blurred by a false idea of how hierarchies have worked in ancient civilisations (Douglas 1993).

The hierarchy is geared to the long view; it expects to reproduce itself for ever, and the expectation of stability is self-fulfilling. It has a vested interest in its traditions, and is a vehicle for their conservation. It has

effective co-optative powers, it can absorb and contain diverse elements without splitting apart. Either it sets up rank orderings, or separate compartments and buffer zones. You remember the story about St. Peter taking a party of newly arrived Non-Conformists on a guided tour of Heaven; in room after room they cheer and clap, exclaiming with delight at what they see; one door, however, he does not open and beseeches them to go by on tiptoe, making no noise; after they have got past, Peter explains: "That room is for the Catholics. They think they are the only ones here, and we don't like to tell them". A typical manoeuvre for a hierarchy.

Another hierarchical trick is to divide all members of the community into two or more responsible associations. For example, a man in some contexts is a member of his mother's group, in others of his father's, so that each person is linked to others in crosscutting ways, no one loyalty can absorb the others; or territory and lineage may be counterpoised affiliations. In several parts of Africa gender classification does this work of balancing the community. Everyone has two alignments, so that if strife breaks out, crosspressures prevent an irreconcilable split.

There are many other features of hierarchy but the one I must take care to mention is that, as an upshot of the separating, ranking and balancing processes, the diversity of social life is fully articulated. Though there are words for the various positions, there is little need to spell out verbally what is happening: specific allocations in space indicate social place and sequencing; dress, gesture and body movement acknowledge it without verbalising. Rituals choreograph each person's part in the ongoing cycle of generations. The insides of their minds are partitioned and furnished for the roles assigned to them in the cosmic drama. An articulated social system means an articulated mind set. The hierarchist is used to complexity, logical and practical, and experienced in playing around with patterns and positions.

The disadvantages of hierarchies are well-known. They can mobilise, but only slowly. They fall into the bureaucratic traps, overformalisation, routinisation, emotional aridity and frustration. Their biggest danger stems from their habit of trying to control knowledge. New knowledge is an immediate threat to the carefully built complexity of the hierarchical system; the work of assimilating it is onerous; only too easy is the other solution, to apply censorship. The hierarchy always risks a danger that it has censored its essential information. While it is monitoring the mazelike warrens of its internal relations, the outside world may change so much that some essential supplies are cut or enemies make a surprise attack.

The sect is smaller. I start with its disadvantages so as to explain why it is difficult for it to encompass a large population. Sects that seem in the course of history to have acted as aggressive imperialists, if they have lasted beyond the death of their founder, have generally modified their organisation towards hierarchical structures. I have described the weaknesses of enclaves in *How Institutions Think* (1986). The position of a dissenting minority group is essentially weak. There is reason to worry about losing members as some will always be tempted to defect to the

larger, richer, established institutions, and there is no effective way of stopping the leak. Weak leadership follows on the difficulty of maintaining the boundary against the outside world, and the ever lively fear of defection. An egalitarian commitment is a response to the double effect of weak leadership and ineffectual boundary maintenance, a tactic to restrain free-riding as well as a principle. The organisational difficulties of egalitarian communities are compensated by a doctrinal focus on the evils of the outside world, meaning especially the hierarchies and the culture of entrepreneurial individualism.

Given these difficulties, the sect is a fragile organisational form. Faced with threatened schism it tends to split. Sometimes this is turned to strength as when the parent group maintains good relations with the newly formed one. Confronted by ambitious leaders who would deny its ideals, the sect's main resource is to expel them; they cannot be demoted or punished, there is no upstairs or downstairs for them to be kicked to. The sect can look to eternity, but not plan for the long term. It is good at mobilising a rush to the barricades, but bad at coordinating complex roles. It can muster for attack, but not for settled administrative cadres. Delegation is difficult. Ambiguity in personal relations has to be tolerated, but not ambiguous intellectual positions. The biggest disadvantage is the tendency to simplify divergent views and reduce disagreement to non-negotiable black and white, right and wrong.

The advantage of the sectarian enclave is its passionate devotion to equality. The ideal of equality is much more difficult to actualise in internal relations than is normally supposed. At every point of social life what we can call natural inequalities of endowments emerge, or initial first-comer advantages are there to be built upon, cornering a source of privilege can be too tempting. Equality requires constant vigilance if it is to be maintained over time (see Rayner, "The rules that make us equal" 1988). On the other hand, equality, as a rallying cry against the outside, has the power and appeal of simplicity. This gives the attack on hierarchy a strong cutting edge. The sect is the conscience of the community; powerless, it denounces the destructive quest for power; leaderless, it accuses the self-seeking of leaders; egalitarian, it inveighs against inequality.

When it comes to debating on matters of conscience, the two cultures have opposite styles. The hierarchist is good at splitting logical hairs and used to looking for compromise solutions. Hierarchical policy aims to keep everyone together, to maintain the integrity of the whole. If a schism threatens, the contenders are expected to find a *modus vivendi*, and logic will be engaged to invent a conciliating formula. Do not underestimate hierarchy's role in the development of doctrine: the doctrine of the Trinity is one such formula, "Consubstantial with the Father" is another, also the doctrines on the resurrection of the body, the virgin birth of Jesus, miracles, purgatory, the sacraments, or the role of Mary. Catholic doctrine as we have it now bears witness to the hierarchical bent for argumentation and a cumulative, incorporative style of thought. The doctrinal preferences of the sect are simpler, given its liking for simplicity in all

things, its affection for the primitive Church, its dislike of artificiality. The sect is short on administrative infrastructure, it has not got the institutional support to sustain a complex argument; negotiation is not its forte; it is not interested in resolving doctrinal disagreements with complex compromises and paradoxical formulae which fudge the strong certainties of black and white.

If you accept these contrasting pictures of the two forms of organisation, you will see why a hierarchical church should have seven sacraments. Rather it is surprising that Catholicism has not instituted seven more. And you can see why the Church authorities are dubious about reducing their hierarchical distinctions. It is not just traditions that are at stake.

Doctrine as a Way of Life

There is another issue. If we respect a religious institution, we cannot dismiss out of hand its claim to honour its continuity with its own past. The scholars at the Vatican see an element of betrayal in going back on what has been decided by their deceased predecessors. Any community has a certain way of perceiving its own historic identity. Telling its members to forget their common past and make new myths of present reality is the same as telling them to get lost, die off and disappear. You can do this if you basically dislike the institution, but it would be easier to leave it. We can now return to the sacraments and the ordination of women. How can the Church keep the sacraments, all seven of them? How can she keep to her elaborated doctrines which testify to the intellectual tradition of argument and compromise? How can she keep the capability to renew herself without dissolving into fragments? For all this I believe she needs to keep her hierarchical conception of herself and of the world.

She is in charge of a truth. Some would maintain that the truth is held in a form of words. But I would demur. How can that be? The words themselves only make their sense in the institutions in which they are used? Can the charge to preserve the truth be performed by simply conserving and handing on the words? Are doctrines words? Or are they a way of life? We can take the spectrum of Christian Churches, and find in them all the possible ways of being organised, each form of life demonstrating a different way of meaning what is said.

When the Church holds on to a hierarchical conception, she might be saying that the organisation is the message. In holding to the hierarchical ideal for herself, she is not necessarily saying that no other forms of organisation are good and right. It could be that the worship of God is not complete without the whole spectrum of enacted ideas. It could also be that the others, the non-hierarchical ideas, need at least one extreme form of hierarchy for realising their own identity of dissent. If they were all to go the same way, Catholic Church with the others, towards sectarian and individualist forms of religion, there would be a loss of dialogue and a loss of meaning.

The Catholic Church may be saying that her calling is to exemplify

hierarchy and so to enshrine a certain message that can only be expressed in that form. Such a view would be a rather advanced position in semiotics and epistemology. What, in that case, would the message be? What can hierarchy do that the other forms of religious organisation cannot? Perhaps the message is something about articulating a form of thought in a form of organisation. Or perhaps about a machinery for self-renewal and survival, which is more difficult without an experience of complexity. Or something about reconciling opposed views. It would not be just a matter of blindly holding on to the past. We could worry about the risk to a certain capability for dealing with new problems. There is no reason to think that an egalitarian way of organising would preserve that capability. Were it to be lost, the Church leaders could reasonably fear that what has been achieved will be dissipated. The Church of the future could become more factious, more angry against backsliders, more convinced of sin, more intransigent, to the point of violence.

Women as Caring, Compassionate, Constructive, Rational Beings

Here we are, at a road block. The women claim their right to be ordained priests, the Church denies it. The Church extols hierarchy, the women deride it. When neither can go forward or back, they must look for a way round. Here is my suggestion.

In a hierarchy what is not formalised does not count. The women should ask for a formal role in the counsels of the Church. It needs to be thought out more carefully than I am in a position to do. I suggest a permanent commission on doctrine, empowered by the Pope, elected by a female franchise, for a term to be decided, according to qualifications to be decided. The Women's Commission on Doctrine should have real authority. Should they express doubts about a teaching on faith, morals or administrative and disciplinary matters, it would have to be taken seriously: the suspect ruling would have to be sent back to source and rethought, and it could not pass into practice without the agreement of the Women's Commission once they have queried it. I am not sure whether the women should have a special field of concern, such as matters affecting gender and procreation, or whether they should not be free to initiate enquiries on anything that they find worrying, and take up queries and complaints from the laity worldwide. Above all, and perhaps the main thing, the Women's Commission should be seen to be effective. Perhaps they should be equipped with sanctions?

I am told that one of the reasons why the women's wish to be ordained can be safely disregarded by Rome is that there is so much heavy Third World Catholic opinion against it. These will be societies which are used to hierarchy and to gendered organisation in their own traditions, and which see with dismay the current trend to market individualism. Many of them would take to the idea of a highpowered Women's Commission, because of their experience of similar gender-balancing institutions (Douglas 1992)

The demand for a powerful, fully accredited Women's Commission

would call the hierarchical bluff. Agreeing to a Women's Commission on Doctrine would prove Rome's commitment to her own arguments against ordaining women, (natural signs, procreation as the model of God-to-people, the nuptial mystery, and continuity with the Old Testament). It would help the existing hierarchy to look to the quality of their present arrangements and to worry about their present tendency to operate a top-down command system. There is at present no lateral balance to check abuse of authority. It would be a way to institute countervailing powers by which information could come to the top from the bottom and the sides. At present it is only too easy to tell the women that they can never be priests, and not wait for a reply.

It would call the gender bluff. Rome says that the Church is a gendered institution, this is at the heart of her identity. Right! say the women, we like that idea, but when will you introduce gender as a principle of organisation? It would call the bluff on natural signs. Right! say the women, procreation is fine as the model for the organisation of men and women in the Church; we understand it very well, every one knows it takes two to procreate. When will the natural sign be serious, not just a form of words? In the strategy of debate, this suggestion would pull rugs out from under episcopal feet. How could the bishops object?

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