

Sacrifice, Social Maintenance and the Non-ordination of Women

Joseph Blenkinsopp

I

Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter published on May 22 1994, by coincidence the anniversary of the burning of Joan of Arc at the stake, stated in peremptory fashion that the admission of women to priestly ordination is not subject to debate among Roman Catholics, and the non-negotiability of this statement has been insisted on more recently by Cardinal Ratzinger. In deference to this admonition I propose neither to debate the issue itself nor evaluate the theological and exegetical arguments on both sides, though it will not be possible to leave them completely out of account. What I would like to do instead is reflect on what is at stake for the church leadership, theologically and practically, in excluding women from the ministerial priesthood and doing so in such uncompromising terms as to even forbid the faithful to debate the subject. To pose the question in this way is not meant to insinuate that there can be no reasonable and arguable grounds for an exclusively male priesthood nor does it imply a dismissive attitude to arguments put forward in official documents in favour of the exclusion of women, much less assume that these arguments are advanced disingenuously. At the same time, I think it can be said that our reasons for holding certain positions are often unacknowledged and unarticulated even to ourselves, and are in any case more primordial than the arguments we elaborate in defence of these positions. In other words, our agenda is not always fully displayed in our arguments, which I imagine also holds for arguments put forward in official church documents.

The apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* of John Paul II did not, in the event, contain much in the way of argument. In matters of doctrine and church discipline arguments tend to crystallise over a long period of time in a succession or *catena* of official pronouncements. But the topic of ministerial orders for women forms, as G. W. H. Lampe put it, a negative rather than a positive tradition, if indeed it can be called a tradition at all.¹ What I think he meant was that this particular issue emerged only in the late fifties, and was first addressed in an official Roman Catholic document in 1975. In that year and the year following there took place the

correspondence between Pope Paul VI and Dr. Coggan, Archbishop of Canterbury, with respect to the ordination of women in the Anglican communion, followed by the declaration *Inter Insigniores* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.² The apostolic letter of 1994 referred back to *Inter Insigniores*, a much longer and more discursive text, but it could also be read as a follow-up to Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women) issued on August 15th 1988. This document brought up the subject of the non-ordination of women only incidentally and *en passant*, significantly in the section on the eucharist (chapter VII, par. 26).

One of the main arguments advanced in *Inter Insigniores* in support of the official position is the well-known one that Jesus chose twelve males as the core group of his apostles. In any other context it would be natural to suppose that in choosing men only Jesus was merely conforming to expectations and social realities in the context of Palestinian Jewish life at that time, as he did in other respects. One might go further in the same direction and argue that since the apostles were destined for an itinerant mission the choice of women would have been socially inappropriate any way for the same reason that, in the Old Testament, we read about the itinerant "man of God" but not of a female counterpart. Or, finally, it would at least make sense to argue that the duodecimal symbolism required male representatives corresponding to the twelve tribal eponyms, the sons of Jacob/Israel. Rather than developing any of these arguments, however, *Inter Insigniores* insisted that the choice of twelve males resulted from a deliberate decision of Jesus in accordance with the eternal plan of God. This is, on any showing, a remarkable claim, and surely a disturbing one for many Christians since it could be thought to imply that gender inequality is part of a divinely sanctioned order. This familiar issue of distinguishing between what in the Scriptures is culture-conditioned and what is of permanent and prescriptive theological significance emerges again, in paragraph 4 of the same document, which distinguishes between the Pauline injunction that women wear veils when praying or prophesying (1 Corinthians 11:3-16) and the prohibition against public speaking in the church assembly addressed to women (1 Corinthians 14:34-36; 1 Timothy 2:12). The former no longer applies, we are told somewhat superfluously, but the latter is taken to exclude women from "the official function of teaching", a role restricted then and still today to men.

Whatever one thinks of this as exegesis, it seems that these observations function within a broader argument which is the subtext for what *Inter Insigniores* says about the ministerial priesthood, an argument which runs something like this: Jesus chose twelve men as his apostles;

together with these twelve he celebrated a last meal which was a true sacrifice; in effect the Twelve, the only ones we know to have been present with Jesus on that occasion, concelebrated with him the first Sacrifice of the Mass, and it was therefore to them alone that the command to repeat the act was addressed; they and they alone, therefore, must have received the equivalent of ordination to the priesthood, presumably in the act of concelebration.

As I noted at the beginning, my concern is not to evaluate this or any other argument advanced in official documents as a piece of biblical exegesis. That is a task for New Testament exegetes. The reason for presenting it at all is that it leads directly to the main issue which is also the sticking point. If we ask what in the Roman Catholic tradition priests can do that non-priests cannot, the answer is *sacrifice*. While official teaching authority, the *magisterium*, inheres in and is restricted to the priesthood, what is centrally constitutive of the priestly office is the exclusive right to offer the sacrifice of the Mass, *potestas in corpus Domini*. This has always been acknowledged. It explains why churches with a quite different eucharistic theology have had the least difficulty admitting women to pastoral ministry. It was also the main bone of contention in ecumenical conversations with the Anglican communion, suspended at least temporarily after the latter took the step of ordaining women priests. For Roman Catholics the point emerged more clearly after the abolition of minor orders as steps towards the priesthood and the opening up to lay people, under certain conditions, of the liturgical functions of lector, acolyte, cantor, commentator, administrator of baptism, distributor of holy communion, and the ministry of the word and prayer.³ The one thing they absolutely may not do is offer the Sacrifice of the Mass.

Though the sacrificial function of the priest is not referred to in Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter, it is given its due place in both *Inter Insigniores* and *Mulieris Dignitatem*. In the former we read that "the sacrament of the Eucharist is not only a fraternal meal [the adjective is noteworthy], but at the same time the memorial that makes present and actual Christ's sacrifice and his offering by the Church". Later in the same document we are told that only the priest has the right to perform the sacrificial act, and that he does so *in persona Christi*. In *Mulieris Dignitatem* the point is made more succinctly. We are told that the Twelve were called precisely in order that they might be with Christ at the Last Supper. "They, and they alone, receive the sacramental charge, 'Do this in memory of me' which is joined to the institution of the Eucharist". There follows a passage which deserves to be quoted in full (emphasis in the original):

the group; for example, by the allocation of portions or cuts of the sacrificial animal.

In societies organized according to patrilineal descent sacrificing was a predominantly and, in most cases, exclusively male affair. The instances adduced by anthropologists in which, in addition to men, post-menopausal women were allowed to participate, illustrate the common belief that menstrual and post-partum blood has a defiling effect and disqualifies women, or at least pre-menopausal women, from participation in the central religious acts of the community. It is understandable, therefore, that women could not function as priests in Israel of the biblical period since, quite apart from menstruation, the purity laws excluded them from the sanctuary for forty days after giving birth, and for eighty if the child was female (Leviticus 12:1-5). This does not, of course, explain why the society in question felt it needed to have such laws.

But the ritual marginalization of women in this kind of set-up is not due exclusively to considerations of purity; it is a feature of social organization in general. Patrilineal systems work by importing women into a household from outside to bear children for its adult males, one of whom will in time become the new family head and perpetuate the process. In this context, therefore, women are always outsiders, honorary members of the household of destination, and as such generally excluded from taking part in the most significant cultic and ceremonial acts of the group except as spectators. This is so whether we are talking about ancient Greece, Rome, Israel or traditional patrilineal societies in sub-Saharan Africa. Women contribute their reproductive capacities, but the contribution is to a system over which they exercise no direct control.

There is, I believe, an instructive parallel *on the level of social realities and dynamics* between proprietary control of sacrifice within a patrilineal kinship group and exclusive control of the Sacrifice of the Mass by the celibate hierarchy of the Catholic Church; and I hasten to add that the analogy is not invalidated by the obvious absence of kinship relations of descent in the ranks of the clergy. Lineage systems are to a greater or lesser extent fictive any way, and biological descent from the clan eponym is generally less important than subscribing to the group ethos and taking part in its mandatory rituals. The ecclesiastical analogue to a descent system restricted to male celibates was, and remains, as effective a means of preserving traditional arrangements, sustaining the corresponding structures of authority, and preserving and handing on patrimonial property as the patrilineal primogeniture system practised, for example, in Israel of the biblical period.

The point may be illustrated by the legislation mandating clerical celibacy. It is well known that the invalidation of clerical marriage in the

Since Christ, in instituting the Eucharist, linked it in such an explicit way to the priestly service of the apostles, it is legitimate to conclude that he thereby wished to express the relationship between man and woman, between what is “feminine” and what is “masculine”. It is a relationship willed by God both in the mystery of creation and the mystery of redemption. It is the *Eucharist* above all that expresses *the redemptive act of Christ the Bridegroom towards the Church, the Bride*. This is clear and unambiguous when the sacramental ministry of the Eucharist, in which the priest acts *in persona Christi*, is performed by a man.⁴

This is in some respects an extraordinary statement, but the only point I wish to emphasize is its implication that the priest is first and foremost a *sacrificing* priest. Since this is generally true of priests in widely different cultures and epochs, it occurred to me that a social science approach to priesthood and sacrifice could throw some light on certain aspects of current theory and practice in Roman Catholicism especially with respect to gender roles. I am assuming that social contextualizing of this kind can enlighten without being either reductionistic or prejudicial to the unique features of the Christian sacrifice as understood in Roman Catholicism.

II

In ancient and some contemporary societies sacrifice functions as a central feature of patrilineal descent groups. In this kind of social arrangement the essential elements are intergenerational continuity between males and the preservation and transmission through time of the material resources of the lineage, especially patrimonial domain or immovable property. Participation in the periodically celebrated sacrificial cult of the clan defines and delimits membership in the group and controls recruitment into it. Sacrifice is also the emotional focus of the group's existence. In ancient Rome, for example, one's status as member of a particular *gens* (kinship group), one's *gentilitas*, was determined not so much by circumstances of birth, being born into a specific kinship unit, as by participation in the *sacra gentilitia*, the periodic clan sacrifice attendance at which was mandatory for all adult males. A similar situation obtained as far as we can see in ancient Israel where attendance at the annual sacrifice was required for adult male members of the clan. On one occasion David excused himself from attendance at Saul's court by claiming that his “brothers”, that is, his fellow-clansmen, required his attendance at the annual sacrifice of the agnatic group (1 Samuel 20:5-6,28-29). Periodic sacrifice of this kind was the primary means for giving people a sense of belonging, sustaining a traditional way of life, regulating social boundaries, and defining some people in and some out of the group of sacrificing adepts. It also served to reinforce status and hierarchy within

twelfth century (in the seventh canon of the Second Lateran Council, 1139) had the purpose of preventing the alienation of church property through the benefice passing to a *legitimate* male offspring of the clerical incumbent by virtue of primogeniture. This prescription is, in essence, no different from measures to protect patrimonial domain and the "purity" of the lineage commonly attested in patrilineal societies. Many things have changed in our post-industrial society, needless to say, but important elements of the basic ecclesiastical structure remain together with equally important remnants of the theology which served to legitimate it.

To make the point more clearly, we might consider another analogue to patrilineal social organization (minus animal sacrifice) taken from the fairly recent history of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Against determined and sustained opposition, colleges for the education of women were established in both university cities in the late nineteenth century. At first these were unaffiliated with the universities, and though women were eventually admitted to lectures and examinations, they were nevertheless granted only a titular degree, one that they were not permitted to advertise. Even as recently as the 1930s women's colleges were not automatically considered constituent members of the universities in question. About the same time, the regulations of the University of Cambridge set a quota of five hundred women students, which number included women working in laboratories and museums. This amounted to less than ten percent of the male student body at that time. The reason for this state of affairs is fairly transparent but was spelled out with devastating irony in Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* published in 1938. Until a few decades ago both institutions were the preserve of exclusively male and still to a considerable extent celibate faculties (one recalls Mark Pattison's mordant comments a little over a century ago and Evelyn Waugh's allusion to Oxford's vinous and torpid clerics). Since the Oxford and Cambridge B.A. entitles the holder to an M.A. on payment of the appropriate fee but without further examination, and since membership in the university and the right to vote are conferred by possession of the M.A., women who had passed their examinations could be deprived of a say in administrative and policy decisions by the simple expedient of denying them the right to call themselves B.A. or, when that right had eventually to be conceded, by drastically restricting their number. Needless to say, none of the disastrous consequences which defenders of the status quo predicted would follow on the admission of women have in fact been realized, though we may be sure that there are still members of both institutions who would disagree.

From a social science point of view, therefore, Oxford and Cambridge operated until fairly recently in a manner analogous to a patrilineal descent system but without the inconvenience of having to

depend on the reproductive capacities of women. If, as I have suggested, the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church also fits this pattern, and to the extent that it does so, we would expect the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist to be emphasized. And since sacrifice is an important aspect of social organization, we would expect to find a correlation between different eucharistic theologies on the one hand and models of church organization on the other. Here, too, perhaps, the social-science approach may help to clarify or expand our theological thinking.

III

We owe the understanding of sacrifice as primarily a form of social bonding rather than placating or offering food to a deity or ancestral numen to Emile Durkheim who took it over, with modifications, from William Robertson Smith, one of the great British (Scottish) Old Testament scholars and Semiticists of the late nineteenth century. Based on his own fieldwork, the late eminent anthropologist Victor Turner made a valuable contribution to the discussion along these lines by distinguishing between the prophylactic, expiatory and piacular kind of sacrifice and what he called the sacrifice of abandonment to good.⁵ Prophylactic sacrifice aims to purify, ward off danger and get rid of disorder, and for that reason is more concerned with maintaining boundaries and restrictions. The purpose of the other kind is *communitas*, therefore not so much thrusting away evil as unclogging the channels of communication in the society, restoring the flow, collapsing hierarchical and segmentary differentiations. While the one tends towards separation and social stratification, the other is conjunctive and integrative, bringing together the living and dead members of the kinship group in a strengthened and strengthening social bond. Turner was at pains to point out that the distinction is never clear-cut. The way a particular group or society conceives of what it is doing when it sacrifices will be situated at one point or another, or successively at several points, on the prophylaxis-abandonment to good spectrum, and there will generally be elements of both types in any given instance.

Turner's observations insinuate the idea that there are ways of understanding the Eucharist as sacrifice which differ from one another as widely as the kinds of sacrifice familiar to anthropologists. Since Vatican II there has been a shift, some would say a drift, among Catholics—most visibly in the United States—away from the prophylactic and piacular type towards the idea of the Eucharist as primarily expressive of *communitas, koinonia*; in other words, towards the idea of the Eucharist as creative of community or, in Victor Turner's phrase, abandonment to

good, rather than as expressing and sanctioning existing church hierarchical structures. In the aftermath of Vatican II, the change was reflected in a greater receptivity to ecumenical communion services and a tendency to blur traditional and dogmatic distinctions between denominational eucharistic theologies, sometimes in theory, more often in practice.

The eucharistic theology implicit in *Inter Insigniores* and *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* is clearly at the other end of the spectrum. To judge by these and other pronouncements John Paul II, like his predecessor Paul VI, hews to a strong view of the Eucharist as sacrificial together with a strongly prophylactic view of sacrifice. But we have seen that it is precisely this sacrificial theory and the corresponding practice which sustain intergenerational continuity in a male descent group, whether it is a question of a traditional sacrificing descent group or a celibate, sacrificing priesthood. In either case, the inclusion of females among the sacrificial adepts is seen to pose a threat to the social organization which the sacrificial ritual functions to sustain.

It will be well to emphasize, once again, that I am not talking about a sinister determination on the part of church leaders to restrict power, privilege and the perquisites of office to their own ranks, nor about a disinclination to share power and control, as natural and endemic as that attitude is in any large organization. The point is rather that patterns of social organization inherited from the past generate attitudes and arguments favorable to their own perpetuation, and come eventually to be seen as natural and inevitable.

On the subject of inherited attitudes, we may also note that sacrifice as prophylaxis necessarily entails the need to exclude ritual taint, therefore the need for vigilance on the part of the sacrificial adepts with respect to reproduction and sexuality in general. This is widely thought to be characteristic of ancient Israelite cultic practice, which it certainly was, but it is by no means confined to that place and time. There exists this deep, subterranean, non-rational belief that menstrual and post-partum blood pollute, while the blood of the sacrificial victim purifies and protects. In the Jewish context Lawrence A. Hoffman has made this point recently in a remarkable study dealing with the history of the circumcision rite.⁶ Hoffman notes that according to rabbinic theory circumcision is based on a theory of sacrifice and represents symbolically the covenant between God and male members of the community, females being aggregated to it only as wives or daughters. Circumcision, in other words, is seen as initiation into a male "life line". On this basis the rabbis build a contrast or binary opposition between the sacrificial blood of circumcision which is salvific and menstrual blood which introduces disorder and

pollution. It is this binary opposition which, Hoffman claims, lies behind the ritual marginalisation of women in rabbinic law and in actual practice.

In arguing his case, Hoffman refers quite often to a brilliant and intuitive study of sacrifice by Nancy Jay which appeared posthumously in 1991.⁷ The author drew on a wealth of data from ancient societies and traditional societies which have survived into the modern world to show how uniformly women of childbearing years were and are excluded from active participation in sacrificial ritual. Briefly, her conclusion was that in patrilineal descent groups sacrifice makes amends for having to have recourse to the reproductive faculties of women; it is birth done better; a remedy for having been born of women. Once again, therefore, the binary opposition between sacrificial blood on the one hand and menstrual and post-partum blood on the other. She goes on to note that, if this is so, it is hardly surprising that there still linger around the Eucharist deeply ingrained anxieties and fears about pollution connected with the sexual function, childbirth, and the menstrual cycle. But the point of the preceding observations is to suggest that there is more at stake than that. Granted the social function of the Eucharist as sacrifice within ecclesial and hierarchical structures, admitting women to share with men control over the Eucharist is perceived (correctly) to pose a threat to existing ecclesial arrangements and the eucharistic theology which sustains them. This is not yet an argument that these structures ought to be changed. It is rather to make the point that it is anxiety generated by the prospect of structural change, even more than the fear of pollution, which informs these recent documents excluding women from the ministerial priesthood.⁸

- 1 *The Expository Times* 76 (1975), 123-5.
- 2 *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 68 (1976), 599-601; 69 (1977), 98-116.
- 3 New Code of Canon Law art.968 par.1.
- 4 English text from J. Gordon Melton, *The Churches Speak on Women's Ordination* (Detroit, New York & London: Gale Research Inc., 1991), 1-25.
- 5 Victor Turner, "Sacrifice as Quintessential Process: Prophylaxis or Abandonment?," *History of Religion* 16 (1977), 189-215.
- 6 Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood. Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 7 Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- 8 I wish to thank the Association for Religion and Intellectual Life for permission to publish this revised and expanded version of an article which appeared in *CrossCurrents* Fall 1995.