

PRIESTHOOD & WOMEN

It is inevitable that one-day women will be accepted for ordination to the priesthood along with men in the Roman Catholic Church. Yes, I say inevitable.

One fundamental reason is that there is no theological basis for their exclusion. Edward Schillebeeckx (1914-2009) was one of the first theologians to write about religious celibacy in human terms as a basis for the spiritual reality (1958). He also voiced his strong support of women's' ordination.

His arguments are logical propositions. Women and men are equals. A frequent objection to women's ordination is that Jesus chose only men for priesthood. Schillebeeckx asked, "Why must the idea that Jesus chose men, given the culture of the time, suddenly acquire a theological significance?" He pointed out that Jesus also selected married men—exclusively Jewish men.

Traditionally the exclusion of women from ritual sacrifice was based on the belief of their "uncleanness"—bleeding. That prohibition was so strong that it extended to men—priests—who had contact with menstruating woman—they were forbidden to approach the altar. Even beyond that, a celebrant was forbidden to have sexual relations with his wife for some time before his sacramental duties.

The theologian put it this way: "All kinds of (*supposed*) feminine impurities have played a part in the history of the Church restricting women's role in worship as hygienic measures were ritualized".

There is no physical reason that women cannot be suitable candidates for the priesthood. We know that there is no basis to hold either that women are 'unclean' or that sexual intercourse is a legitimate excuse to exclude women from ministry and presiding at the Eucharist.

There is still a strong misogynist strain within the ranks of the clergy. This is abhorrent to many men as well as women. Although we are centuries removed from the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1466) the ideas that women are constitutionally inferior to men, cannot be trusted, are

impressionable and unreliable, etc. are not yet purged out of the clerical system.

But it is patently clear that women are intellectually and psychologically every bit the match for men. In fact, some authorities have speculated that the sexual abuse of minors by bishops and priests would not exist in the numbers and degree it does among ministers if women were in leadership positions.

The second reason that women's ordination is inevitable is the pressure of reality and the *zeitgeist of the 21st Century*. History teaches that the evolution of religion is either responsive to temporal reality or it is marginalized and dies. The Roman Church moves slowly, but it does move sooner or later in response to (and at times leading) 'the people of God'—The Church.

We exist in the time of Women's Liberation. The male-dominated hierarchy even now cannot function without women. Many women are no longer satisfied with "attractive tasks...that favor feminine characteristics" while they are excluded from church leadership.

Schillebeeckx writes that, "As long as Women are left completely outside all decision making in the Church there can be no question of real Women's Liberation".

Social currents that run deep can be ignored or resisted for a time, but sooner or later their purifying force will overcome surface ripples. The emphasis on elaborate dress, expensive vestments, jewelry and luxurious living quarters that we see among some of the hierarchy are desperate gestures to reinforce a monarchical power system whose time has run out—it is effete. Window dressing will not stabilize the house of God.

Nowhere is the history of religious 'slavery' more clear than in the treatment and subjugation of religious women by the hierarchy. Women who desired to serve humanity at one time in the U.S. flocked to convents and religious institutes (200,000 in 1965 and 50,000 in 2014). Religious life was at one time a main avenue to education, status and service for Catholic women. The price was subjugation to male juridical and practical control. No longer. Women have myriad paths to all that convent life once offered and more.

The third reason Women's ordination is inevitable is the current double standard by which men and women are treated by the power structure of the Church. The pressure of truth will not support this duplicitous operation forever—or for long. Voices in the highest ranks of the Church have already spoken out against the careerism and self-interest of bishops and clergy—these self-serving elements in the power structure of an all-male-club cannot last.

An increasing number of lay people are supportive of women priests and a married clergy. The priest population in the U.S. has decreased from 58,000 in 1965 to 38,000 in 2014. Over 3,000 parishes are without a resident priest. The need for qualified priests to minister is on the brink of dire. It is unreasonable, unconscionable and detrimental to the mission of the Church of Christ to dismiss and ignore the women and married men called to service.

Mandatory celibacy is a human construct and has outlived its usefulness for diocesan service. History proclaims that the obligation has never worked very well. In fact obligatory celibacy is an impossible and irrational demand. A majority of Catholic clergy does not practice it.

Gender and marriage are not intrinsic impediments to priestly service—decrees and tradition notwithstanding. Both ecclesiastical proscriptions were practical constructs molded in particular cultural circumstances with particular institutional and pastoral needs in mind. The people of God must not be deprived of sacramental life because of an institutional power (control) structure.

Schillebeeckx said that “If women are excluded from leadership in the Church and presiding at the Eucharist on the basis of their gender, the connection between Church and Ministry is broken in favor of relationship between sacred power and Ministry”. He added, “This is in No Way Christian.”

There are some Christian voices being raised in favor of women's ordination. A few Catholic bishops have ordained a small number of women. These heroic persons are doing what change-makers and devout rebels have always done—they act in accord with their conscience.

In addition to the valiant women who have received the sacrament of Holy Orders and serve communities, Fr. Roy Bourgeois a Maryknoll priest and peace activist merits reformer status for his bold support of women's ordination. His witness has been sanctioned with a Vatican dismissal from his priesthood. His judgment is that "the ordination of women in the Catholic Church is inevitable because it is rooted in love, justice, and equality."

Thoughtful people know that the judgment of St. Paul will outlast any temporary ecclesiastical glitches and biases that restrict ministry to the detriment of the church of God. "There is neither male nor female. In Christ we are all one."