

Women's Ordination

Last week the Vatican sent out a letter to its bishops around the world citing the “attempted ordination of women” as one of the gravest crimes under church law, thus putting the ordination of women in the same category as heresy, schism and clerical sexual abuse of minors. And the extreme irony of this communication from the Vatican is that it comes at a time when Roman Catholic Church is beset by a record shortage of ordained priests in the West and at a time when sexual abuse by priest is tearing the Church apart. The issue of women’s ordination has been elevated to lofty heights by a male dominated church. And I have to ask, what is the fear driving such skewed priorities?

But we need not be surprised. The ordination of women is a burning issue in other Christian denominations. Some churches have even drawn the line at having women in any form of leadership in their congregations, citing Scripture as their justification for treating people unequally.

But their use of Scripture is somewhat selective. The Gospels attest to the high status of women in Jesus’ eyes, and indeed they seem to have been the ones who were with Jesus to his end and there at his new beginning. And it is clear from Paul’s letters that women held high positions in the early Christian Church. Paul salutes fifteen women alongside eighteen men. Pricilla, whose name is twice mentioned before that of her husband, indicates that Paul at least held her to have a more prominent position in the Church and that she was seen as a missionary and teacher of distinction -all this in an extremely patriarchal society. And in the early centuries of the Christian Church, women seem also to have been in the majority at least in the upper classes, for during the persecution of the emperor Licinius around 322CE there was enacted special prohibitions directed against women, as if the emperor realised that the strength of Christianity lay in its women members.

However, **As I See It**, such textual arguments are spurious in the extreme. Surely what really matters is the overall texture of the Christian gospel which seeks to be open all. After all it was Paul that said, “....in Christ there is neither male or female” We are all children of God gifted in different ways, and there is no evidence to indicate men make better leaders or have clearer theological minds and so are temperamentally and intellectually more able to lead in churches. There is however clear evidence that women have been marginalised in churches for centuries by a patriarchal mindset that is determined to hold onto its power.

But as interesting as all this discussion about women’s ordination, there is a bigger issue that stalks our congregations and that concerns the very notion of a priestly caste at all. Increasingly the question is being asked – do we need ordained clergy at all?

Now there’s a question for the 21st Century Church!

Tony would be more than happy to chat about the above article.

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As I See It

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