

Anglican-Roman Catholic Consultation Statement on the Ordination of Women (1975)

State of the Question

Since 1969 the Anglican-Roman Catholic Consultation has consistently affirmed that its goal is to help the two churches to arrive at full communion and organic unity.¹ Recently the question of ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate has become an increasingly pressing issue in our churches, but the state of the question is not the same in both. The General Convention of the Episcopal Church is expected to consider the question at its meeting in September, 1976; meanwhile the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church has recently reaffirmed its position that only men are to be ordained to the priesthood.

If a divergence on this subject eventuates in official action, it will introduce an important new element into officially appointed dialogues, as well as into conversations and covenants at many other levels. However, the members of ARC are convinced that this difference would not lead to ARC's termination or to the abandonment of its declared goal. The reasons for this conviction will be dealt with more fully in later paragraphs.

Development of Tradition

A special consultation of scholars on this question, convoked in June 1975 by appropriate authorities of our two churches, reported as follows:

In considering the relation of the question of the ordination of women to the authority of the church's Tradition, the following considerations must be kept in mind.

There is what may be called an "essential Tradition" which, as witnessed in the Scriptures, the ecumenical creeds, the church's liturgical tradition, and its proclamation and teaching, constitutes the basic identity of the Christian community. This Tradition has as its fundamental content the relation of human beings to the God and Father of Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

This Tradition is variously elaborated and interpreted in dogma and doctrinal tradition, according as inquiry and change within the church, or confrontation with intellectual, social, or political movements in the world require the church to move towards a deeper self-understanding through explication of the Tradition which constitutes its identity. It thus faces, from time to time, novel issues, which demand that on the basis of its given self-understanding, it explain itself in new ways for the sake of fidelity to the Gospel.

In the current situation, the question of the ordination of women has raised issues which cannot be answered adequately by the mere citing of traditional practices or beliefs. Current discussion of the issue has shown that traditional reasons for refusing the ordination of women are not universally acceptable. It has further shown that problems relating to the doctrine of God, of the Incarnation, and Redemption are at least indirectly involved in its solution, so that any decision, whether for or against the ordination of women, will in fact require the church to explain or develop its essential Tradition in an unprecedented way. The church, therefore, faces an issue which demands of it a new effort at self-understanding in regard to certain elements of its Gospel.

¹ "ARC VII Statement," adopted at the seventh meeting, December 8-11, Boynton Beach, Florida. Published 1972 in ARC/DOC I, pp. 9-20.

Such an effort involves a two-fold process: first, the theological exploration of the Tradition and of the new question in its bearing on the data of Christian revelation; second, an official decision by constituted authority in the church which encompasses the doctrinal and practical aspects of the issue. In the divided state of the Christian churches, separate processes will be gone through by the different bodies.

The theological exploration mentioned above has been undertaken by both Roman Catholic and Anglican theologians. Official pronouncements give no indication of any expectation of change in the present position of the Roman Catholic Church on this issue in the immediate future. At this meeting, a number of the Roman Catholic participants felt that the implications of this matter had not been explored sufficiently to offer a final decision. On the other hand, the question of the ordination of women is expected to be proposed for action at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in 1976. Anglican participants felt that the discussion in the Episcopal Church in the United States had reached a stage where decision was becoming possible.²

Understandings Already Shared

The process outlined in the fourth paragraph of the above statement is now going on in both churches and consequently is of concern to ARC. We have given careful consideration to several papers subsequently written by the scholars who were called to the special consultation. ARC's contribution is not to propose what either church should do, but to place the question within the context of agreed statements already issued by ARC and ARCIC—the national and international commissions of the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches—notably the Windsor Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine³ and the Canterbury Statement on Ministry and Ordination.⁴

These statements are a strong indication that, though disagreement exists on the answer, the question is based on a common understanding of the issues involved and the meaning of terms common to both churches. We are talking about the same Eucharist and the same three-fold ministry; we share the same fundamental sources of doctrine in Scripture and Tradition. Both churches make use of the insights of theological research, incorporating the contributions of anthropology, psychology, history and other aspects of culture to arrive at authoritative decisions.⁵

Women in Ministry

A concept of the inferiority and subject status of women is reflected in both the Old Testament and the New. However, the fundamental equality of men and women is indicated in a number of key biblical passages⁶ and has been developed in the teaching of the church. The expression of

² ARC Special Consultation on Ordination of Women, Mercy Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, June 22-25, 1975.

³ ARC/DOC I, pp. 47-50.

⁴ To be published in ARC/DOC III.

⁵ Cf. "Doctrinal Agreement and Christian Unity: Methodological Considerations," ARC eleventh meeting, published in ARC/DOC II, pp. 49-53.

⁶ Genesis 1:27-28 (cf. 5:1,2, placed by an ancient editor after the fall). Judges 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14; Nehemiah 6:14 (judges and prophetesses). Joel 2:28-29 (cf. Acts 2:17-18). Mark 12:18-25 (sexes in the resurrection); Luke 8:1-3 (companions of Jesus); 10:40-42 (woman as disciple); Acts 1:12-14 (awaiting Pentecost with the eleven); 9:36, 16:14, 40; 17:4, 12, 32 (leaders in local churches); 18:1-26 (Priscilla as theologian); 21:8 (daughters of Philip) Romans 16:1-16 (Phoebe the deacon, various women workers in the Gospel); 1 Corinthians 7:1-16 (marital mutuality); 11:2-12 (though men are accounted superior, women pray and prophesy in Church); Galatians 3:26-29

this equality in the roles assumed by men and women in society is a matter of cultural development and change. The church must measure this development in relation to grace—our new creation in Christ—and to the ultimate fulfillment of his victory over sin and death.

In addition to Christian witness within the family, women have long been engaged in teaching, nursing, social work, missionary service, and care for the young, the aged and the infirm. Although the diaconate has been opened to women in the Episcopal Church, the role of presiding at the Eucharist has not been opened to women in the practice of either church. Yet women are now serving as Christ's ministers in many new ways: for example, ministries of peace, social justice, theological education, and formal pastoral care of special groups, including leadership in hospital, campus and prison chaplaincies. Women now play an increasing part in the Liturgy as lectors and auxiliary ministers of Holy Communion. Today they stand on a level of equality with men in exercising the ministry of all baptized persons in the public forum.

Issues to Be Faced

The New Testament records that Jesus chose only males to be apostles, and this has been cited as a model. Moreover, the fact that the church has continued to ordain only males to the priesthood is a weighty precedent. However, one must explore the reasons for this practice to determine whether it holds for all time or is capable of change when cultural evolution presents new possibilities for witness to the Gospel.

Both our churches agree that no individual has an inherent right to be ordained priest. Nevertheless, the exclusion a priori of a large class of persons from this ministry must be justified by cogent arguments, since women are now widely recognized as capable of exercising leadership in many roles once regarded as appropriate only to men. If the churches are to change their age-long practice, however, the claim that there is no strong reason against the ordination of women must be reinforced by strong arguments for it, since the desirability of change does not automatically follow from acceptance of its possibility. In any case, whether a change is advocated or a tradition affirmed, adequate theological reflection is necessary on the part of all concerned, because a decision of either sort would involve a response to a question never before raised in this way. The depth of the issue is indicated in the third paragraph of the above report of the June, 1975 consultation.

The question of ordination of women presents problems within both the Roman Catholic and the Anglican communions; so also do the Marian dogmas. Both of these issues are relevant to a deep concern for womanhood in the life of the world and the economy of salvation. In both our churches there is a growing realization that women should have a more effective voice in all areas of church life, befitting their dignity as human persons made in the image and likeness of God.

Diversity in Unity?

A difference in practice between our churches on ordination of women would inevitably raise the question of its effect upon the goal of full communion and organic unity. If this goal is thought of as requiring uniformity in doctrine and discipline concerning candidates for ordination, the problem would indeed be a serious one. However, there is a development in theological thought about Church unity toward accepting diversity as a gift of the Holy Spirit who endows churches

(In Christ "neither male nor female"); Philippians 4:2 (women who "have labored with me in the Gospel along with Clement...").

as well as individuals with varied gifts.⁷ Theologians of both churches are writing on Church “typology” in terms which suggest that we might accept and even cherish “varieties of service” (I Cor. 12:5) among churches—differences appropriate to the characteristic theological method, liturgical expression, spiritual and devotional tradition, and canonical discipline of each. These differences have relationship to the cultural situation, psychological outlook, intellectual method, and forms of social organization of different communities.

The ecumenical task is to inquire whether one church can fully recognize another in the midst of differences; whether both can discern a substantial unity in faithfulness to the Gospel amid varied expressions and understandings of the single Mystery, the single Faith, the single Christ. Particular controverted issues of church life may represent different ways of manifesting God’s grace, as the Spirit has guided us. Even the things we do not agree with in each other’s traditions may have something to teach us about God’s will for his people. We proceed in the faith and hope that the Spirit is leading us into unity.

Discerning, Deciding, Doing

There is a particular urgency for mutual consultation before important decisions are taken by either of the two churches which already share so much in common and which intend to persevere in seeking together that unity for which Christ prayed. This process of mutual consultation, however, must not interfere with the interacting roles of prophecy and authority within either church. The entire body of the faithful is in Baptism anointed with the Spirit, and this one same Spirit, distributing diverse gifts at will, at times manifests itself to the entire body through the prophetic witness of a few, for the sake of the whole. It is the proper role of authority in the Church to encourage and promote discernment of such witness, thus fostering an authentic development while at the same time maintaining the integrity of a normative Christian life and tradition.

“Speaking the truth in love” is the way in which the Church will best prepare and strengthen itself to carry out the mission God has given it. We have tried to express that mission in the concluding paragraphs of our statement on The Purpose of the Church:⁸ The church, the Body of Christ in the world, is led by the Spirit into all nations to fulfill the purpose of the Father. In so far as it faithfully preaches the Gospel of salvation, celebrates the sacraments, and manifests the love of God in service, the church becomes more perfectly one with the risen Christ. Impelled by its Lord, it strives to carry out the mission it has received from him: to prepare already the structures of the Kingdom, to share with all persons the hope for union with God.

In humility and repentance, the church shares the guilt of mankind in its disunity. Presenting men and women with hope in the fulfillment of their destiny beyond this life, it also assumes, under the cross of its Lord, the burdens and the struggles of the oppressed, the poor, and the suffering. Striving for justice and peace, the church seeks to better the conditions of this world. To the divided, it offers oneness; to the oppressed, liberation; to the sick, healing; to the dying, life; to all persons, eternal salvation.

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⁷ “Doctrinal Agreement,” p. 52.

⁸ ARC XV Statement, made public on October 31, 1975. To be published in ARC/DOC III. DP, B, PR, PS.

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