

Women and Girls in the R C Church

Pamela Perry, August 2019

I'm really pleased to represent CWO (Catholic Women's Ordination) and Parishioners' Call to talk about our beloved but sometimes frustrating Catholic Church and how today's women do and do not fit into its structures.

CWO has been campaigning bravely and doggedly for the ordination of women for 25 years. Parishioners' Call is a sister movement to CWO. It was founded in January 2018 in Salisbury with the aim of giving parishioners the confidence and opportunity to call for change; to reflect and share with the hierarchy their own vision of how our Church could be renewed and reformed. What we immediately found was that parishioners are equally keen for both married men and women to be ordained; that ordination should be marital status and gender-blind.

I live right beside the door of Salisbury Cathedral and attend services there with my husband several times a week. However, as I have heard others say, "Catholicism is in my blood". My love of the Church began suddenly in France at the end of the nineteen fifties when I was eighteen. Staying with my penfriend in Paris, I'd been shocked by the sight of impoverished, homeless people such as I'd never been aware of before, sleeping all along the banks of the River Seine. After I returned home, I read in The Daily Telegraph that Abbe Pierre, a French priest, was gathering some of the destitute into, self-supporting, mutually supportive communities, almost like families. They were called Ragpickers because their funds came from recycling rubbish. The idea spread, eventually growing into the Europe-wide Emmaus movement.

I'd left the Anglican Church at the age of eleven for the usual childish reason that I'd found it boring, so it was out of social concern that I wrote to ask Abbe Pierre if I might work for him as a volunteer. However, when I met him, I was pulled up short, by seeing God in his eyes. It was my first direct experience of God. Attending a Mass that Abbe Pierre celebrated one night in the open air by the light of a bonfire, served by and in the company of ragged people, initiated me into the rich spirituality of the Catholic Church. Now, half a century later, I believe everyone, irrespective of gender or marital status, should have the blessing of sharing in the Mass in the fullest possible way, in whatever capacity they may be called. The vocation of everyone who feels called to be a priest deserves to be tested irrespective of his or her marital status or gender. In his last book before he died, Abbe Pierre advocated the ordination of women. He well understood their value, not least because Emmaus depended upon the organisational and practical skills of Mademoiselle Coutaz, his secretary and close friend, as much as it did upon his own inspiration.

Pope John Paul II said, "The presence and the role of women in the life and mission of the Church remain absolutely necessary and irreplaceable". How disappointing was it then when in 1994, in his Apostolic Letter "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis" he declared that *the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful!* He wanted to stop all discussion of the topic and his letter certainly frightened people. Since that time, brave priests and nuns have been disciplined and removed from their duties and communities, and lay Catholics excommunicated for campaigning for the ordination of women. Not one of them so punished has yet been reinstated

When the Catholic Church then began to speak about the complementarity of men and women it seemed to be thinking biologically, valuing women primarily as child-bearers,

home-makers and educators of children. It is indeed possible that it was Helena, mother of the Roman emperor, Constantine, who rolled out the Christian religion throughout the Roman empire, who sparked her son's interest in Christianity. She was considered a saint in the eastern and western churches and reportedly discovered the "true cross". With a different mind-set, perhaps Helena would be honoured rather than her son? Yet, if Helena had herself been its great promoter perhaps Christianity might not have developed such an authoritarian and patriarchal structure.

But women, including mothers, have been powerfully influential figures in their own right: Presidents and Prime Ministers! The Church's own history includes women theologians, abbesses, monarchs, missionaries, martyrs, mystics, nurses, hospital administrators, scientists, scholars and physicians. Of 36 Doctors of the Church, four, designated after 1970, were Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Sienna and Teresa of Lisieux. The first saints of the Americas, of the United States, of Native America and of Australia were all women. Yet women have tended to be airbrushed out of the Church's history. Dr Ally Kateusz, historian and author of the book "Mary and Early Christian Women: Hidden Leadership" recently presented a paper at the International Society of Biblical Literature in Rome showing how depictions in early Christian art of women as priests and bishops have been hidden away or destroyed at the Vatican's behest. Work was even carried out in old St Peter's to cover up evidence. There is a free Kindle edition of Ally's book and Ally herself will be speaking at the Catholic Women's Ordination Annual Gathering in Birmingham on October 5, to which, of course, we'd be delighted if you wanted to come.

Pope Francis brought a breath of fresh thinking into the Catholic Church which just might herald a change in its attitude to women. He elevated the status of women when he appointed seven women to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, giving women a vote on the Church's governing body for the first time. Cardinal Pell's successor in the Vatican is also a woman. Moreover, Pope Francis has elevated the celebration of Saint Mary Magdalene in the General Roman Calendar from a Memorial to a Feast, demonstrating that the "apostle of the apostles" as described by Saint Thomas Aquinas, can be a model of women's role in the Church. Pope Francis also set up a Commission which has yet to report, to research whether women were ordained as deacons in the past. Two of its members are reported to have given him their conclusions only for him to call for more "evidence".

There has, of course, been a huge change in cultural attitudes regarding the equality of men and women, in my lifetime. This summer's edition of *Prospero*, the BBC staff magazine, recalls that when BBC Television News appointed Nan Winton as the first female newsreader in 1960, the BBC editors were appalled. The thought that a woman could be the conveyor of truth and authority on television was something they couldn't imagine and couldn't accept. When she began to read the News, much of the media coverage was sexist. The *Evening Standard* said, "Miss Winton usually hides herself behind a desk. Pity. She has a 36-25-37 figure"

In everyday practice, the Catholic Church has been greatly influenced by this general cultural change. At the present time it both allows, and *needs*, women to do more. In fact, except for the Diaconate and the Priesthood It no longer distinguishes between men and women, and women fill approximately 85% of all Church roles that do not require ordination. Nuns and sisters have long had a wide variety of vocations including contemplative prayer, teaching, providing healthcare and working as missionaries. Now you can tell your daughters that lay women can be catechists, altar servers, extraordinary ministers of holy communion, pastoral workers, parish secretaries, outreach and youth workers, readers and school and hospice chaplains. Sheffield Diocese has a woman director of its counselling service and women spiritual directors, some of whom are paid. Shepton Mallet employs a woman pastoral worker who lives in the presbytery. Portsmouth University has a woman chaplain (who refers to God as He and She!). My own parish has

had three paid women employees - a secretary, an outreach worker and a youth minister. Because of the shortage of priests, it is looking to employ pastoral workers who could be either male or female.

State Institutions no longer require Catholic chaplains to be priests. Wandsworth prison is advertising for a chaplain who *can* be an ordained Roman Catholic priest or Permanent Deacon, a Religious Brother or Sister *or a suitably qualified lay person of the Roman Catholic Church.*

Administratively the UK Catholic Church certainly trusts women. In the Clifton diocese, the Chief Operating Officer, is a woman, as are her PA who previously worked for a Business Bank, the Diocesan Property Officer, the Diocesan Gift Aid Organiser and the Finance Officer.

However, in the UK, Church discipline keeps women out of the pulpit. Elsewhere the Church is not so strict. A CWO member's parish church in Germany reminds her of Amazonia and other rural places, such as her west Kenyan relatives' village, where word and communion services, often led by women, have been the norm for years. At a Mass she recently attended, two women catechists led the service, with an input from children including in the homily with the priest fitting in comfortably. She speculates that the involvement of the State in the funding and administration of the German Church has effectively led to its being more democratic.

Most Christian Churches of other denominations no longer believe that God's plan includes banning women from preaching. As long ago as the end of the eighteenth century, Jarena Lee, born to free black parents but hired out to work from the age of seven, became the first authorized woman preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She was mystically called to preach:

"An impressive silence fell upon me,. . . to my utter surprise there seemed to sound a voice which said to me, "Go preach the Gospel!" I immediately replied aloud, "No one will believe me." Again I listened, and again the same voice seemed to say, "Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth, and you will turn your enemies to become your friends." . . .

When Jarena's minister said that their Discipline did not call for women preachers she felt relieved. But "no sooner did this feeling cross my mind, than I found that a love of souls had in a measure departed from me; that holy energy which burned within me, as a fire, began to be smothered... O how careful ought we to be, lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. . . . And why should it be thought impossible for a woman to preach seeing the Saviour died for the woman as well as for the man. . . ."

Church discipline has bruised many Catholic women who have heard the call to be priests.

Pippa Bonner wrote to The Tablet:

I have heard a persistent voice calling me to priestly ministry, which started 25 years ago. I waited, unable to have it taken seriously and tested officially. Meanwhile I continued

my social work job, ran a hospice bereavement service, remained active in my parish, volunteered on a hospital chaplaincy team and now work in pastoral care. I completed a Master's course in Theology encouraged by friends (some priests). I joined CWO, campaigning and praying for priestly ministry in a reformed Church. Most importantly, I brought up three children and am now a grandmother.

Many years ago our bishop invited people to make an appointment to discuss their vocation. I wrote. Many weeks later I received a terse reply scolding me... but the voice continued.

I wait. I am now too old to be considered but I pray other women may enrich priestly ministry alongside men in a simpler, less hierarchical Church.

Carlotta Kramskoy wrote:

I, too, have heard a "persistent voice calling me to priestly ministry". I felt called at the age of six but have never been permitted even to discern the validity of that call, which remains as strong today as ever. However, I feel lucky that I have been able to put my MA in theology and ministry to practical use, contributing in a small way to pastoral ministry in both my parish and the diocese. I have great support from my bishop, who appointed me diocesan interfaith officer and who solemnly consecrated me as a widow in the service of Christ and the Church. Although feeling strengthened by the grace of consecration, I still experience extreme anguish at the thought of a life denied. I continue to thank Bishop John Crowley and other bishops and priests for speaking out in favour of open dialogue on this matter.

In marked contrast, this letter by Judy Rees, an ordained Anglican friend shows what a benign change in Church attitudes can take place. She writes:

I see priestly ministry for women as a privilege - as it is for men too.

In the Anglican church, many women in ministry had believed themselves called to the priesthood well before it was a possibility. I was not one of them. For me, the attraction of full-time ministry was personal Christian witness - quietly pastoral rather than public. This was way back in the 1960's when I was a parish worker and had to be persuaded to become a deaconess and then deacon.

When it became possible for women to be ordained priests, it simply seemed a natural next step and I was taken by surprise when my colleague and I were ordained, at the joy we experienced. On one level the first time we celebrated the Eucharist also just seemed natural; on another level it was rich, deep and mysterious.

Life has moved on since we tended to see the role of men and women priests as complementary to each other. It is much more a shared ministry, each contributing gifts and insights given by God. Wonderfully, there is also much more emphasis on shared ministry with lay people, for all are part of the body of Christ.

Judy is right of course, when she says that ordination is a privilege. There is no such thing as the right to be ordained. However, in its reverence for each human soul, doesn't the Church have an *obligation* to honour the sense some women have of God's call to ministry; to see if it can discern in them the requisite gifts of the Spirit? Hasn't it also an obligation to consider the *need* some Catholic men and women may have, to be ministered *to* by women especially through homilies and in confession? As someone recently said, the Holy Spirit is screaming for change in the Catholic church.

Bishops' vows prevent them from commenting but in their retirement three emeritus bishops, Bishops Hollis, Crowley and MacMahon, have felt free to speak. Referring to the negative ruling of "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis," Bishop Crowley wrote in *The Tablet* that respected theologians around the world have repeatedly insisted that discussion of even a venerable ancient tradition, which does not pertain to an essential article of creedal faith, cannot simply be shut down by papal pronouncement, however forcibly delivered. What drives his own conviction that women's ordination should be considered by the Church is "a simple matter of embracing the rich diversity and complementarity which God in creative delight has bestowed upon all of those fashioned in God's own image and likeness. "

"Imagine" he writes, "what the public face of the Church might begin to look like if women were to be ordained. At a stroke, the present monochrome masculine face of the Church would be replaced by a gender inclusiveness more faithful to the usual human setting, whether in the family or in society. The world looking in at us could begin to see a new face of the Church: women and men working together in a complementary and mutually enriching way, to the benefit of everyone, and to the greater glory of God.

In the story of a convalescent patient's gradual recovery of health a critical moment sometimes comes when fresh new blood is pumped into the struggling body, transfusing it with new life and energy. "

Bishop Crowley let the last word belong to a wise Jewish leader in the apostolic era of the embryonic Christian community. The disciples of Jesus had just been thrown into prison, accused of being seditious, and were then brought in to face the whole Sanhedrin. When they said they would continue to preach the Good News of Jesus crucified and risen, they stood in danger of being put to death. At this point, a Pharisee called Gamaliel, "a doctor of law and respected by the whole people", stood up and addressed the Sanhedrin. "What I suggest is that you leave these men alone and let them go. If this enterprise, this movement of theirs, is of human origin it will break up of its own accord, but if in fact it does come from God you will not only be unable to destroy them, but you might find yourselves fighting against God" (Acts 5: 34 - 40). Gamaliel's advice was accepted."

This reminds me of the debate on women's ministry in the Church of England at the General synod of the Bishops in 1992. *The Times* attributed the Synod's vote in favour of ordaining women to Revd June Osborne, then Dean of Salisbury, now Bishop of Llandaff. She had ended her summing up of the debate by pleading with the bishops just to *test* the priestly vocation of women. There was a crucial shift in the voting and a few bishops who might have been intending to vote against the motion abstained.

Bishop June speaks of the profound benefits women have brought to the Church. "I think of those who have told me how they joined or returned to church membership because they saw women being taken seriously, using properly their God-given gifts and wisdom. I think of the pleasure felt and expressed by people of all backgrounds when they see men and women working together as colleagues in church... celebrating their complementary gifts and outlooks. I think too, of the distinctive grace women have brought to what the church does. They bless people's lives with their own brand of care, for those getting married, having children, finding faith or journeying towards death. What women do to enhance the joy, to bring comfort and nourish hope is no better or worse than what men do but is worthy of respect.

Where women share in the directing of power and authority, there is a lot of evidence that their male colleagues find themselves more at ease, helped in putting together their private and public selves, and better able to use their intuition."

Such a huge decision will probably require a General Council of the Church. Meanwhile, a first step would be to allow free and open discussion throughout the Church at every level. *Is the ordination of women part of God's plan for the Church?*

Free and open discussion is what Parishioners' Call both encourages and facilitates. We believe that as major shareholders in the institution of the Catholic Church, we parishioners, who keep it in being by our donations, have both a responsibility and a duty to see that it is fit for purpose. It is vital for us to make our voices heard, to hold meetings, however small or however large, to reflect on the present and future of the Church and to communicate our conclusions in writing to Pope Francis copied to our bishop.

"Overcoming Silence", which is another campaigning group says, "Now is the time for turning round. We experience in our own lives the thousand deaths of the church institution. We are driven to the cemeteries of our faith - closing parishes, trust killed by abuse, our children's faith assassinated by soulless imposition of rules that exclude them or their friends and loved ones. In our deep sorrow, we have seen the Lord. He lives! Love cannot be killed! But we have to look for him beyond the structures we have been taught to see as immovable truths! Jesus calls us by our name and wants to be recognized in ... the women, unwilling to give up on the Church, tending to the cemetery of our collapsing church institutions. Can we recognize in them the face of our Lord saying: go and tell my brothers! Not because women are better than men but because only a Church where all bring their gifts to the table is a fruitful ground.

Each of us can act for this new Church."

Pipper Bonner says, "Governance and oversight are important, but let's return to community-building, where love and justice prevails. People need to work with priests, bishops and the Pope on ways that return us to Jesus' original idea. Within five years, most priests in the West will have retired or burned out, and parishes amalgamated to form vast areas where pastoral and sacramental care from exhausted priests will not be viable. Let's return to basics. I continue to pray for small, graced, sacramental communities where women and men are called to share their gifts - ministering to each other. Discernment, prayer, love and open-mindedness seem key"

I hope that this weekend will bring a reformed Church a little closer, that a few of you might join Catholic Women's ordination, and will be emboldened to stir your parishes into Parishioners' Call action when you go back home. I can pass on to you the address to which you should write to the Pope in order for him to receive it, while copying your letters to your bishop.

I would suggest now that we divide into circles of six in which every single person can have an opportunity to express his or her thoughts and reactions to my talk. Then in the last twenty minutes of the session, could one person from each group report back the main gist of what has been said? If there turns out to be a consensus might this even result in a call from the Malvern group of parent parishioners to Pope Francis?