

Women and the Priesthood

Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast." ~ Matthew 9:15



The choosing of the twelve Apostles, by Domenico Mastroianni, 1876-1962

WOMEN HAVE GAINED increased equality with men in our contemporary world. Legislation has been passed and amended and tested in the courts to promote equality of opportunity in the workplace, schools, and marital rights. This trend toward equality is supported by the Church and most other Christian communions. Many of these communions have chosen to open their all-male ministries to women in an effort to extend the equality achieved in society into clerical ministry.

The Church continues to adhere to its practice of a male-only clergy as a norm received and established by Christ when he instituted the priesthood. Jesus chose only men to be his apostles and, as the *Catechism* explains, "[t]he Church recognizes herself to be bound by this choice made by the Lord himself. For this reason the ordination of women is not possible"¹ (CCC 1577). This is the teaching of the Church, established as a definitive and irreformable (unchangeable) teaching by the supreme authority of Pope John Paul II in his 1994 letter *On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone*.

The question of why women cannot be priests can only be answered and understood in light of the truth that Christ reveals concerning himself and his plan for the Church. Far from being bound by the norms of his culture, Jesus called both men and women to be his disciples (see Mk 15:40-41; Lk 8:1-3; Lk 24:9-10; Jn 20:17-18; Acts 1:14) and ignored Jewish customs that separated men and women (see Mt 26:6-13; Lk 7:36-50; Lk 13:11-13; Jn 4:5-29). It is thus simply false to believe that, in choosing only men as his apostles, Jesus succumbed to societal pressures of his day that discriminated against women. In fact, our Lord chose a woman to receive the highest honor and dignity of humanity when he chose Mary to be the Mother of God and the Mother of the Church. Yet he did not include her or any of the other women disciples in the priesthood, even though all the disciples "forsook him and fled" (Mt 26:56) when Jesus was arrested, while his Mother and the faithful women followed him to the foot of the cross (see Jn 19:25). This exclusion cannot, therefore, mean that women are of lesser dignity but instead must flow from the God-willed differences between men and women (see also handout on The Dignity and Vocation of Women) and the nature and meaning of the priesthood.

God the Father willed that his Son be incarnated as a man and not as a woman. A spousal relationship between God and his people is a theme of the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah tells us:

"For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called" (Is 54:5). Through the prophet Jeremiah, God says that he will renew his covenantal relationship with his people: "Behold, the

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¹ Cf. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* 26-27; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, declaration, *Inter insigniores* from *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 69 (1977) 98-116.

“Equality before the Lord is not sameness.”



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days are coming ... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband” (Jer 31:31-32). Jeremiah had also reproached the Israelites for their repeated breaking of their covenant with God in marital terms: “Surely, as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so have you been faithless to me, O house of Israel, says the Lord” (Jer 3:20).

The entire book of the prophet Hosea is an extended parable on the marriage between God and his people and the faithless behavior of the Israelites. In a passage of surpassing beauty and tenderness, God says: *“Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. And in that day, says the Lord, you will call me, ‘My husband,’ and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal’ [that is, a master to a slave woman]... And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord” (Hos 2:14-16, 19-20).*

The same kind of imagery pervades the New Testament. Jesus works his first miracle, changing water into a superabundance of the finest wine, at a marriage feast (see Jn 2:1-11). He compares the Kingdom of Heaven to a marriage feast (see Mt 22:2). He calls himself the “bridegroom” (see Mk 2:19-20; see also

Jn 3:29, where John the Baptist says this). St. Paul tells us that the mystery of Matrimony “refers to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:32), and that the relationship between Christ and his Church is as completely intimate as a marriage: *“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:25-27). In the final scenes in the book of Revelation, the consummation of the marriage of Christ and his Church is announced: “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure... Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rv 19:7-9).*

The male symbolism of the bridegroom is central for understanding the priesthood, especially in its specific character of service that is fully expressed and revealed in the celebration of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist, Christ the Bridegroom gives himself up to the Father as an act of redeeming love for his Bride the Church. This action is a joint offering of the Church as the body of members joined to her Head who is Christ, represented by the priest. The representation of Christ in the priest acting *in persona Christi* (“in the person of Christ”) is clear only when it is a man whose masculinity images Christ, the Bridegroom.

From the very beginning of the Church, men and women were both baptized (see Acts 8:12). Men and women are equal in their baptismal dignity: *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).* But equality before the Lord is not sameness. Equality does not take away the distinctiveness of the God-given roles of men and women in both creation and redemption. The role of women is as essential to the Church’s mission and holiness as is its priestly ministry.

Finally, holiness is the goal of Christian living. The Church holds up Mary as its example *par excellence* for men and women alike to imitate. *The greatest in the Church, the true expression of its power, are not the ordained ministers but its saints, on earth and in Heaven, whose lives are transformed in their service of charity expressed toward God and others so that they become “other Christs” not merely in a ministerial capacity but as true icons — images — of their Savior.*

(CCC 1577-1578)