

Plymouth Diocese Synodality Series Talk 6. Should women share in the hierarchy?

This talk has just 3 points (out of many) following the thought and words of Pope Francis.

1. It's a theological question not one of function.

In 2020, Pope Francis wrote that the great work of women in the Church:

‘summons us to broaden our vision, lest we restrict our understanding of the Church to her functional structures. Such a reductionism would lead us to believe that women would be granted a greater status and participation in the Church only if they were admitted to Holy Orders. But that approach would in fact narrow our vision; it would lead us to clericalize women, diminish the great value of what they have already accomplished, and subtly make their indispensable contribution less effective. (QA 100).

- **Ordination of women is a theological question – not primarily one of function.** The functional elements follow as a consequence of the theological position.
- **‘Theological’ means it’s about Salvation** and Salvation depends entirely on our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
- **Jesus Christ’s teaching is passed on in ‘Divine Revelation’,** entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors (the Hierarchy), the ‘deposit of faith’.
- **Theological decisions are made in accordance with Divine Revelation** – that all may be saved and share the blessed life of our Father in heaven (CCC1).
- **Divine Revelation is ensured by the Holy Spirit who guides the Magisterium in unity with Scripture & Tradition.**

Summary: Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium of 2,000 years, every Pope including Pope Francis, agree that, in the order of creation and salvation, Christ has established for women an equal, different & complementary role from that of the ordained ministry.

2. The ‘great status’, ‘great value’ and ‘indispensable contribution’ of women in the Church is rooted in Scripture

In Genesis: Eve (woman) was created:

- **Equal to Adam** (‘male and female he made them’)
CCC 369 “created, willed by God, in perfect equality as human persons...in their respective beings as man and woman.”
- **After Adam in the order of creation** (‘taken from the rib of Adam’)
‘sub-ordination’ used by St Paul (Eph 5:22, 1 Tim 2:12) is understood as not affecting the *equality* of persons (Just as the Son of God is begotten by the Father but equal to the Father in the Godhead). ‘sub(-under or after) in the ‘order’ of creation, affects the *roles* given them by God; that which is given to Adam is different from that which is given to Eve, in a similar way to the roles of fatherhood and motherhood as different and equally necessary for new life.

- **Complementary with Adam** (as ‘helpmate’)

Woman is created as a ‘help-mate’ (Hebrew – *ezer*) for Adam, (Gen 2:18, 20) that is, a help that is ‘meet’ (original meaning of ‘mate’, which means fitting, appropriate, complementary). The word has, in other Scripture texts, the connotations of giving a strong, loving assistance, not of being falsely subservient, nor of being a servant except in the meaning of giving ‘service carried out in freedom, reciprocity and love’.¹

The word *ezer*, is used over twenty times in the Old Testament indicating most commonly the ‘help of the Lord’. This help, *ezer*, is sought by the people of Israel in times of weakness or inability, ‘If it had not been the Lord who was on our side when men rose up against us ... Our help is in the name of the Lord’ (Ps 124:1&8). ‘The Lord is our help and our strength’ (Ps 46:1), God is our ‘help against our adversaries’ (Deut. 33:7). In women this kind of help is a fitting or appropriate strength, steadfastness, comfort, even rescue, not replacement.

Examples of women as fitting helper (‘Ezer’)

- In the Old Testament, women as *ezer*, are evident in the courage of Queen Esther, the fidelity of Ruth, the humble perseverance of Hannah and the wisdom and work of the valiant woman in the book of Proverbs.
- In the New Testament, women, courageously, “were present at the foot of the Cross (cf. *Lk* 23:49), assisted at the burial of Christ (cf. *Lk* 23:55) received and transmitted the message of resurrection on Easter morn (cf. *Lk* 24:1-10), and prayed with the apostles while awaiting Pentecost (cf. *Acts* 1:14).”²
- In the Church’s great women saints, St Catherine of Sienna, St Bridget of Sweden, St Teresa of Avila, St Hildegard of Bingen, St Hilda of Whitby.
- Woman as *ezer*, is evident above all in Mary, the Mother of the Lord throughout her life, as the person of the beatitudes and the one who stood with unflinching faith at the foot of the cross.

3. In Catholic Tradition women follow the Marian Principle (mother) not the Petrine/Joannine principle (apostle)

Nov 2022, Pope Francis spoke of these two principles as relevant to why women should not be ordained.

“And why can a woman not enter ordained ministry? It is because the Petrine principle has no place for that. ... I wanted to highlight the two theological principles; the Petrine principle and the Marian principle that make up the church. Therefore, that the woman does not enter into the ministerial life is not a deprivation. No. Your place is that which is much more important and which we have yet to develop, the catechesis about women in the way of the Marian principle.”

Mary was not chosen by Christ as an apostle in the Church

(therefore, not a member of the hierarchy), nor were the other women disciples.

¹. C.f. Pope JP II, 1995, Letter to Women 11.

². CL 49.

- a. Mary is present with the apostle John at the foot of the cross. She is given to John as a *mother*. Mary believes all Christ's words against all physical evidence. She is steadfast in the *faith* and maintains *hope*, in her unwavering *love*. This is the Marian way of living the royal priesthood of God's people.
- b. Mary at Cana is a model for a woman's role in relation to the hierarchy. She lets Jesus her son know the situation – 'they have no wine'. Jesus listens and questions her. Mary also speaks to the servants, turning them to her son – 'do whatever He tells you'.
- c. Mary is present and praying with the apostles at Pentecost. She is not an apostle; she is praying with and for the apostles and disciples.

4. In Conclusion

For women to be ordained (as deacons, priests, or to preach during the liturgy) is the wrong kind of 'help'. The male ministerial priesthood 'ministers to' the 'royal priesthood' of the people of God, above all by the liturgy. In the congregation, women serve the Lord as receivers, believers and transmitters of the graces necessary for sustaining and living the royal priesthood of all the baptised.

St Cyril of Alexandria speaks of Mary in a way which illustrates the vitality of the 'Marian principle' for all women in the Church, with her:

- "Through you the Apostles have preached salvation to the nations . . .
- through you the priceless cross is everywhere honoured and venerated;
- through you the demons have been put to rout and mankind has been summoned back to heaven;
- through you every misguided creature held in the thrall of idols is led to recognize the truth;
- through you have the faithful been brought to Holy Baptism
- and churches been founded among every people."³

³. St. Cyril Alex., Homil. contra Nestor.