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# WOMEN PRIESTS.

BY

A. A.



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## WOMEN PRIESTS.

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“ Women Priests ”—What a preposterous idea !  
But *why* so preposterous ?

There is no action in life, other than that of pater-  
nity, which is not potentially that of a woman: just as  
there is no action in life, excepting that of maternity,  
which is impossible to men. Certainly there are  
things which men do far better than women, just as  
there are things that women do far better than men,  
but this implies choice and suitability, rather than con-  
descension and exclusion in either case. This war  
has evidenced the undreamt of possibilities of fem-  
inine achievement in the most unexpected quarters.  
Given the necessary physique (possessed by some  
women), together with such education, experience,  
and traditions as a man would enjoy, and a woman  
could even be an Admiral of the Fleet, or a Brigadier  
General, as witness the women of history from De-  
borah down to Joan of Arc. Just as, given the ne-  
cessary patience (possessed by some men), sublime  
self-sacrifice in details, pure untiring love, and the  
feminine traditions of self-effacing domesticity, and  
a man might even fulfil satisfactorily the complex  
duties of the mistress of a poor and anxious home.

Undoubtedly there are spheres in which men excel,  
as there are spheres in which a woman excels. But,  
the point is, motherhood and fatherhood are the only  
actions which are absolutely and positively exclusive  
to either sex. Many people are quite unable to see  
any really valid objection, whether theological, bio-  
logical, historical, or sociological, to the admission of  
*suitable* women to the Catholic priesthood. Of course,  
as in every new departure, special care would be ne-  
cessary as to the mental, moral, physical, and spiritual  
qualifications of any woman candidate for the priest-  
hood; the more searching the tests the better, for our  
women priests must be of the very best type; nothing  
less will do. (This special care in the choice of suit-

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able women might lead to a corresponding and most necessary increase of care in the selection of men candidates also.)

What are a priest's duties? Primarily and chiefly the administration of the Sacraments.

Of the two great Sacraments, *one* can already be administered validly by women, therefore sex is obviously not an essential barrier to the administration of a Sacrament. This is noteworthy.

The Blessed Sacrament of the Altar can only be celebrated by a priest. What is there to prevent a suitable laywoman from adding to her real qualifications the authority for this action, which she would receive in taking Holy Orders? There is no obstacle placed in the way of a suitable layman.

We are very fond of those Christmas cards which call the Altar "another Bethlehem," and it is, of course, as the result of the Incarnation that the Blessed Sacrament is our privilege and our possession.

Of the two Events, which is the greater? The original action, the Incarnation, which altered the whole course of the world's development, or its resultant, the Blessed Sacrament, which carries on and applies for all time the saving grace of the Incarnation?

Certainly we cannot minimise the importance of the Incarnation.

Who was the human agent there? A woman. Who was—shall we say—the Celebrant? A woman. Whose was the human voice, the human will, which made of Bethlehem the first "House of Bread"? Not the voice and will of a man, but of a woman. "Born of a woman." She bore about the sacred Body and Blood of Christ, not in a gold or jewelled pyx, but in the shrine of her own body; she guarded It, not in a tabernacle made with hands, but in the temple of her own flesh and blood. She lifted up holy hands at the Consecration of humanity at that first altar—

she lifted up a holy voice in the *words* which were the seal of that Consecration—she was, by her suitability, the medium of the origin of *all* Sacraments.

No *man* was chosen to be the medium of the Divine Will. This of course may be explained as being due to biological necessity; yet the *fact* remains, with all it involves of the essential suitability of a woman to the very highest spiritual function, when that function needs her co-operation. If there had been unsuitability the Divine Omnipotence would have found some other means.

It is quite true that our Blessed Lord, in taking upon Him our common humanity, took the form of a man, and not of a woman. Yet, does this argue any superiority of mankind over womankind? Taken in conjunction with the humility of our Lord, who took the lowest place in life, took upon Him the form of a servant, died the death of a slave and a malefactor, and who *never* claimed the highest place, but performed the lowliest offices, it might on the contrary even be regarded as the most intense condescension possible.

But there is no need to press this point. One would rather feel, with the deepest reverence, that human nature in its entirety was honoured by the Divine condescension: womanhood in becoming the Mother of God, and manhood in becoming the vehicle of the union of the two natures, Divine and human, both manhood and womanhood realizing their perfection in the Incarnation; one by means of the special virtues of womanhood and the other by means of the special virtues of manhood; so that human nature in its entirety was permitted to fulfil the Divine will in the Incarnation.

"In the Image of God created He him: male and female created He them." Birth, life, creative power—we only see on earth a dim reflection of these tremendous functions. Humanity itself contains in its male and female components an

*image* of Divinity. Some inscrutable and indescribable life-giving correlative must exist in the Divine nature, or we should not be expressly told that the "Image of God" included both male and female. This is a great mystery. Do we respect the *completeness* of this marvellous correlative of Divinity as we should do—or do we cripple any of its activities? Do we give to *full* humanity that power of expression which—as at least an *image* of God—should be its solemn prerogative? or do we limit unrestricted expression to one section alone of that humanity which in its completeness—and in its completeness only—is an Image of God?

Can we estimate the far-reaching results of such a limitation, or realize the tremendous responsibility involved therein?

Religious people who claim an essential superiority for man, are apt to quote in argument that the fall of humanity originated in a woman, and to consider the subsequent curse as an assertion of her inferiority.

Probably the allegorical "apple" was the realization of sex; this came first to Eve, in some way, by suggestion—diabolical suggestion according to Bible history—and with this realization came the knowledge of good and evil in sex life. The "apple" could scarcely have been anything else, as at that stage no other social sin was possible. The animals have no such knowledge. Adam and Eve, having passed through an evolutionary crisis, and having become rational creatures, possessing the power of choice and free will, could not evade such knowledge, which came first to Eve by some intuitive process permitted by Almighty God and effected by Satan. The realization of sex was then unavoidably conveyed to Adam by propinquity, with the recorded result. In some way the possession of knowledge resulted in wrong choice, with the ethical consequence of a warped human will, and the physical consequence of

much suffering in the flesh for both sexes. But there is, in the Bible narrative, even at the beginning, no statement of masculine superiority of a spiritual or ethical character—there was to be a sexual domination, unspeakable in its awful consequences of tyranny, torture, and horror in the lives of women, but even so, of a limited character—limited both individually, "thy desire shall be to thy husband," and also chronologically—till the "seed of the woman" should bruise the serpent's head. Human nature, both male and female, had to work out its own freedom and salvation, aided by Divine Grace. "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." The Incarnation was to remove the curse upon humanity incurred by the Fall, *including* the curse of the domination of sex, which was, in principle, removed once and for all by Christ, even though it has taken subsequent centuries of progress to apply His teaching practically, and to effect the still most incomplete working out of His principle of equality.

And, to the Catholic, even if Eve's rebellion and self-indulgence brought sin, does not Mary's conformity and obedience, sweet chastity and austere purity, bring hope? Does the vice count for everything, and the virtues for nothing? Is there only condemnation for women through Eve, and no release through Mary's Divine Son?

And, has suffering no expiatory power? For women in general as well as for any individual?

Again, we would ask, are there no *men* inadequate to the duties of their Holy Office? Inadequate morally, mentally, physically, spiritually?

As, thank God, there arise before us the images of innumerable saints, holy, Christlike men, true priests of God, and true lovers of humanity, does there not also arise the recollection of awful caricatures of the priesthood—immoral, stupid, lazy, self-indulgent, or tyrannical men—hirelings not shepherds; yet calling themselves priests of God; surely

this is so, and to some of us, who in the days of our ignorance looked upon a priest by virtue of his office as being necessarily as near perfection as a human being can be, the knowledge of these inconsistencies comes with a great shock, and increases the desire for women priests—because the *raison d'être* of exclusiveness no longer exists. It is obvious that manhood is *not* the perfect vehicle for priesthood, then why exclude women, on the score of real or imaginary shortcomings, which are a common human failing, and are not confined exclusively to either sex? Does sex—either sex—argue perfection? Does sex—either sex—preclude the potential perfection commanded by God to all humanity? Holiness, intellectuality, morality, practical ability, these are not the monopoly of either sex, therefore there is no essential superior qualification in one, any more than in the other.

Other duties of the priesthood, second only to that of administering the Sacraments, are visiting the sick, parochial organisation, teaching the ignorant, interceding for the wilful, comforting the sorrowful, preaching to the congregation, etc. Are not women—the right women—quite equal to men—the right men—in these respects? Then, the administration of Holy Unction, the joining of men and women in Holy Matrimony, what is there in womanhood to prevent the proper performance of these duties? Confirmation and Holy Orders would be equally well administered by a woman bishop as by a man bishop. If the priesthood and the episcopate are essentially unsuitable for women, why have women in the past had the insignia of the episcopate—the crozier and mitre—bestowed upon them?

As to absolution in auricular confession (and this is specially noteworthy), how many modest and reserved women would feel like prisoners set free, by the sudden release from the necessity (if they would have sacramental absolution) of unburdening their hearts and consciences before any man, even a priest? Would a man like to take all his sins and troubles to

a woman priest—would he feel sure of comprehension, and true sympathy, and really helpful advice—would not also the proper reserve of sex trouble him—then think how all this is intensified in the relation of woman to man. Again, how many unbalanced women would be the *better* for taking their sins and troubles to a woman instead of to a man, and what a relief this would be to many earnest priests now-a-days, who realize the burden and the difficulty of dealing with such cases, and would gladly hand them over to a duly qualified woman.

Some women would of course prefer the old way; prejudice dies hard; that would be a matter of individual choice, but to many the relief would be untold.

To the thinker, blessed with any real historical sense, St. Paul's much quoted dictum is—as regards the *details* of its expression, a negligible quantity. It is surely ludicrous to attempt to apply, arbitrarily and irrevocably, the social etiquette and sumptuary laws of any one place and period to the requirements of every other place and period. St. Paul himself, accepted and quoted as he is by so many as the apostle of a static sociology, would probably have regarded the Mosaic etiquette as being somewhat obsolete. But, if we can realize that what St. Paul aimed at was the definite application of the underlying and essential principle of seemliness and suitability, and respect for existing social laws and conventions, then his teaching—apart from the transitory conditions of its local and temporary application—becomes a good starting point for that true social reform which is based on the development rather than the destruction of correct principles already in existence: principles of an abiding character, and capable of universal and progressive application.

Thus St. Paul's teaching has its true value for all times and under all conditions.

One is often grieved by the unbalanced sentiment, approaching idolatry, which makes many women hover in an undignified fashion round some special priest; it is a matter for great regret, and has often been the cause of scornful and amused comment. Yet even this want of balance, this silly idolatry, is expressed in a better and more wholesome way than the masculine counterpart; as witnessed by the unbalanced male sentiment which makes idols of stage favourites: the one aims at self-indulgence, open and unashamed—the other has at least some germ of that right feeling which makes us love the highest when we see it, or *think* we see it. It is better to hover round the Church door than to hover round the stage door.

We are often told that the best women do not desire the priesthood—indeed, that the very idea is abhorrent to them. This may be so with some, but is it so with all? Assuredly it is not; it is the heart's desire of many devout women. And how wonderful will be the moment to the first woman priest, when she enters into her long-deferred heritage, and as she performs the central act of Catholic worship cries out—in the spirit—in a burst of rapture and an ecstasy of love—"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour."

We are also told that holy women in the past never desired this privilege; such women as St. Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa of Spain, Mother Juliana of Norwich, Hilda of Whitby, Mdme. de Chantal, Angelique Arnaud, Mdme. de Guyon; and, in more recent times, Florence Nightingale, Josephine Butler and others. This is, quite possibly, true, but are there not definite crises in psychic evolution, for individuals as well as in the aggregate, when there is a sudden realization of possibilities hitherto unimagined! And again, how can *we* tell what silent cravings filled the hearts of those loving women, as they did *all* for the Altar *excepting* the central act! Amongst the writer's own most vivid personal experiences may be reckoned the

ardent and overpowering longing, when preparing the Altar for Celebrations, to be a man, *just* to be able to celebrate the Divine Mysteries; it seemed so hard to be shut out from that greatest of earthly privileges; but so hedged round are we by convention and habit that the possibility of women priests never, at that time, even dawned upon the mind. Many women walk through life in blinkered semi-blindness, seeing the goal, looking faithfully ahead, drawing or bearing their heavy burdens, but knowing nothing, seeing nothing, of the great possibilities of life on either side of the blinkers of habit and convention. Suddenly these may be removed, and the full wonder of the world, the material world and the spiritual world, breaks upon their startled vision, and the cry is, "Oh! *what* I have missed all my life, let me help others not to miss it all." So does the Chinese woman unprotestingly submit to the torture and deformity of the bandaged foot; so does the Turkish woman endure the insulting veil; till the illuminating moment comes when bandage and veil are cast aside once and for ever. So also it is in the moral and spiritual life of women. We claim our fullest and highest privileges, and we claim emancipation into a more complete usefulness. We do not claim notoriety, as has been said in cruel and uncomprehending criticism, but we aim at freedom, freedom to exercise our highest faculties and to enjoy our highest privileges. Lengthened suffering, involved and often obscure processes, are usually the preliminaries of emancipation; but the actual throwing off of the shackles often comes with startling suddenness, as events, both remote and recent, witness.

This baffled longing for usefulness may result in the diversion of helpful forces into the wrong channel. The prophetic instinct cannot be stifled, the cry of the soul cannot be stilled. Want of sympathy in the Church may drive women as it did John Wesley and his followers into nonconformity with the Church's rules, and the result, the deplorable result, may be the

formation of another schism, officered and administered by women—women of mental and spiritual ability, who feel that they have their message to deliver. The Free Churches recognise this, the Catholic Church either will not or cannot recognise the existence within it of such an important factor in modern life: but remains the chief stronghold of sexual inequality, domination and exclusiveness.

Physically, the priesthood would occasion no greater strain than that incurred by many other occupations successfully discharged by women. And those especial finer qualities of women, which chivalrous men applaud and admire and protect, just as women foster in men *their* special virtues, would those suffer—or would not they rather find their fullest development and usefulness in the exercise of the most delicate functions and duties of the priesthood? Insight, spirituality, sympathy, intuition, refinement, love of order and beauty, patience, gentleness, and the like.

As to the question of celibacy, while a true vocation to celibacy would probably make for a greater *efficiency* in many respects in women priests as it does in men priests—(when it *is* genuine, and carried out faithfully in the spirit as well as in the letter by those who are able to accept it fully, not making it a cloak for libertinage)—yet the sacrament of marriage, and holy motherhood, should be no barriers in the Catholic Church, any more than marriage and fatherhood are barriers against men in the Catholic Church—if we except the disciplinary accretions of the Roman branch.

It is said that if our Blessed Lord had regarded women as suitable for the priesthood and episcopate, He would have given His commission to women apostles. But He was patient with all the limitations of His period and country, and at that time the status of women would have made their apostleship a practical impossibility. But *all* His actions pointed to the

equality of women, though He did not expect from the world at large an acceptance of such a radical and sudden social change. The unsuitability is at any rate purely hypothetical, never having been tested or given a trial. A mere theory is no proof, and cannot be reckoned as such.

History, sacred and profane, proves indisputably the ability of women to govern, to teach, to lead; and that in spite of the limitations to which they have always been condemned. Recent occurrences have shewn even more than this, they have proved that women can do things hitherto undreamt of: then why should intellectual, social, professional doors be opened to them, and spiritual doors closed? Dignity rightly conferred makes the recipient dignified; shall we then, in the interests of the human race, limit the dignity of womanhood?

Rather let us face this question with an open mind, and in the light of history in its broadest sense. Let us realize the significance of events and of developments. Do not let us say that because a thing has never been yet, that therefore it never can be: we ought, at this stage of the world's history, to have learnt the futility of that line of argument.

Let us not be blinded by habit and convention, shutting our eyes to the reforming potentialities of life; in our pride, prejudice and the narrower sacerdotalism turning deaf ears to the appeal of humanity, and becoming unjust judges; killing, limiting, crucifying spiritual forces, and thus adding another false judgment to those recorded in the world's history; from the Great Injustice and the Great Crucifixion down through myriads and myriads of lesser ones.

“The old order changeth, yielding place to new,  
And God fulfils Himself in many ways.”

**PAMPHLET**