

Rt Rev'd Dr Stephen Pickard

Canon Theologian on the Ordination of Women

Dear Bishop Keith

I've been conscious that I said I would write something regarding the ordination of women as priests, a matter that will come before your forthcoming diocesan synod. This is not a long note as the issues have been rehearsed many times. However, I thought I would briefly note the following.

1. There are a number of different grounds offered for refusal to ordain women to the priesthood. I would identify under three main headings: biblical, theological/anthropological and ecclesial. It is clear from the recent history of the debate that different people and churches place different weight on the importance of each of these three areas. Moreover, they all deserve careful consideration. My one comment is that generally speaking the question of context seems to be too easily glossed over. I believe that the influence and shaping power of host cultures is both more significant and more resistant to interrogation than usually recognised. This failure inevitably skews any assessment of the grounds for refusal and is also the reason that in recent decades the sociological dimension of arguments about the ordination of women have been pursued more vigorously. In what follows I make some brief notes on the three areas. Having studied this matter for many decades particularly in the Anglican tradition I am of the opinion that the ecclesial argument concerning the unity of the Church is the most significant for Anglicans; particular for those in the Anglo-Catholic tradition.
2. Biblical. The main issue here is identified by conservative Protestants in terms of the doctrine of headship. It has different forms but essentially the argument is that males have authority over females (both in the order of creation and in redemption) and that this is to be observed in the life of the church. Of course, the restriction of this headship doctrine to the ecclesia introduces a fundamental incoherence given that this pattern of authority ought in fact to be observed throughout all of society but in fact is not nor is it taught by those who espouse the doctrine of male headship. The doctrine of male headship unsurprisingly is contested amongst Protestants. Kevin Giles' writings examine and critique the doctrine of headship, and in this context special attention is given to the position of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. Giles' scholarship is well known and has never, to my mind, been adequately refuted. The doctrine of headship is increasingly otiose in the world of twenty-first century Australian society and ecclesial life. Moreover, the doctrine of headship has never been given prominence in Anglicanism beyond a certain kind of conservative evangelicalism.

3. Theological/anthropological. It is in truth hard to separate these two areas. The argument is familiar enough in the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic traditions. The argument is that in so far as the priest is an ikon of Christ, in ministry and especially at the Eucharistic feast; and in so far as Jesus Christ was in his earthly life male; then in like manner a priest in the Church of God is required to be male. There are some nuances to this position and a richer ecclesial framework in which the argument can be made. Of course, there have been and remain Anglicans who have held to this view as justification for not ordaining women to the priesthood. It is also a fact that this argument has never been convincing for the vast majority of Anglicans. And in the modern context awareness of the powerful shaping impact of inherited patriarchy has rendered the argument about the maleness of Jesus impotent (pardon the pun). Theologically the resurrected Christ present in the Eucharistic celebration is the second person of the Holy Trinity. How this reality can be trumped by gender is a puzzle to say the least. The priest who stands at the Altar in persona Christi is an ikon and representative of humanity before the Lord. This could be developed but suffice it to say this argument has not commended itself even for most Anglo-Catholics.
4. Ecclesial. The argument here has its roots in the Reformation whereby the Church of England understood itself as both Reformed and Catholic. Accordingly, it saw itself as a protest within the great Catholic tradition and also understood itself as a Protestant church to that extent. But essentially the Church of the Tudor Settlement conceived itself as representing a third continuing strand in Christianity tracing its roots to earliest times; the other two being Roman Catholicism and the Orthodox Churches. This self-understanding sharpened in the early nineteenth century into what became known as the Branch Theory of the Church. This can be found in William Palmer's famous two volume Treatise on the Church. It became common parlance and endured as such. The argument was important and had been going back to the 17th and 18th centuries when it was associated with, for example, William Wake and ecumenical initiatives. The Branch Theory was important because on contentious matters the Church of England's position was, de facto, that only when the three branches of the great Church were in agreement was change of a fundamental kind permitted. Of course, exactly what constituted such fundamentals remained contested. But nonetheless the branch theory of the church, albeit as wooden as it might appear, was a very useful way of preserving some notion of the unity of the Church. But it can't help us now because it does not give a true and accurate account of the world wide Body of Christ in its diversity and division; nor does it provide a basis for a new mission for a new time.
5. The question about the unity of the Church is a critical one for the Church of God and especially for Anglicans. Schism undermines the witness of the Church to the gospel and as the history of Christianity shows once a major break occurs in the Church the resulting harm and disunity can quickly become chronic. That in fact is the reality of the history of the Church: East/West division; the Western schism between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism; and the chronic ongoing fragmentation within Protestantism. In truth the unity of the church is

properly an eschatological hope for which we work and pray. Interestingly it is the 19th century missionary movements that gave birth to modern ecumenism. But for many reasons the hope of a more united Church seems more distant and impossible than perhaps half a century ago.

6. What then of the branch theory of the church as espoused by the Church of England and more latterly in Anglicanism? In important respects it is a theory that flies in the face of empirical reality. Moreover, what now constitutes a legitimate branch church? The world-wide emergence of Pentecostalism has significantly disturbed the once familiar alignments of the earthly Body of Christ. In truth the more the people of God have become aware of one another as part of a global Church in a way hitherto not possible (due to ease of travel and communications; missionary endeavours etc) the more the question of church unity has to be reconceived in terms of radical diversity and richness. The older branch theory was never equipped to deal with the actual reality on the ground and worked as an abstract construct that could be called upon to silence challenges to the status quo. It became essentially a recipe for do nothing.
7. The complex contemporary situation is the context in which the issue of women's ordination as priests in the Church of God has to be addressed. To what extent does ordaining a woman as a priest constitute a schism in the church of God? It is hard to see how this ministerial practice (which is very different from a departure from the ancient Creeds) creates an intolerable ecclesial rupture in an already deeply fractured world-wide Church. Moreover, the fractures can no longer be conveniently identified across traditional ecclesial boundaries e.g. Orthodox, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism. In truth the fractures run through these very ecclesial bodies wherein Orthodox churches disown and reject other Orthodox Churches; where Roman Catholics across the globe are engaged in major dispute and contests and in places functional (though rarely formal) rejection of the Magisterium of the Roman Church. For example, witness the way in which the various Religious Communities and Orders in the Roman Catholic Church challenge and ignore Papal authority. Unity, such as it exists, is increasingly formal and paper thin and reduced to somewhat transactional institutional forms.
8. The problem with the traditional branch theory of the church is that it always was and is now clearly seen to be an abstraction. The argument that Anglicans can only accept women as priests when the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches of the East do, simply ensures that, this side of the eschaton, women will never be priests in the Anglican Church. But in fact they have been so ordained across global Anglicanism.
9. At this point I believe John Henry Newman's theory of development has great value. Newman was trying to find a way for him to justify leaving the Church of England and being received into the Roman Catholic Church. His theory of developments was a way to satisfy himself that, notwithstanding that Rome had added many things to its belief and

practices over almost two millennia; it still remained a true church in which he could find salvation. In short, he had to find a theory to account for what he called a 'difficulty' i.e. that the Roman church of his day was not like the Church of the apostles. Hence, he developed a raft of criteria that had to be met to justify a change. In a sense Vatican 2 is the Roman Church's effort to update itself in the spirit of Newman. The Roman Church may finally get there regarding women priests but even if it does the old branch theory would still prevent women priests in Anglicanism because the Eastern Orthodox Churches (deeply mired in their own cultural contexts) will remain staunchly opposed to women priests.

10. In brief to resist the ordination of women as priests on the basis that it undermines the unity of the Church simply does not square with what unity actually looks like on the ground in the twenty-first century global Christianity. Indeed, women priests provide a remarkable window into other dimensions of the unity of the gospel that resonates powerfully and authentically with our current cultural context. It is a development that we can confidently embrace for the sake of the coming one church of Jesus Christ.

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30 May 2022