

"Pastoral Letter on Women's Ordination"

A Pastoral Letter on the Ordination of Women in the Church
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A MESSAGE TO MY BROTHERS:

About the Sacerdotal Ordination of Women in the Church

At the "Deacon Days" in the year of 1996, in Hessen, at the beginning of the meeting, which included about 80 men and women, the question was posed: What women have played the most important role in the development of religion?

Surprisingly, most named not an important woman in the Bible, the history of the church, or theology. Most participants named their grandmothers, a person of closeness, a symbol of wisdom and patience with children. Many mentioned that the influence of their grandmother had a distinct and enduring effect more than any other person. Actually, many Christians feel that women have had a great influence in teaching religious truths, and we were hardly aware of it.

Zeitgeist (spirit of the age) or the Holy Spirit

Another question for most Christians is: If and to what degree the entrance for women into spiritual and church positions should be made possible? The answer to this was not simple or tension free. It seemed to many that the old and solid institutions, such as the priesthood, should not be manipulated by fads. Whoever wants to give their opinion on women in ministerial offices in the church must first differentiate between "spirits."

Terrible powers have been released by that which we call Zeitgeist, the spirit of the age. Especially here in Germany, we have learned that the Zeitgeist can kindle a firestorm in the world.

But the Zeitgeists are not always evil spirits. Occasionally, it happens that a perfectly good spirit embraces public opinion. The Zeitgeist has not only brought dictatorships, wars, destruction of individuals and nations, it has also at times set slaves free, realized the dignity of human beings, and thus bring acceptability to that which is verified by nature.

It was Paul, the world-wise people's apostle, who gave us the following advice, "Check everything and keep the good." (1 Thessalonians 5, 21) Everything that is fashionable, a new invention, a public opinion, that comes to us should be checked if whether it is good, if it agrees with the spirit of Jesus, agrees with the Holy Spirit, or is sent by the Father, who discerns between the spirits. Paul was able to resist the Zeitgeist, especially if it stood in opposition to the will of God. But he could just as well take advantage of the Zeitgeist for the benefit of his missionary enterprises and for the good of the faith communities that he founded.

There are numerous examples when the church succumbed to an evil Zeitgeist, when the church listened to the opinion of the ruler of the time. Examples of this are the obsessions with witch-hunts and the influence of anti-Semitism. There are also numerous examples that prove the good influences of the Zeitgeist that reminded the church of its original commission. Today, there are many voices that encourage the church to oppose racism

and oppression. However, it has not been so long ago that slavery was considered a God-given institution and that non-European people were not considered as worthy candidates for ordination as priests.

Today, churches believe in a democratic form of acceptance of all. All people should be given the right of self-determination. People of every background should have entrance to political offices.

For many centuries the people of the church could not conceive of a different way of governing the church other than an authoritarian monarchism. Until the last century it was accepted, in many European countries, that only members of the aristocracy were worthy for the office of bishop. This attitude at times needed strong attacks through the *Zeitgeist*, to remind the church that the rights of humanity are one of its own age-old concerns. The ideals of democracy of the last two hundred years, freedom, equality, and solidarity, sprouted directly from Christian roots.

The Dynamic of the Women's Movement

Only with one part of the human race does the church have difficulty in recognizing human rights, women. Many concerns with the women's movement, whether based on Christian belief or not, are viewed by some church leaders as an offspring of the evil spirit. It is considered as a fashionable demand that is in no way worthy of consideration.

We can easily state that the women's movement of the last one hundred years has contributed to the question of the role of women in the church. Together with my synod I consider this impulse to come from the Holy Spirit. In many cultures, as well as in our own, women have played a repressed role for a long time with few exceptions. The accidents of biology and physiology (here the *Zeitgeist* played a very bad role at times) have often influenced the judgment of even the greatest theologians since ancient times to such an extent that they have portrayed women as second class citizens. In the meantime, the women's movement showed, even within the church, a clear consciousness of the dignity of all human beings. It is high time for us to consider this with regard to the position of women in the church.

Biblical Evidence

It is true that women in the Bible are not characterized as an emancipated group. On the inherited priesthood of the Old Testament religion, which should be not confused with the community leaders of the New Testament (apostles, bishops, presbyters, deacons, and deaconesses), women had no part. In the Old Testament, the thinking of the patriarch was dominant.

There are only a few unique women who, through their prophetic gifts, their leadership qualities, or their fortitude and unusual transactions, attracted attention. We remember the "arch mothers" Sarah and Rebecca, Leah and Rachel, who often stood in the shadows of the "arch fathers" but were equally the vessels of hope for the increase of the people of God and the continuation of their journey. Only in recent times has our attention been directed to the Hebrew midwives, Pua and Schiphra, who resisted the extermination of children as ordered by Pharaoh and thereby saving the life of the nation of Israel. (Exodus 1, 15-21)

Especially important is the "so-named prophet" Miriam, sister of Aaron and Moses, who gave thanks to the Lord, with song and dance, for saving the baby Moses in the reeds.

"The people ceased, they ceased in Israel, until I, Deborah, arose, until I arose, a mother in Israel." (Judges 5,7) With these and even stronger warrior-like words have the psalms remembered the heroine, prophet, singer, and judge, Deborah, to whom the Israelites brought their legitimate business to be judged. The songs of praise for the violence, which assured Israel its survival in Canaan, sound strange to us today. Apart from the bloodbaths that occurred in self-defense in the history of Israel, it surprises us that strong women were elected for

leadership services (until then it was only a man's job to kill). (Judges 4, 21 and Judith 13, 8) Men seemed to become weak during such critical moments in Israel's early history. (Judges 4, 8, and 14)

The tradition of the story of Ruth, a Moabite, who moved with her mother-in-law to Israel and, although a non-Israelite, to become the ancestor of King David must be noted.

Through the courageous and pious widow, Judith, Israel learned of the threats of the godless king, Nebucadnazzar, and so Israel was saved.

Known and still celebrated is the story of the heroine, Esther, who prevented the persecution of the people of God by the Persians.

I will only name a few women who played an undeniable role as arch mother or prophet, judge and savior, for the Israelites. Research into women's historical importance has brought forth many new names, that previously seemed insignificant, but proved important in showing the way for God's people, and leading them again to a living proclamation.

The New Testament does not speak so much of groups of people. Christ spoke mostly of and to individuals. Against this background, we can see that Jesus was very aware of the women in His presence.

Next, notice is to be given to Mary, the mother of Jesus, the woman who still plays a foremost role in Catholic Christianity. In the early centuries of Christianity, the veneration of the mother of Jesus grew more and more, aided by dogmatic declarations. With clear definitions of the belief in Jesus as the Son of God, the woman who bore Christ through the Holy Spirit receives more veneration.

Luke the evangelist shows the considerable role in the annunciation before the birth of Jesus of she who sings of the life mission of her son in the Magnificat. (Luke 1, 46-55) The song of the Virgin Mary calls to mind the way of all the women prophets of the Old Testament and today remains a part of the daily prayers of the church. In high church liturgy the authenticity of Luke's character as an evangelist is shown by using incense and by making the sign of the cross. Today, it is important for us to recognize what the liturgy establishes. It is a young, unknown woman that stands before the announcement at the beginning of the New Testament. This is why Mary in the Laetian Litany is called the queen of the apostles. In the Gospel according to Luke, she is the first that exercises the apostolic commission to announce the Gospel. She, who belongs to the so-called weaker sex, is by the law of Messianic order to proclaim in poetic form and not only by private communication, "The exalted will be brought low and the lowly will be exalted." We must, therefore, remember if women announced the Gospel of Jesus' birth in the ministry of the sermon and are praised during the sermon or venerated in song, there is no other like Mary.

Women belong as a continuous convoy to Jesus, of which Mary Magdalene stands out. While all the men, with the exception of John, had fled, she with other women remained with Mary, the mother of God, under the cross. (Matthew 27, 55f; Mark 15, 40; John 19, 25f)

It is these same women who bring the first message of the resurrection. The word of the angel at the first morning light is, "Go...tell the disciples." (Matthew 28, 7) After the appearance of the resurrected Jesus with the words, "Go and tell my brothers..." (see also John 20, 17), it has become the model to praise and call the women the apostles of the happy message. During the Middle Ages, Mary Magdalene was referred to as "Apostola Apostolorum" or the female apostle.

The story of the penitent woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7, 36-50), John identifies her as Mary of Bethany, illustrates how Jesus allows women to approach him and that he has no problem of being touched by women. Mark tells of an unknown woman who anoints the head of Jesus. (Mark 14, 3-9) Jesus himself explains this anointing as part of the funeral ritual, as a sacramental consecration of the cross. At the same time the story

draws a parallel of the kings Saul and David by Samuel. What was done at that time to kings by a male prophet is being done to the Messiah by an unknown woman.

It is Martha of Bethany who says, "Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." (John 11, 27; see also Matthew 16, 16) The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4, 1-42) deals with the question of Messiah. The Samaritan woman in her conversation with Jesus is more and more convinced that he is the Messiah and she becomes a messenger herself. Many Samaritans become believers through the preaching of the woman, so says the evangelist John at the end of the story.

Apostles--Male and Female

Even if the twelve apostles are leaning on the twelve sons of Jacob as the founders of the people of God, and that they are men, the contours of the roles between men and women are not always so clear cut in the New Testament. The word "junger (or disciple)" can refer to men as well as women. The Last Supper reports of the apostles and the message, "Do this in memory of me," may seem to be directed only to men but after the death and resurrection of Jesus, women also shared in the Eucharist.

In the letter to the Romans, the assumption that the salutation to the twelve apostles as being addressed to men only is not conclusive. Now it is remembered that Paul also became an apostle. The title apostle was also given to Barnabas and other early messengers, including Adronicus and Junia, his wife. (Romans 16, 7) Other women became known among the apostles as deaconesses, involved in missionary work. As assistants to the apostles and as leaders in the Christian households (Philippians 4, 2, Evodia and Syntyche; Phelimon 2 Aphia; Romans 16, 1-3 the deacon Phoebe; Romans 16, 3-5 Maria; Romans 16, 12 Tryphosa, Persis; 1 Corinthians 1, 11 Chloe; Colossians 4, 15 Nympha).

We see women in the areas of social standing with apostolic evangelical proclamation, in the founding of churches, and in the leading of Christian communities in households.

Well known is the Roman Catholic Anton Vogtle, an active participant in New Testament issues, who stated pointedly, "Some people would have liked if the Vatican had been built and started by Peter; however, things don't work that easily." He wanted to point out that the demand for proof for a clear structure of the church that included women in the New Testament is great. When we search for proof of official offices for women in the ancient church, it will not be found. There are no precise reports in which liturgy and under whose leadership the ceremony of Holy Communion was first established. If women lead the Eucharistic celebration, as many both male and female theologians believe, it is still questionable. This alone is proof that at the time of the New Testament this thought of lawful categories was still far off.

Waiting for Research

We do not know if Biblical historical research in the future will bring answers to the role of women in the ancient church. It is surprising that theology has accommodated this question to some degree, since the question about women in the church has only been brought out in the last decade. However, we cannot refer to ancient Christianity when we think of ordination for women in the priesthood today. Not everything, not even the good, that was included in the church of the past, as well as today, as expected practices can be found in the Bible or even mentioned as exact practices.

At this point it is necessary to give a word in the use of Biblical texts. The meaning of the word, tradition, in the Bible is not conservatism. Tradition means a conscientious effort to live out the principles of the foundation. The Bible is the guideline but within the guidelines there is room for flexibility with the times and with its peoples and cultures. This also means that nowhere can it be shown that Jesus wanted to exclude women from

the ministries of preaching and leadership in Eucharistic communities, and the diocese, merely because they are women. Moreover, it has been shown that women, as well as men, were welcomed by Jesus in a more unusual way, for the times, as companions at the table, as proclaimers of the Gospel, and as leaders in the Christian community. Only in the post-Pauline Pastoral Epistles did we learn that women were, due to the practices of the church, at that time and place, put into the background.

Parallels

As more of the ministries in the church developed into public services, it shows the exclusion of women. The reasons for this were many and perhaps its members were not really conscious of it. The idea that women were subordinate to men was paramount in the process. Added to this is the fact that women were busy with their many children and an abundance of domestic responsibilities. Also, many women were needed to help with farming or in the trade of the husband to assure economic survival. These time-consuming activities did not allow women to think of leadership roles in the church in which the hierarchy over time developed.

As was mentioned in the beginning, it was self evident that the inclusion of women in church leadership roles during this time of development was not even considered. Surprising parallels, but easily accepted as self evident, developed that certain groups of people were not suitable for church office. Indians and other non-European peoples were at one time not considered for spiritual offices within the church. The Bible does not give clear information. Some restrictions existed in a few churches until recently, such as barring from the priesthood illegitimate offspring, candidates from divorced parents, and also those with physical handicaps. For us today these are hardly understandable reservations.

Nevertheless -- an Underground Stream

"Women shall remain silent in the church." (1 Corinthians 14, 34-35) As this reading was read from the letter of the Corinthians by a lector during mass, a smile went through the congregation. A sentence like this gives us problems; theologians are still debating the meaning of it. Some believe that the apostle wanted to give a warning to women not to disturb a Christian meeting through uncontrolled talking. Others think it is a later addition to the text. Again, others think Paul wanted to exclude women from preaching. It is clear that the same Paul did not stop women when it came to the proclamation of the resurrection. Most of the names of missionary women in the New Testament were revealed by him. However this sentence was meant, a later curtailment of women talking as a reminiscence of habits of the synagogue has never, in fact, been historically proven successfully.

Nor was it possible to exclude women from all ministries and responsibilities of the church. Any visitor to the church is aware that women are a distinct help in community activities and work. Above that, it is important to say that women have had special niches in leading and preaching functions within the church throughout history.

So we see examples of women in the first century as leaders of women's organizations and as deaconesses. We also hear that they were theological teachers and spiritual models. "We had a sister who was the teacher (didaskala) of our life, mother after our own mother, she enjoyed so much frankness in her speeches with God, that she was for us a stronghold of power, a God-pleasing instrument and everything that indicated security." So wrote Gregory of Nyssa concerning his and St. Basil's sister, St. Makrana (327-380 AD). As founder of a women's community, she demonstrates, along with many other women of her time, the indirect influence on the spiritual life and the spiritual teaching that they consistently expressed.

As research in recent decades has proven, women have contributed and influenced the history of the ancient church in considerable ways, especially in the Christian evangelization of nations. The example of the "Holy Mother Mino" (early 4th century) unknown until recently, was praised by the church of Georgia as an apostle.

Her life tells us of a convocation reminding us of the prophets and apostles. Presumed to be a slave during a war, she wins influence over the king and queen and becomes the founder of the nation state of Georgia.

Hilda of Whitby (614-680 AD) deserves special mention. Her biographer, The Venerable Bede, reports that she founded a double-convent. Her influence was so great that five of the men of her Order, that lived under her biblically oriented teaching, became bishops. There would have been six men but one died before his ordination.

During the time of the great Monastic movements of the Middle Ages and also into more modern times we can see more extraordinary women as founders of convents or in positions of spiritual leadership within their communities. They were often seen as an inspiration to partner-convents for men and sometimes even as church leaders. "To his beloved mother Hildegard, more worthy than great precious jewels, wills to her son Helenger, her son not in deed but in name, tender of the flock of the Holy Disbode, everything which is better than material goods. While the whole world acknowledges her deserved praise, that you are blessed by the Holy Spirit...I have hidden in reluctance." With these words, in a form of self-renunciation, begs Abbot Helenger from Disibodenberg on the Nahe, in letters for spiritual help for him and his convent from the Holy Hildegard of Bingen. The letters of this great woman came to our attention after decades of silence. Even if Hildegard, as a child of her time, did not have intentions of asking for the priesthood, her extensive work is not only prophetic and mystic, but also sacerdotal: proclaiming, administering, admonishing, leading, spiritual and pastoral care, and helping a sinner return to the faith.

Similar gifts are attributed to Clare of Assisi (1193-1253 AD), Mectilde of Magdeburg (1207-1282 AD), Mectilde of Hackeborn (1242-1292 AD), and Gertrude of Helfta (1256-1282 AD).

At the end of the Middle Ages, we do receive a reflection against the prevalent ideological opinion of the inferiority of women from a Christian point of view. "As God's will inspired him on the field of Damascus, he formed Adam from clay and as he completed the form, he took him to the earthly paradise...Adam fell asleep and from one of his ribs the Lord God formed the body of a woman. This means that God intended to make her a companion for Adam, to stand by his side not as a slave at his feet...the Almighty God made the female body. Should nature be ashamed of it? To say this would be utter stupidity. Yes, and after whose image was the female body made? I do not know if you understand that she was made in the image of God." These are the words of a Venetian poet and writer Christine De Pizan (@ 1364-1430 AD).

Teresa of Avila, a Spanish mystic, reformer of religious orders, and teacher of the church, was added to the list. The spirit of contradiction to the acceptance of women to take over the priestly work is shown by the words of her biographer, Fray Luis De Leon, "Today it is something new and unheard of that a weak woman would have the courage for such a great undertaking. That she was so wise and skillful in her dealings that she was able to win the hearts of all against the weakness of nature."

Very different is the judgment of the papal Nuntus Sega, "...is a restless vagabond, obstinate and stubborn, that under the cover of piety she invents bad lectures against the orders of superiors and the Council of Trent. She acts like a professor even though the apostle Paul had forbidden women public professional work." Teresa is a modern person not wanting to review a conflict. She writes, "Master of my soul! While you were still on earth, you always showed women special closeness. You found from them not less love than from men...The world errs from demanding from us not to do public work for you, to tell truths and quietly cry. I cannot believe that, Lord, since I know your goodness and justice. You are not like a judge of this world, the sons of Adam that think that every good capability of women must be held under suspicion. The day will come, my King, when this will become known...I see the time coming when all strong and good gifted spirits will not be pushed aside merely because they are women."

The works of women, even if repressed, forgotten, or filtered with the exception of a few sweet blossoms, show the same spiritual power as those of the extensive writings of their contemporary male counterparts. Not to be

forgotten is the influence of great Christian princesses of the Christian life from the Middle Ages to the French Revolution. Factually, they practiced, as may be called good or bad in specific instances, a spiritual and ecclesiastical political influence that even surpassed the power of some bishops.

Modern Developments

The influence of women, sometimes endured and sometimes welcomed, continued after the division of churches. In our sister churches in Holland, the Klopjes in the Beguine-Tradition, unmarried women living together in small groups of varied religious or political persuasions, existed from the time of the French Reformation until the 19th century. This was a movement that was independent from and yet had roots in the type of devotion characteristic of Jansenism. They assisted in socially combined responsibilities within the community, in the teaching of catechism, and in the liturgy of the church.

In the 19th century, an effort was made in founding convents. By the end of the 19th century, we saw the end of the selfless work of these community sisters, who had great spiritual influence on the people in their care, and although not ordained, were sometimes better father confessors than the priests of the parish.

Among the many founding fathers in the Old Catholic movement, the most important woman was Sister Augustine with the earthy name of Amalie Von Lasaulx. As superior of the Johannes Hospital in Bonn, she was well acquainted with the protest of the faculty of the University of Bonn (a protest against the Ultramontanism of Vatican I), whom she did support with her unfailing faith. Unfortunately, only remnants of her written correspondence regarding her faithful devotion remain.

Shortly after the dissolution of mandatory celibacy in the Old Catholic communities, the wife of the priest became very important. The wife of the priest was fully involved in the pastoral care of parishioners, without official contract, but nonetheless welcomed.

In conclusion, an increasing number of women in the last several decades have participated in the leadership of the Old Catholic Church, both legally and officially. They have been in active service as members of church committees within the parish as well as representatives in the official meetings, synods, of the diocese.

In other churches with a Catholic character many women have taken over priestly functions, mostly on account of the shortage of priests, starting with missions, religious instruction, sermons, and the celebration of baptisms, distribution of communion, and the conducting of Christian funerals. The only exception is that they have been prohibited from saying the distinctive prayers of the Eucharist.

This development of women's participation in ministry began in some of the Protestant churches. The tradition in the Protestant parsonage allowed women to assume greater roles of responsibility in ministry. At the beginning of the 20th century, women for the first time enrolled in the formal study of theology. Out of discussions of Biblical studies, and participation in religious services during the war and the time between the two world wars, an understanding for women's ordination developed. Since the middle of the 20th century, with conditions of understanding of official agreements, the ordination of women became a practice among many Protestant churches.

In general, we can say that before the first Christian churches were established, women have been actively involved in ministry in different parts of the church. In the gathering of Christian communities, women were active partially in silence and partially through preaching and have, at times, been found to be in leadership with priestly duties.

By the close of the first millennium, at least in the convent, deaconesses all but disappeared. However, some of the rites of the order of deaconesses continued. For example, in the consecration of an abbess, "The bishop lays

his hands...on the head of the chosen with the delivery of the rule the bishop says, 'Receive the motherly guardianship over the people of the Lord and the care of their souls according to the law of the Lord and be the leader to the heavenly pastures.'" (Compare Pontificale Romanum Clementis VIII ac Urban VIII, etc..., Romae 1868...)

Representatives of the Lord, Male and Female

Whoever has been baptized, whoever has preached the Gospel and founded missions and has baptized others, whoever leads a community of men and women, represents Christ. The messenger, male or female, independent of gender and nationality, and so every baptized Christian, represents Christ in all the multitudes of spiritual gifts. This is the way the words of the apostle Paul is to be understood: "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, we are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3, 28)

For me the oneness of male and female in the representation of Jesus Christ is most clear when we think of the sequence of events immediately following our Lord's crucifixion. The giving of his life and the following persecutions have not only been for men in the history of the church. From the earliest times until today, persecutions of Christians have also included women. Men were not the only ones who have been pursued and tortured because of their beliefs in their church, and at times were even persecuted in the name of the church.

I think of the example of Blandina (d. 177 AD). Christ bestowed great honors on her although she was considered worthless by the people. Blandina was hanged on a cross to become the booty of animals. She showed her persecutors that saw her hanging on the cross and who heard her pray incessantly as their sister that all who were dying and suffering in Christ's honor will also live in the community of God in eternity. This seems to me to be the most penetrating witness for the presentation of Christ. It could not be more profound, to be one with the Lord in the sacrifice of one's life.

To become a father in earthly terms can only be accomplished by men. But only a woman can become a mother. However, by giving one's own life to become one with Christ can be accomplished by men and women alike. With this knowledge it is immaterial whether it is a man or a woman who says the Eucharistic prayer, "Lord...Let your spirit come upon these gifts (the bread and wine)...that they may become for us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ." The power of the consecration of the bread and wine of the Eucharist is not dependent on the gender of the priest but only upon the Holy Spirit who empowers the words of the minister so that the words become that of the living Christ. Just as men and women are both recipients in communion, so can men and women offer the gifts in the service of the givers who are present. Just as the surrender of Christ, the bridegroom, is represented by men and women, both liturgy and life represent men and women in agreement with the whole church as the bride of Christ.

God, both Father and Mother

"Jesus Christ is the one that leads the struggle with the good and the bad, so he becomes our true mother. This is the reason that with all motherly love he defends us." God is our father as truly as God is our mother. God announced that with the words, "I AM." What God means is, "I am the power and goodness of the father, I am the wisdom and gentleness of the mother, I am the light and the grace of holy love, I am the triune, I am the oneness, I am the high and magnificent goodness." When I read these words for the first time a few years ago, I could not believe that these words came from the beginning of the 15th century. The hermit, Julian of Norwich (1342-1420 AD), has composed several such texts. She also was forgotten for centuries. Only recently have theologians recovered these and similar treasures of church history.

In the past it was rare that the image of God as father gave way to the completion of our image of God as mother. Often in church history it is Mary that gives motherly attributes to God. Many of us know the song, "Beautiful, magnificent, high and mighty, loving heavenly women, to her I dedicate myself, body and soul,

eternally." I consider the way to God's motherliness through the veneration of the person of Mary and other holy women as not wrong. In some of the Old Catholic communities there exist traditional forms of devotion to Mary. However, in some addresses and salutations to the Mother of God does it not seem to be an approach to God, in prayer and song, that is really directed to God? This roundabout way to God is not a wrong direction.

Our era begins with the theology that God is both father and mother, that in Christ men and women are one. The Holy Spirit in the old Hebrew language of the Old Testament, Ruach, is in the feminine gender. This partnership, despite the actuality of gender, made it easy for our generation not to be concerned about male or female offices or ministries.

Based on this is another strong argument for the ordination of women. Today, there are many women who do not actually exercise priestly functions but nonetheless feel called to the priesthood. I remember in this connection that the apostle Paul had a personal experience (calling) that became the foundation for his calling to apostolic ministry. Many women within the church feel called to serve in the ministerial offices of the church and to participate in the official decisions of church governing bodies, and most people of the faith communities are agreeing. Wherever the acceptance of the church, the people of God, is present, especially with regard to vocations and ministerial office, an important condition exists for discerning the mind of the Spirit (census fidelium).

The One Office as a Statement of the Love of God

We know today, contrary to our spiritual and natural ancestors, that women are not less fertile soils than the procreating father. Only by uniting can both genders become parents.

This does not weaken the power of tradition, our images of the caring father and the loving mother. In any case, in the future we will need to be familiar with both the motherly and the fatherly proclamation of the Gospel in order to sustain our faith. History, as well as the present, shows that the preaching of the Gospel is not gender bound. Motherly and fatherly accents are easy to recognize, and the roles behind the images belong together and should not live separately, but rather side by side. This togetherness was in earlier times obscured by societal differentiation between men and women.

The danger of prejudice has never been fully eliminated. Today, it appears that the changing role of women is contributing to the loosening of family ties. Perhaps it will become more important to show the love of God as a relationship, especially in the relationship between the genders.

Baptism, Vocation, Ministerial Office

Through baptism and confirmation we become one with Christ. The Holy Spirit is the consecrator at the celebration of the Eucharist, not man nor woman. That is why we put great importance in our Old Catholic Eucharistic prayers on the epiclesis, the invocation for the Holy Spirit to consecrate the gifts of bread and wine and to bless the gathered community. Through our reception we are rightly called by the Laurentianic litany, spiritual vessels, to allow Christ to come through us into the world. "If Christ is born one thousand times in Bethlehem and not in you, you will be eternally lost." (Angelus Silesius, the Cherubic Wanderer, Book 1, volume 61)

So we can summarize by saying, in baptism and confirmation all become qualified for ministry in the church and become a foundation of the church. The call to specific ministry gives both men and women the capacity for special ministerial offices. Through the commission and recognition from the church and community, and through the laying on of hands and prayers by the bishop, this quality, charism, will be released.

"The unity of the church was...not that the one sun illuminated all in the same way so that all had unity, but rather the sunbeams of the one sun illuminated and showed them the truth differently, just as though the sun was for only one person." Whether one church had a lack or an advantage in terms of the fullness of the truth, the same is true for any bishop or other church official. "From every apostolic church flows the sunlight of truth," words from the first German Old Catholic bishop, Joseph Hubert Reinkens, whose 100th anniversary of the year of his death we have acknowledged this year. (Joseph H. Reinkens, *About the Unity of the Catholic Church*, Wurzburg, 1877, page 90f)

In Reinkens' time, his opponents describe the break, caused by the question of papal infallibility, as un-Catholic, un-apostolic, and heretical. For early Old Catholics, it was important to know that Catholicity and Apostolicity were not dependent upon one person or one church. Every local church that is in agreement with its bishop, that meets to hear the word and to receive the sacraments, whose age-old profession of the faith remains preserved by the Holy Spirit, is a Catholic and Apostolic church.

It is important for me to note that our diocese stands unchanged in this regard. With the ordination of women we are not creating a new article of faith nor a new office. We deployed something that had never been excluded nor forbidden by the New Testament. Leadership and the proclaiming of the Gospel by women, although often times hidden, at other times was public. This includes the Eucharist that is for us the sacrament of bread and wine given to us by Christ.

I am very calm to be face to face with both the hopes and the apprehension of what the ordination of women could bring. When we consider the influence of women, at least within the various parts of the life of the church, have had, and that now should become official and legitimate, I cannot see many changes that would bring a question of our faith into play. That things could get better is not in question. I say this not only to my inner self.

On the Way: Courage and Outlook, Intercession and Gratitude

Even if we are convinced that the Catholic Church on the account of the ordination of women is in its essence neither touched nor changed, we would have not taken such an historic step alone.

We have noticed that among the people of God worldwide that an understanding for the movement of women has been shown to grow, especially in the role of proclaiming the Gospel and at presiding at liturgies. The development of our theological opinion on this subject inside our diocese and the growing discussions and votes, not least encouraged through the League of Old Catholic Women, in ever different worldly transpositions, have numerous parallels and examples in other churches of the world.

Especially important were the decisions for women's ordination by the Worldwide Communion of Anglican Churches in the last decades. Their experiences were acknowledged by us through contact with women deacons and priests who were practicing at that time. Finally, not only the Synods in Germany continued to vote for women's ordination, but bishops have given their public support for it. In Switzerland and Austria, just as here, many women are serving in the ministerial diaconate.

More recently at the Synod of Mainz in 1989, when the diaconate for women had already been introduced, there came a voice from the "outside" in support of the decision on women's ordination to the priesthood. Professor Hans Kung, not an Old Catholic but nonetheless an undisputed theologian, encouraged us very much. There are churches with synodal government that reject the ordination of women outright and will not permit discussions of the subject. Other churches wish for women's ordination with the approval of the majority of the congregation but still object to a discussion. As a separate church, we are overburdened with tension, the roots of these tensions show the cultural differences, and sometimes a different understanding of the theology in regard to the priesthood.

A worldwide decision on this subject would necessitate that an ecumenical council for all Christian churches was brought about. This is, however, I say for several reasons, unfortunately, not in sight.

So, we cannot deny a part of our responsibility for our chosen way. But for me it was very important that we found a precedent for our decision in the New Testament. In the original church, there came great excitement and strong arguments between Paul and Barnabas on the one hand, and other early Christians on the other, about the question of whether non Jews should be converted or if only Israelites should become the heirs of Christ. (Acts 15, 1-35) Interesting are the sequence of events. Paul and Barnabas have held missions among the Gentiles as the previous chapters mentioned. Then came the disagreements. Only then did the apostles and elders meet to decide the question. That means that it is not a question posed and then decided, but rather a certain practice in a very specific situation that precedes the argument. Then the practice is decided upon.

If it came at all to a formal acceptance of the ordination of women, it could also be an acceptance in a practical introduction through individual localities, then this could be followed upon an already traveled road. There are churches existing today that would ordain women. Following are disagreements that would have to be settled in a worldwide decision on the question.

We, our church and other connected churches, are in the process of practical exchanges where we had to contend with opposition. With a good conscience, with a good reason, and good confidence, we now do this. We see that women in the priesthood in our diocese are effecting an image of God. An image of oneness as men and women, in an image of love, that in the unity of the genders we find a clear expression in the creation and a central point of ecclesial life in the office of the priesthood. When we so often and so strongly emphasize our concern about the Catholicity of the church, and its relationship to all people, then we find the sacerdotal services by both genders as a perfect expression.

Our prayers and good wishes accompany all women priests that are starting their work at this time. They accompany all those who work in the propagation of the Gospel, of peace, of justice, and the preservation of creation. And our prayers accompany all that work for the unity of the church of Christ.

I want to thank all the women and men of this diocese who helped me to decide and helped me in writing with regard to women's ordination.

"The blessings of almighty and gracious God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, come to us and remain with us always."

Bishop Joachim Vobbe
The German Old Catholic Church
Bonn, Germany
2 February 1996
Candlemass Da