

## Women in the Church? The time is now.

([Associate Professor Mary Coloe, 17/11/2019](#))

(Image of *Women and Man One in Christ*.) Who recalls this consultation “On the Participation of Women in the Church in Australia,” – and this book – which is the final report? It was published 20 years ago in 1999.

What has happened? What change has resulted? Did this make a difference? 0 zero nada!

And there will be no changes until the structures are changed and women’s vocations to be ministers of the word and Eucharist are recognized. I do not want to use the word “deacon” or “priest” as that could suggest taking on board the whole clerical spectrum - I am speaking of women who have the skills, the competence, the theological qualifications, and the vocation to serve the people of God by preaching the word, and leading the celebration at the table, in the way that is so natural to women to nurture and nourish.

There is only one critical reason why women’s vocations are not recognized or welcome.

**Men make up the rules.** And according to those man-made rules God would not, should not call women to these ministries, which the church has reserved for men-only.

An example: I have been teaching Scripture and publishing theological books since 1991, for almost 30 years. And I hunger to be allowed to share the Scripture, not just with the wonderful theological students at our college, but with the parishioners gathered for the Eucharist. Even though I teach seminarians, priests, and occasionally bishops, and I have given workshops on preaching to the younger ordained men, I am not permitted to preach. Week after dismal week I sit through nonsense and the people of God are starving for the real nourishment of the word. This is a disgrace that the Curia in the Vatican, and the Catholic Bishops of Australia allow! **Men make up the rules.**



The sign on the doors of all Catholic Churches should be

The situation we are in now with regard to the participation of women, is almost identical to the situation in the early church with regard to the admission of Gentiles.

### **Is it possible that non-Jews could be followers of Jesus?**

The dilemma is described in Acts 10. The disciple Peter was invited to the home of a Roman soldier. On the journey Peter became hungry and in a vision saw a sheet coming down from heaven with all varieties of animals, reptiles, and birds. A voice from heaven said, “Get up. Kill and eat.”

But off course Peter couldn't accept this gift from heaven because some of the animals on offer he considered unclean. He replied to God, - By no means Lord.” And the heavenly voice replied, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” This strange vision happened three times, and Peter steadfastly refused to eat – even as he hungered.

When Peter arrived at the house of the Roman soldier – after some conversation, the Holy Spirit was poured out on the household – onto the Jews and Gentiles present. Peter replied - **Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.**

God acted – the Holy Spirit got their first - without asking Peter's permission. God did the unthinkable – broke open what was once the covenant restricted to Israel only – now it was open to all people.

The negligence of those given the task of being Shepherds to the people of God, is allowing them to hunger for Eucharist, while they steadfastly say – “No” to women, and “No” to God. “We want vocations, but not these ones!”

We need a strong Peter today to see with the eyes of the heart what God is offering the Church today. And if this is too radically new, remember God's word to the prophet Isaiah. “See, I am doing something new. Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” Isa 43:19.

In fact – having women as ministers of word and Eucharist is not something new. If I can share some of the New Testament evidence, and evidence from liturgical texts and archaeology you will see that there were women with the title “diakonos” presbyteros and even episkopos in the first 6 centuries. But this evidence is not well known as history is androcentric and women's experience is not in view.

### **Women in the New Testament.**

Women were included in the discipleship group of followers of Jesus (Mark 15:40-41; Matt 27:55-56). Women were the first to receive the Easter proclamation, and in the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene is the first to experience an appearance of the Risen Jesus and commissioned to proclaim the Easter message to ‘my brothers and sisters’ (John 20:17). For this she has been given the title in the Church, *Apostle to the Apostles*.

Women were not included in the list of ‘the Twelve’ as these were a highly symbolic foundation group, modelled on the twelve patriarchs who were the foundation of Israel; this group did not continue beyond the foundation time.

In the New Testament world, women were leaders of House Churches (Nympha, Col 4:15; Apphia, Philemon 1:2; Mary, Acts 12:12); a woman named Lydia was the first European convert, and her home provided the first welcome to Paul and his Gospel (Acts 16:14-15). Women were prophets (Acts 21:9), they prayed and prophesied in the community liturgies (1Cor 11:5). Priscilla was a travelling missionary like Paul (Acts 18:2, 19; 1Cor 16:18; 2Tim 4:19; Rom 16:3). Paul names Phoebe, ‘deacon’ and ‘leader’ of the Church in Cenchreae (Rom 16:1-2), and commends Junia, calling her ‘outstanding among the Apostles’ (Rom 16:7). These New Testament writings give evidence of the active participation of women in the community. Poor, biased, translations distort the perception of these women.

In the New Testament communities the titles used to describe leadership were elders (*presbyteroi*), overseers (*episkopoi*) and stewards or administrators (*diakanon*); none of these roles is linked to the Eucharist in New Testament times. In the New Testament there seems to be little distinction made between these titles and it is not until the next century that these developed a hierarchical structure. The term ‘priest’ (*hierus*) is never used to describe a Christian ministry in the New Testament, nor is there any ritual called an ‘ordination’. Here we need to be aware that the term priest (*hierus*) in both Judaism and pagan religions meant an official linked to the sacrifice of an animal in a Temple. Within the New Testament the primary description of worship was the ‘Lord’s Supper’ and this was a meal celebrated within a house, and there is no indication who presided over this meal—it may have been the owner of the house, or a travelling missionary, or an early disciple if one was present – all roles which include women.

The first time there is any mention of who led the Eucharist occurs in the *Didache* (ca. 100) and in this text the presider is called a ‘prophet.’ ‘But permit the prophets to offer thanksgiving as much as they desire’ (*Did.* 10:7). ‘Every first fruit then of the produce of the

wine-vat and of the threshing-floor, of thy oxen and of thy sheep, thou shalt take and give as the first fruit to the prophets; for they are your chief-priests' (*Did.* 13:3). Within the New Testament, named women held all of these roles: prophet, householder, travelling missionary, apostle. Also, please note – for a good hundred years **before there was a priest, or an ordination – there was Eucharist.**

An investigation into the New Testament and the possibility of women's priesthood was conducted by the Pontifical Biblical Commission from July 1976 through January 1977. When the Biblical Commission studied all the relevant information, some of which I have briefly noted above, their conclusion was that the New Testament alone was inconclusive on whether women could or could not be ordained priests. This was a unanimous decision (17-0). Scripture alone could not determine an answer to the question of women's ordination.

### **Women in the Tradition.**

If the Scriptures are unable to provide a conclusive answer, an examination of Church tradition may bring greater certainty. It has become commonplace to hear phrases such as 'women have never been ordained', or 'women have never been priests'. A study of historical documents and epigraphs provides evidence that such statements are wrong, as I will demonstrate. In the early centuries women were 'ordained', they were considered part of 'clerical orders', they were called '*presbytera*,' '*diakonos*', and '*diakonissa*' and two that we know about were given the title '*episcopa*'. While noting these terms, it is also important to recognise that at present there is no certainty what roles these women had in relation to sacramental ministries; but nor can we be certain of the roles men had in such liturgies. An androcentric reading of history presumes that men in these roles in the past, had the same function of men in these roles today - but not the women!

It is only when we move beyond the New Testament that words, which today are associated with hierarchy and priesthood, have their origins. Tertullian (155-220) was the first to use the terms *cleric* or *clergy* as distinct from the people, the *laos*, and he describes the *clergy* as an '*ordo*'. Tertullian also speaks of both women and men in 'ecclesiastical orders': "How many men and how many women in ecclesiastical orders owe their position to the practice of continence."

Within Roman society there were different ranks that were known as an 'order' (*ordo*), e.g. the order of *senators*, or the order of *equites*. The process of being enrolled in an order was called 'ordination'. This pattern from the Roman political world had a strong influence on the

Church. Widows and Virgins could be enrolled in an *'order'* providing they met strict conditions of good works and also age; according to Theodore of Mopsuestia, a woman could only 'be received into the order of widows' if she were over sixty. This same author also asks, 'whether it was fitting that deaconesses be ordained before this age.' Widows had a role in receiving penitents who, according to Tertullian, were required 'to prostrate themselves before the widows and the presbyters' (*De Pudicitia* 17, 7).

In the *Apostolic Constitutions* (ca 400) there is a description and prayer for the ordination of a deaconess:

O bishop, you shall lay your hands upon her in the presence of the presbytery, and of the deacons and deaconesses, and shall say: O Eternal God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of man and of woman, who replenished with the Spirit Miriam, and Deborah, and Anna, and Huldah ... do Thou now also look down upon this Your servant, who is to be ordained to the office of a deaconess, and grant her Your Holy Spirit ... that she may worthily discharge the work which is committed to her. (Book VIII, 19-20)

The Council of Chalcedon (451) determined: 'A woman shall not receive the laying on of hands (*cheirotoneisthai*) as a deaconess under forty years of age, and then only after searching examination' (Canon 15). The age of forty for a deaconess continues in the Justinian legislation (ca 530) where deaconesses are listed among the clergy and like other clerics deaconesses receive an ordination by the 'laying on of hands,' they were attached to a Church and were supported by the Church.

In addition to widows, virgins, and women deacons, an Abbess was also 'ordained' in a ritual laying on of hands. As head of her community, the Abbess heard confession, absolved from sin, gave penances and reconciled members back into the community. As part of her ordination ritual a religious mitre was placed on her head and she received from the bishop a staff as a sign of office. The Cistercian Abbess of Las Huelgas, (founded in Spain in 1187), as well as wearing the mitre and carrying the crozier of a bishop, also exercised Episcopal authority by appointing and dismissing parish priests, she issued faculties to hear confessions, to preach and celebrate Eucharist, and carried out other duties of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Her powers of jurisdiction came to an end by Papal edict as late as 1873.

There are several books now available that provide primary sources such as ancient liturgical prayers, inscriptions from tombs and other monuments where women are named

with the title deacon, and deaconess. Gary Macy's book, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West* provides liturgical evidence and examines the changes of the Priesthood up until the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Ute Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies* examines the evidence from the New Testament and Patristic writings in the early centuries. Madigan and Osiek's book *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* list sixty-one such inscriptions in the East and four in the West covering the first six centuries. And more recently, Miriam Therese Winter, *Out of the Depths. The Story of Ludmila Javorova Ordained Roman Catholic Priest 1970 – 1990* in the underground church of Csechoslovakia

These books also include evidence for women given the title *presbytera/presbyteressa*, (a total of 10) and there are two women who have the title *episcopa*. One woman, whose name is uncertain, was buried in the Basilica of St Paul's in Rome. Her inscription reads: 'Here lies the venerable woman, bishop (*episcopa*) Q, buried in peace for five [years] + Olybrio.' Also in a Church in Rome, there is a mosaic showing a group portrait of four women. On the far left, one is named, 'Theodora Episcopa'.

The above sampling of the traditions regarding the ordination of women has not been widely known, because history has given little attention to women's experience. But as more and more evidence from history comes to light there can be no doubt that for centuries within the Catholic tradition, in a variety of jurisdictions, women received ordination to different roles, women were considered as clerics, women bore titles that today we would associate with deacons, priests and bishops, and in some of these roles women exercised ecclesiastical and sacramental authority.

The witness of Scripture (Phoebe) and tradition provides a precedent for considering the ordination of women to be ministers of the Word and the Eucharist. If the diaconate were open to women right now, apart from wider pastoral opportunities, this would enable women to participate in Church governance, which Canon Law at present restricts to male clerics (Canon 129 #1).

If the New Testament and the early centuries provide evidence of women's full participation in the Church – where, when and why did it all go so wrong?

**The source of history's conditioning.**

Far too often the Scriptures are blamed for the discrimination against women, prevalent in so much of our heritage. Certainly, the Scriptures, particularly the Old Testament, reflect a patriarchal society, but the tradition's misogynistic attitude has its basis not in the bible but in Greek philosophy.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.)

“And a woman is as it were an infertile male; the female, in fact, is female on account of an inability of a sort... The male provides the ‘form’ and the ‘principle of movement,’ the female provides the body, in other words, the material...” (*On the genesis of the creatures,* bk. 1, chap. 20)

Aristotle's understanding of the human person and society continued into the Roman world in which Christianity began and developed. Such philosophical thinking about gender differences is based on a false understanding about the process of human conception. In ancient times it was believed that only the male was active in the generation of human life. The woman was a passive recipient of the male seed and the carrier of life, but she contributed nothing to life's origin.

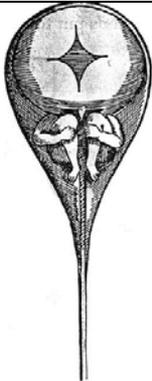
“If, then, the male stands for the effective and active, and the female, considered as female, for the passive, it follows that what the female would contribute to the semen of the male would not be semen but material for the semen to work upon.” (Aristotle. *De Generatione animalium.*)

From this wrong ‘biology’ came an understanding that women were deficient and that only the male was the true and complete sex, females were a deviation. Thinking that women were physically deficient and inferior may have been a factor in treating women as socially and politically inferior.

I want to stress that this attitude towards women does not come from biblical teaching but from the philosophy of Aristotle which has its basis in ignorance about human biology. But as the early Church developed within this Greco-Roman world, Greek philosophy became the milieu for Christian theological thinking. Aristotle's view about the inferiority of women is reflected in Patristic writings and the theology of Thomas Aquinas who wrote:

In the higher animals, brought into being through coitus, the active power resides in the male's semen, as Aristotle says, while the material of the foetus is provided by the female.' (*Summa Theologica* 1a. 118, 1 ad 4).

These philosophic considerations work out of a dualistic perception of the human being understood as matter and spirit, with the woman always identified with the material and the man identified with what was considered the higher faculty of rationality and spirit. This understanding of human conception, which had its origins four hundred years before Christ, continued throughout most of our Christian tradition. So certain were scientists about the male being the sole source of life, that even when microscopes began to be used male prejudice saw in semen miniature human beings, complete with arms and legs.

	<p>The drawing was conceived by Nikolaas Hartsoeker not by what he had seen, but what he presumed would be visible if sperm could be adequately viewed.</p>
<p>The entire human person is within the sperm.</p>	<p>1694 Drawing of Human Spermatozoa</p>

Women have no role in the act of procreation. As late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the view persisted that only the male contributed to the creation of a human life, with the woman providing the womb receptacle to incubate and nourish this life.

It was not until 1827 that Karl Ernst Von Baer identified and described the female ovum using a microscope. The discovery, that woman also was an active participant in human procreation, has had profound effects on the understanding of the human person and also of human society. Following Von Baer's work, no longer could a woman be considered an inferior biological specimen of the human race. But this is a very late discovery—1827. In the 1800's we knew more about electricity and the solar system than we did about human life.

What I want to insist on here is that the perception of women's natural inferiority to men emerged from Greek natural philosophy and was based on false biological knowledge.

But this is the philosophic milieu taken for granted throughout most of Christianity and therefore this necessarily is the prevailing world view that informs and shapes Christian theology, and that influences biblical translations, Church architecture, rituals and canon law.

### **A Matter of Justice and Necessity**

John Paul II when writing to the gathering of women in Beijing in 1995 said:

‘There is an urgent need to achieve *real equality* in every area... this is a matter of justice but also of necessity.’

**As a matter of justice and necessity** reinstate women deacons and priests as in the early centuries.

**As a matter of justice and necessity**, English translations of our liturgical readings and prayers should include and name women, instead of maintaining the archaic use of ‘man’ as a generic term. In many cases, the use of the term ‘man’ is an inaccurate translation from the original language, since Hebrew, Greek, and Latin have different terms for an individual male and for a general collection of people – women and men. An accurate and literal translation should make this distinction in English.

**As a matter of justice and necessity** women should be well represented at all levels in diocesan, national and international committees, commissions and consultations regarding Church matters. We also have been baptized into Christ and share in his royal, priestly, and prophetic character.

**As a matter of justice and necessity** women should have equal access to financial support in their theological studies instead of only financing the theological education of a few male seminarians – who may later leave, but with no requirement to refund their fees.

**As a matter of justice and necessity** women should have equal access to diocesan support for their discernment of vocation and pastoral formation for ministry. Seminary formation houses should be open to both men and women who consider they have a vocation.

### **Conclusion.**

Recently, for my professional development, I completed a module on Abuse in the Workplace called “Safeguarding Essentials.” This module was prepared by the Catholic Church Insurance.

45. One aspect described various forms of abuse: Physical, Sexual, psychological and also Spiritual. Can you recognize any of this?

**“Spiritual abuse is the misuse of religious beliefs and practices to manipulate, oppress, or punish a person.”**

Examples of spiritual abuse include:

Threatening punishment by God

Denying religious rites

Distorting scripture to justify improper or harmful behaviour

Refusing to provide pastoral care and resources.

Isn't this the experience of women?

For daring to speak out on women's concerns – excommunication, loss of job,

Denying women the sacrament of ordination; and due to a shortage of priests, denying rural parishes the Eucharist

Reading scripture and history to justify only a male priesthood. E.g.

Bishop Rudolf Voderholzer of Regensburg, said he saw no possibility of ordaining women. “It won't get us a millimetre further if we rig up the history of the Church in order to allow ourselves to ordain women,”

Another Bishop: “We need to look back to the beginning of revelation, if there wasn't such a thing, if the Lord did not want a sacramental ministry for women, it doesn't go,” -

Is there any sacrament of ordination for anyone in the NT?

Only men have access to seminary formation and theological studies paid for by the diocese.

My conclusion: Women have experienced centuries of spiritual abuse by church authorities.

The liberating God of the Exodus, who hears the cries of all who are oppressed, laments with us and over us, and over our institution for the centuries of neglect, ignorance and prejudice that have been part of women's experience within the Church that we too would like to call our home.

**The time is now.**