

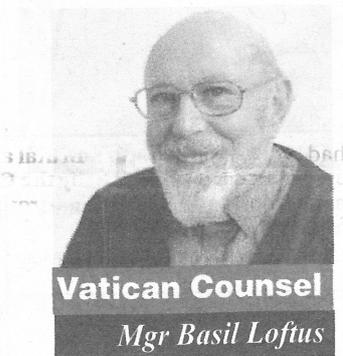
“THE Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women. This judgement is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.”

These words from Pope John Paul II’s apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* – issued at Pentecost 1994 – seem clear enough. Then, as if the Pope’s own apostolic letter were not sufficient authority, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith weighed in with a statement that “this teaching requires definitive assent, since, founded on the written Word of God, and from the beginning constantly preserved and applied in the Tradition of the Church, it has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal Magisterium (cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* 25, 2). Thus, in the present circumstances, the Roman Pontiff, exercising his proper office of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32), has handed on this same teaching by a formal declaration, explicitly stating what is to be held always, everywhere, and by all, as belonging to the deposit of the faith” (28th October 1995).

Not much wriggle-room there. Even Pope Francis seemed impressed by the strength of the statement. On 1st November 2016, during an in-flight press-conference on the way back from his visit to Sweden, the question of women priests in the Catholic Church was raised with him. He replied that the question was settled in 1994 by St John Paul II, who taught that because Jesus chose only men as his Apostles, the ordination of women in the Catholic Church is not possible: “On the ordination of women in the Catholic Church, the last word is clear. It was given by St John Paul II and this remains.” The journalist pressed him: “Really, never?” And Francis answered: “If one carefully reads the declaration of St John Paul, it goes in that direction, yes.”

It is common ground in all discussions that the historical fact is beyond dispute – the Catholic Church has always excluded women from the priesthood and the episcopate. But in 1948 the Dominican theologian, and later expert, or *peritus*, at the Second Vatican Council, Yves Congar, had pointed out that logically “the absence of a fact is not a decisive criterion for concluding prudently in every case that the Church cannot do it and will never do it”. After all, it took over a thousand years for the Church to finalise something even vaguely resembling the present discipline of the sacrament of reconciliation.

Congar’s observation is redolent of a similar one by Lord Denning, one-time Master of the Rolls: “If we never do anything which has not been done before, we shall



Vatican Counsel
Mgr Basil Loftus

never get anywhere. The law will stand still whilst the rest of the world goes on: and that will be bad for both.”

A further difficulty continues to be the argument that the Church’s understanding of women’s role and dignity has evolved. This is not a plea to alter Church doctrine or practice because “the times they are a changin’”, but an appeal to the affirmation and recognition of women’s equal dignity in the Church today. The difficulty of reconciling exclusion from the priesthood and episcopate with that evolved appreciation of women’s place in the Church was not a relevant factor in the genesis and evolution of the historical practice of ordaining only men. Therefore it was never considered. It is therefore a factor to be considered now.

Latterly, a very decisive step forward in this sense has been taken by Fr Giancarlo Pani, a Jesuit Professor of Christian History at Rome’s La Sapienza University. He has no doubt that “one cannot always resort to the past, as if only in the past are there indications of the Spirit. Today, too, the Spirit is guiding the Church and suggesting the courageous assumption of new perspectives”. As well as bringing into doubt the infallibility and definitiveness of John Paul II’s ‘no’ to women priests, Pani wants the whole matter to be discussed in the light of “developments that the presence of women in the family and society has undergone in the 21st century”.

Now if Fr Pani were a lone voice, no matter how distinguished and erudite, the matter may well have ended there. But wait a moment. This man is the deputy editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, a publication of which every edition is not only scrutinised by the Vatican’s Secretariate of State but actually bears their ‘*Beneplicium*’, or ‘approval’. So, was someone having an ‘off-day’ when checking the contents? It doesn’t seem so, because only days after the publication of this latest number Pope Francis called all the members of the editorial board to see him, told them that the latest edition is always open on his desk, and then emphasised what he wanted from them: “Avoid clinging to certainty and safety”, “Don’t take it easy (*andare in pensione*) and hang on to certainties”, “as writers and journalists you must be mas-

Church can now discuss women priests

ters of the incomplete thought, that is of thinking which is open and not closed up and rigid”.

Francis warned them “unless we are agitated and disturbed our writings are fruitless” (not an easy phrase to translate – *senza inquietudine siamo sterili*). But he saved the ‘killer’ to the last. Having referred to the magazine as lying open on his desk, he concluded by telling them: “You have faithfully gone along with all the fundamental passages of my pontificate – from the long interview I gave to your director to the publication of encyclicals and of apostolic exhortations *giving them a faithful interpretation.*” (my emphasis)

But it was in another interview, that given in November last year to the Superiors-General of religious orders and congregations, and only now made public, that Francis stressed an ecclesial virtue which applies not only to those who exercise governance in the Church, but to all who respond to the missionary urge to move the Church on – academics, pastors and writers: “Those who never make mistakes are those who never do anything. We have to go forward! We will get things wrong sometimes, yes, but there is always the mercy of God on our side!”

A further consideration lies in today’s Christian unity aspect of all theological questions. When the early practice of the Church was evolving, not just in the matter of an all-male priesthood and episcopate, but of the whole sacramental and liturgical life of the Church, account did not have to be taken, as it does today, of the over-arching imperative of restoring the unity of the Church shattered at the medieval Reformation. True, the 15th century Council of Trent took into account the need to avoid gratuitously offending the Orthodox Churches, and so did not insist on the necessary sacramentality of every Christian marriage, thus avoiding condemnation of the Orthodox practice which to this day allows divorced Christians to remarry validly but non-sacramentally, and so receive Communion. But it is only in very recent times that the Catholic Church has also begun to take account of the sensitivity of other Christians in the Reformed Churches – the altered discipline of mixed religion marriages and the Catholic upbringing

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ing of children being a case in point. And since 1947, with the freedom given to Catholic Biblical scholars to co-operate with peer scholars in other Christian churches, we have seen a willingness for the Catholic Church to learn from the scholarship and holiness of other churches. And certainly the post Vatican II liturgical reforms owe a great deal to the scholarship and practice of the Reformed churches – think just of the vernacular language, Communion from the chalice and in the hand, and the often overlooked growing emphasis on the Word of God, side-by-side with the sacramental and sacrificial dimensions of the Mass – not to mention the beginnings of married priests in the Catholic Church, with the absorption of Anglican and Lutheran priests.

As I write these words it is with one eye and both ears on the television set, where the debate in the Anglican Synod on gay marriage is in progress. Here too, as during previous debates on women priests, the Catholic Church can listen and learn, as well as co-operate with other scholars in applying God’s merciful understanding to the positive aspects of gender equality.

People’s ‘*inquietudine*’ – the fact that they are agitated and disturbed by Church teaching, has very recently come to the fore in the universal consultation Pope Francis held about the Church’s teaching on sex and marriage. It has led to the present development, whereby, as a result of the apostolic exhortation *The Joy of Love*, Holy Communion has become a real, welcome and much appreciated possibility for some sexually active partners who are divorced and remarried, or not married at all. No doubt we shall soon hear from young people about their anxieties, as the next Synod of Bishops in Rome begins its preparatory stages.

Truly, “today as well the Spirit is guiding the Church and suggesting the courageous assumption of new perspectives”. Being agitated and disturbed by Church teaching can be a positive sign that the Holy Spirit is moving us on to a more sensitive appreciation of God’s Mercy, to not being afraid of making mistakes, and above all to that synodality and collegiality in discussion which alone will give us true discernment, as we learn, in Francis’ words, to “avoid clinging to certainty and safety”, and become “masters of the incomplete thought, that is of thinking which is open and not closed up and rigid”.