**The Tablet: Letters October-November-December 2020**

01 October 2020, The Tablet

**Topic of the week: Time for action on women priests**

Joanna Moorhead describes (“So tired of waiting”, 29 August) the weariness, dejection and frustration felt by four women campaigning for women priests in a Church which, as she says, is “a masterclass in patriarchy”.
Liz Dodd (Column, 19 September) finds it “outrageous and heart-rending” that Pope Francis addresses his forthcoming encyclical to “Fratelli tutti”, with just those two words enfolding “all the Church’s remarkable women into an amorphous, assumptive maleness”. And she calls on “all sisters to make enough noise that one day Rome will hear us”.

Don’t bet on it as long as the clamour is restricted to speaking and writing, necessary though both will remain. Women priests, like married priests, are now an absolute necessity if the Church is to survive, faced as it is with a crippling loss of vocations, and a mass turn-off by reason of its stone-faced conservatism and a degree of discrimination against women that flagrantly defies the equality legislation of the secular world our Catholic people happily inhabit.

The time has come for the same sort of action that women, and men with them, confronted Parliament and courts with a hundred years ago to get the right to vote. They marched in the streets, they chained themselves to railings, they disrupted meetings, they shouted from the public gallery into the chamber of the House, they blocked traffic, they made themselves arrestable; yes, they even went to prison.

Nothing else will now do to get the Church to allow women priests. Altars, especially those of cathedrals, should be surrounded behind and on both sides by lines of women with placards and women, and men, at church doors distributing leaflets, with conferences and meetings being defiantly interrupted, TV and radio notified in advance. The Church has got to be driven to take action – to be embarrassed into it.

Let all the world know that when 12 male apostles ran for cover when Jesus was arrested, it was four women, and only one man, who defied public opinion and stood beneath the Cross. And let’s tell the hierarchy to stop praying for vocations when there are thousands of women already prepared to do the job.

**Michael Knowles**
Congleton, Cheshire

08 October 2020, The Tablet

**Topic of the week: Women’s ministry: time to choose**

It is encouraging to see so much energy generated in The Tablet over Francis’ latest encyclical, Fratelli Tutti, and its relevance to the ministries and gifts of men and women. Much has been made of the non-inclusive title, and while I would have loved to see evidence of the Franciscan balance, including Francis and Clare, in the title, this must not detract from much that is good about equality and dignity in the document.

The Catholic Church has a choice in its response to ministry post-lockdown. Michael Knowles (Letters, 3 October) is right. There has been enough talk about the inclusion of women. Parishes are desperate for the gifts of women, as the pandemic has highlighted the risks for older priests and deacons ministering alone. We need “deeds not words” as Emmeline Pankhurst said just over one hundred years ago.

To that end, a group of lay people from many dioceses in the UK are launching a lay synod, rootandbranchsynod.org, to meet virtually and physically over the next year, culminating in a conference where Professor Mary McAleese will speak on how we move this debate forwards. She and I, like many of your readers, are tired of waiting.

**Katharine Salmon**
Sheffield

The exhortation by Michael Knowles to militant action on behalf of women priests contrasts greatly with the moderate tone taken by Catholic female scholars when approaching Pope Francis on the ordination of deaconesses, followed by the gracious response from the church specialists on this issue.

At the time of the campaigning for the ordination of women in the Church of England, Roman Catholic sympathisers also started militant activity. Nuns did circle dances in the square in front of Westminster Cathedral. Roman Catholic feminists picketed Father Christmas as a male chauvinist icon in an Oxford store. Is this the route we want go down?

Is a feeling a vocation? What if I claimed I had the vocation to be a bishop or even a nun? Such things would have to be submitted to the authority of the Church, the theological and disciplinary arbiter.

**Bernard Cartwright**
Stourbridge, West Midlands

I very much agree with the point made in your editorial (“Time to remove the gagging order”, 26 September) which suggested that Ordinatio sacerdotalis, written by Pope John Paul II, was probably an attempt to stem the tide of voices calling for a discussion on the ordination of women.

I have always felt that such a fundamental change of this kind would need to be considered by a council of the whole Church. I also feel that there could be a twofold approach to all of this: 1) further deliberations by the commission set up by Pope Francis to look at the ordination of women to the diaconate; 2) the ordination of married men to the priesthood, as requested by the Amazon synod.

**Thomas McMahon**
Bishop Emeritus of Brentwood, Stock, Essex

Thank you for your exercise in conscience and common sense. How extraordinary that we still belong to a Church that makes this at the same time an exercise in courage.

**Mary Ring**
Abergavenny, Monmouthshire

14 October 2020, The Tablet

**Topic of the week: Already on the road to women priests**

Bishop Thomas McMahon (Letters, 10 October) recommends a church council to decide on the ordination of women to the diaconate and the ordination of married men. The two issues are not of the same order. Celibacy is a matter of church discipline and could fairly readily be abolished. Personally, I believe that the (non) ordination of women is also a matter of discipline, but many in the Church are not of the same opinion. A decision by the papacy to permit ordination of women would, I suspect, almost certainly lead to a schism in Catholicism, as has occurred in the Anglican Communion, not to mention a sharp deterioration in relations with the Orthodox. No pope could countenance such an outcome.

How then to proceed? It seems to me that the advancement of women to significant positions in the Church, to such an extent that it becomes commonplace and no longer a matter for comment, will lead eventually, and inevitably, to women priests, though no doubt a council should be called before the final step is taken. This is an extremely slow process, but it takes time to break with a two-thousand-year tradition while still retaining the loyalty of all the Church’s members. This process, it seems to me, is one upon which Pope Francis has already embarked.

**Michael J. Walsh**
London N4

Pope Francis has released a video message calling for women to “participate more in areas of responsibility in the Church, without falling into forms of clericalism that diminish the lay charism”.

Clericalism was introduced into the Church, most notably in the late seventh century, to elevate ordained men on to a higher plane than other baptised Christians, and specifically to exclude women from areas of responsibility. As long as women are confined to the lay state, the areas of responsibility accorded to them will always be subject to the overall authority of male clerics.

The subordination of women to men greatly harms the real lives of many women, and is vastly damaging to the Church’s credibility.

**(Dr) Anne Inman**
New Ash Green, Kent

Michael Knowles (Letters, 3 October) shows his true secular colours when he speaks of the thousands of women “prepared to do the job” of priests. Job! The Catholic Church is not one of the many secular job opportunities in the market place demanding the loudest voices and the sharpest elbows, but one divinely instituted by Christ and handed on, in its form, to all of us who constitute the body of Christ.

**Sue Thomson**
Fairford, Gloucestershire

It is perhaps reassuring that saints can make mistakes, especially if they were popes. I am referring to St Paul VI declaring the use of artificial birth control to be unacceptable and St John Paul II forbidding any discussion on women priests.

**Chris Larkman**
London SW20

May I call on Pope Francis to begin his next encyclical with Sorelle Tutte? I would love to see how the chaps react to that.

**Annabel Smith**
Bristol

22 October 2020

**Married clergy**
Michael Knowles (Letters, 3 October) states the need for married priests, but does not raise the issue as to how a married priesthood could be financed.

To support a married priest with a family, a parish would have to raise from £25,000 to £30,000 a year, over and above the cost of church maintenance and the many parish appeals. And if the presbytery was not suitable as a family home, being physically attached to the church or used as the parish office, then a separate house would have to be provided. Is this possible with the present size of parish congregations?

**Angela Edwards**
Cardiff

29 October 2020

**Worker priests**
Angela Edwards’ concern for the financing of a married priesthood (Letters, 24 October) alerts us to the need for some fresh thinking.

There is no need for a married priesthood to cost the local church anything. The head of RE in my first secondary school was a married Anglican priest. He thought of himself as a worker priest and was a great Christian witness for good in class and staffroom. He took up his parish duties at the weekend and expected no pay from his church.

In my next RE department in a Catholic school there were two married former Catholic priests on the staff. When a holiday of obligation came round the head teacher would search for a local priest to provide Mass for 1,000 people and could never find one, while there were two men keen to help on her staff.

In every parish there are mature Catholics who have taken early retirement from their jobs. They have their own house, and a steady income. With encouragement and formation they would be able to give themselves enthusiastically to priestly service, and would not need to look to the Church for financial support.

**Tony Castle**
Great Wakering, Essex

Married clergy are being financially supported in a variety of ways, as they were previously for a thousand years. In a busy London parish a priest currently does two days a week as an accident and emergency consultant. He claims his work in A&E makes him a better priest while his work in his parish makes him a more sensitive doctor.

**Guy Neely**
Chislehurst, Kent

*Letter submitted by MMaC but not published*

*Angela Edwards raises the question of financial support for a married clergy, were it to be accepted as an option within the Church. (Tablet letters October 24th). If the present model of parish life were maintained, then she would have a point.  But a more radical approach is called for, which would address the numerous implications of a family in the presbytery.*

*The 'worker priest' model is a way forward: the married priest would  also have a paid ‘secular’ job.   Having a family to support would also, for the priest, become part of the practical consequence of vocation. This would demand a complete re-examination of the nature of parish ministry.*

*With news reported elsewhere in the Tablet of the closure of St John's Seminary at Wonersh, we are entering a critical phase where we can no longer ignore the reality that is becoming starkly obvious. Either we meet the challenge of a diminishing number of men entering the priesthood or the empty churches of recent experience will become the norm.*

*Now is the time to have an honest discussion and face the reality that challenges each one of us. Might we respectfully suggest that for once the bishops listen to the laity and open a fruitful dialogue? Otherwise we might live to see the outcome of the words of  the poet  W H Auden: 'Time tells you nothing but I told you so'.*

*Chris McDonnell                                                 Mike Kerrigan*

*Secretary                                                             Chair*

*Movement for Married Clergy*

05 November 2020

**Female leadership**
Michael J. Walsh (Letters, 17 October) says it takes time to break a 2,000-year tradition. This is to reinforce the lies that men have told about female ministry.

For heaven’s sake, Paul refers to a female apostle (Romans 16) as if female apostles were the norm. In the first centuries of the Church female Christian leaders outnumbered the male by three to one. It was not until the late fourth and early fifth centuries that female leaders were suppressed, then written out of history. The evidence for that is carved in stone, in Rome, on their tombs.

We are not talking about doing something new; we are talking about restoring to women the role at which they were once supremely successful. We need to rediscover the history of female leadership in the Church, and take Paul seriously when he says there is no longer male or female.

**Mary Ransom**
Sandown, Isle of Wight

I am a recent subscriber to The Tablet, and I look forward to each new issue with great anticipation. Sadly, however, I am finding so many references to women’s ordination tiresome.

I am a convert, having left a Protestant denomination to become a Roman Catholic over 30 years ago. In this Church, I have experienced full dignity, equality and freedom to serve. If one is totally committed to serving, does it matter in which way? For many years much time and energy has been spent on the issue of women’s ordination. I can only think of how positive it could have been, if all that angst had been spent on serving the poor and the marginalised in our “field hospital”, the Apostolic Church.

**Margot Epstein**
St Catharines, Ontario, Canada

**Married priests**
Once again we have a letter in The Tablet (24 October) about the supposed cost of married priests. The Church has had a steady stream of ex-Anglican married priests for the past 20 years and even more in the last ten years with the introduction of the Ordinariate. These priests have been well received by Catholic parishes.

The Anglican Church has far more parishes than the Catholic Church, many of them very small with tiny congregations. They have supported clergy families for centuries.

I, a life-long Catholic, married an Anglican priest and together with our six children lived on a small but adequate income with the advantage of a large house and garden. When my children were older, I supplemented our income by going back to teaching.

My husband later joined the Ordinariate and he is now a married Catholic priest.

Married priests provide many advantages for the Catholic Church. We have lived too long with the illusion that celibacy is somehow more “holy” than marriage.

**Hilary Andrews**
Richmond, Surrey

18 November 2020

**Future priesthood**
The Tablet is to be congratulated on its coverage following the publication of the IICSA report. Both the editorial (“The Church stands shamed again”, 14 November) and Catherine Pepinster’s article offer a frank and honest assessment of disturbing predatory activity within our Church. We owe the victims of abuse more than hollow words of “sincere apology”.

The establishment of a national commission to examine the future pattern of priesthood would begin to show that we are serious in seeking reform. We can no longer hide from the implications of the celibate life as a necessary condition for ordination.

Chris McDonnell, Mike Kerrigan
Movement for Married Clergy, Little Haywood, Staffordshire

26 November 2020

**Schools for scandal**
Clifford Longley’s article (“Abuse: learning the lessons”, 21 November) and the IICSA report both offer us much in terms of lessons which must be learned. But a question which is rarely asked, possibly because the answer may be too uncomfortable, is about historical seminary training.

The seminary I entered in the early 1960s was still offering places to 11-year-olds and upwards. Ordination for those who persevered could be 13 years away and the vast majority of those years of development (personal, spiritual, sexual, educational) would take place away from the nurture of their family in an almost totally male, semi-monastic environment, without any but the most incidental female presence or influence.

Can anyone seriously imagine that this was the best environment in which to prepare for the pastoral responsibilities of the secular priesthood? Many of us may have managed to live this priestly life in an ever-developing world and Church almost in spite of the training we received. But perhaps some were never really prepared to grow as they needed to and the consequences have been devastating; consequences which sadly, but not exclusively, must include clerical child sexual abuse.

**(Fr) Peter D. McGuire**
Spinkhill, Derbyshire

Your astounding reports on the predatory Cardinal McCarrick and the denialism that saw him become a prince of the Church surely drives home the fear that sexual deviancy will continue to disgrace the clergy so long as young seminarians are conned into believing celibacy is an exalted state for all and a unique ornament of the Western Church.

The evidence for the correlation between mandatory celibacy and arrested psychosexual development is overwhelming, in report after report. The near absence of sexual perversions amongst married priests of the Eastern rites and ex-Anglican married priests, and the beauty of their family lives, points the way out of the hideous mess McCarrick and others have created.

**(Dr) Tim Macnaught**
Canberra, Australia

10 December 2020

**What Francis fears**
l It was an inspiration to listen to the superb Tablet Webinar with Mary McAleese on 3 December. After a wonderful exposition of Irish history she ended by encouraging all of us who want reforms in the Church to keep lobbying. She gave the impression that she thought Pope Francis did not fully grasp the importance of some needed changes. I longed to ask her if rather it is fear of a schism led by some powerful reactionaries in the Vatican if he had followed the majority advice of the Amazon Synod to ordain married men.

He pleads with governments to follow their duty to provide financial aid for the poor. How about his own duty to provide the Sacraments to all who are poor in spirit, and to ordain enough priests to do it?

**Elizabeth Price**
Linton, Kent