A Tentative Step from an Unlikely Quarter: A Report on Bilateral Discussions on the Ordination of Women Between Orthodox and Old Catholics

By Duncan Reid

In the introduction to his book on ecclesiology, Miroslav Volf writes: "I do not specifically address the ordination of women. I simply assume it. Everything in my ecclesiology speaks in its favour, and I find none of the biblical, anthropological, christological, and theological arguments against it persuasive." So, you may well ask, why yet another discussion paper on this theme. Why not consider it, as Volf does, simply as a given in the current situation, no longer in need of discussion?

The reason is that we are all involved in ecumenical community, and the ordination of women continues to be a problem for the community of churches. Hurts and misunderstandings have occurred on both sides (not least between Anglicans and Orthodox), and further discussion is helpful to resolving these misunderstandings and hurts, especially if it focuses—as it does in the case before us—on possible patristic objections to women's ordination. I have to add as an Anglican that the question is by no means resolved in my own church—we still have dioceses in Australia that are strongly resistant to women's ordination, and as a church we have yet to allow for the consecration of women bishops.

Further, I have argued in other places that we westerners have much to learn from a sympathetic and open dialogue with the Orthodox, a dialogue that refuses simply to revert to older western frustrations and misunderstandings. Any discussion of contemporary issues, especially such a key issue as this, from an Orthodox perspective is inherently interesting and important. For Anglicans the importance of this discussion is increased by the fact that the dialogue partners in these discussions are the Old Catholics, with whom Anglicans have enjoyed full communion for more than seventy years and who now ordain women to the priesthood in most of their European provinces.

What follows is a report on these consultations, as they are recorded in the Conference Proceedings. The full title of the proceedings is: "Gender and the Image of Christ: Common Considerations and essays of the Orthodox-Old Catholic consultations regarding the role of women in church and the ordination..."
of women as an ecumenical issue, Feb 25-March 1 1996 in
Levadia (Greece) and Dec 10-15 1996 in Konstancin
(Poland). The original edition in German was jointly edited
by Urs von Arn (Old Catholic, Bern) and Anastasios Kallis
(Greek Orthodox, Münster), and published as a
supplementary volume of the Old Catholic theological

Although presented and formulated at consultations held
under the auspices of the Archbishop of Utrecht and the
Ecumenical Patriarch, neither the papers nor the common
statement has as yet any official standing. Even so, the
high level of agreement reached represents, I believe, a
tentative step that places the ordination of women on the
Orthodox agenda.

The Papers

The book of conference proceedings falls into two parts:
First, the 'Common Considerations', the statement of
agreement reached at the consultations in Greece and
Poland, and secondly, the papers presented at the two
consultations. I will take these in reverse order.

The theme of women and clerical positions in the early
catholic church was addressed by two Greek Orthodox participants,
in the paper 'Women in the work of the church: an
exegetical contribution' by Savvas Agouridis, Professor of
New Testament at the University of Athens, and the paper
'The question of women in Church tradition' by Ioannis
Petrov, Professor of Social Ethics and Sociology in the
Theology Department, University of Thessaloniki. A
further set of papers addressed the question of patristic
bases for a theological anthropology: 'Greek patristic
elements towards a theological anthropology of women
in their distinctive humanity', by the Dutch Old Catholic
theologian, Professor Martijn Parmentier of the
Universities of Utrecht and Amsterdam, and by Professor
Constantinos Yordanis, of the Education Faculty,
University of Athens, in his similarly-titled paper, 'A
patristic basis for a theological anthropology of women
in their distinctive humanity'.

A paper by Dr Wiktor Wysoczanski, the presiding bishop
of the Old Catholic Church of Poland (the Polish National
Catholic Church), addressed the distinction between the
basis of a continuing valid tradition, and traditions that are
conditioned by time and therefore changeable. This was
not published in the volume, but incorporated into the final
chapter, the contribution of Professor Jan Visser ('The
question of the ordination of women in the community of
churches'). The theme of gender from a theological,
christological, and soteriological perspective is addressed
by Professor Urs von Arn of the Old Catholic Theological
Faculty, University of Bern, in the paper 'The gendered
nature of human beings from the perspective of the
theology of creation and a soteriological-christological
perspective'.

A set of papers addresses the important questions
surrounding the Adam-Christ and Eve-Mary typologies.
Ms Maja Weyermann, the Information Officer of the Old
Catholic Church of Switzerland, presented a paper 'The
typologies Adam-Christ and Eve-Mary, and their
relationship to one another'. Dr Kyriaki Karayianes
Fitzgerald, who teaches at Holy Cross Seminary in Boston
and is an Orthodox theological adviser to the WCC,
Geneva, also addressed the issue in her paper 'The Eve-
Mary Typology and Women in the Orthodox Church:
Reconsidering Rhodes'.

The emancipation of women as a challenge to the church
was the subject of two papers, both similarly titled by the
Orthodox theologian Dr Dimitra Koukoura (Reader in
Homiletics, University of Thessaloniki), and Dr Elfriede
Kreuzeder, a deacon in the Austrian Old Catholic Church,
Vienna.

A further theme for exploration is presidency at the
eucharist in the context of the theology of icons, raising
questions about the ecclesial representation of Christ
through the priesthood. Prof Herwig Aldenhoven, of the
Old Catholic Theological Faculty, Bern, addressed this
issue in his paper 'Eucharistic presidency in the context of
the theology of icons: questions about the ecclesial
representation of Christ in the priestly office'. A Greek
Orthodox perspective was offered in a paper of the same
title by Prof Anastasios Kallis of the Universities of
Münster and Bern.

Jan Visser, Professor of Old Catholic Church Polity at
the University of Utrecht, addressed the question of
ordination of women in regard to ecumenical community,
developing theological criteria for assessing the
ecumenical consequences of the practice of women's
ordination.

In her paper 'The Ordination of women: a contribution
from Jungian depth psychology', Dr Anna-Thekla Künthin,
a psychologist and psychotherapist and a lay member of
the Swiss Old Catholic Church, looked at the ordination of
women from a psychological perspective.

Finally, a more experiential approach was taken by Dr
Kalliope Bourdara, a former Deputy Minister for
Education, Church Affairs and Culture in Greece, and now
Associate Professor of Roman Law and Legal History at
the University of Athens. Her contribution reflects on the
ordination of women from the perspective of an Orthodox
laywoman.

The Common Considerations

At the conclusion to the two meetings, the following
remarkable statement of 'Common Considerations' was
released:

In faithfulness to the treasure of tradition, we
discern tradition as a process, directed by the Spirit
of God, of the dynamic contextualization of the
truth for the life and the witness of the church in its
ever changing contemporary situation. This
provides questions concerning the appropriate way of dealing with the tradition ....

According to our understanding of tradition as mentioned above, we also investigated the historical data which was brought forward as a rationale for the ‘male character’ of the priesthood: the maleness of the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ’s choosing of men in the circle of twelve, the exclusive appointment of men to the priestly office of the church, as well as the corresponding argumentation with regard to typologies (eg Adam-Christ, Eve-Mary) and with ideas of the priest being the image or representation of Christ.

We have reached the common conclusion that there are no compelling dogmatic-theological reasons for not ordaining women to the priesthood. The soteriological dimension of the church and its mission is decisive for us: the salvation of humankind and the entire creation in Jesus Christ in whom the new creation is being accomplished. We were especially guided by the conviction that was central to the ancient church: only that which has been assumed and united with God has been saved. It is the human nature, common to men and women, that has been assumed by our Lord.

In their Preliminary Remarks that introduce the volume of proceedings, the editors, Professors Urs von Arx and Anastassios Kallis have this to say:

A remarkable level of agreement was reached about the role of women recognisable in the earlier history of the church. Tendencies not to treat men and women differently based on gender, as both are viewed as parts of Christ’s body, allowed for the multiple ecclesial ministries, or to what we would nowadays call leadership positions. For various reasons this gradually gave way to a changed evaluation of the role of women. Arising from the more and more prominent status of church in civil society, certain social views and values about gender differences had more and more of an impact, and this in turn limited the possibilities of women exercising ministries in the church in the way men did ...

Among the objections to the ordination of Christian women raised by churches in the East and the West alike, there are some that claim to be independent from time or a specific sociological context ... according to these reasons not conditioned by culture, there is an indispensable connection between representation of Christ or the ‘Christ-iconicity’ of the priest and the his maleness. These reasons are ultimately untenable. The same applies to the arguments with Christ-Adam and Eve-Mary typologies when they are used to explain a gender-specific difference that would make the ordination of women impossible. Although the patterns of both arguments reflect formal-patristic thought, they do not correspond to the tradition, since they ignore the universal salvific significance, inclusive of both men and women, of the incarnation of God’s Logos.

The collected papers and full text of the ‘Common Considerations’ are to be published in English translation in the Summer (August) edition of Anglican Theological Review. Although it would be premature to predict any change in Orthodox ordination practice in the foreseeable future, the 1996 consultations represent a significant advance in ecumenical understanding on this question.

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3 A reference to Gennadios Limouris (ed.), The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women: Inter-Orthodox Symposium, Rhodes, Greece, 30 October – 7 November, 1998 (Terror, Katerini, 1992.)