

Labelling the Debate

(On Women's Ordination)

by Fr. Lawrence Farley, Canada

All of my generation will remember the lines from A Charlie Brown Christmas when Charlie Brown, depressed over the coming of Christmas, sits down at Lucy's desk (the sign overhead announcing "The Doctor Is Real In") and says, "I am in sad shape. I know I should be happy, but I'm not."

Lucy responds, "The mere fact that you realize you need help indicates that you are not too far gone. If we can find out what you're afraid of, we can label it."

Labelling is not always helpful. Sometimes labels are too simplistically applied, and shut down real thought and dialogue. But sometimes labelling is crucial—such as when dealing with a disease. Then it is called "diagnosis". I submit that our current debates in the Church about sexuality indicate that something is wrong with us, and if we can find out what that is, we can label it. The intensity of debate, conducted as it is between people of equal intelligence and goodwill, about something as basic as human sexuality, and about something which the Scriptures and the Fathers and the traditions of our Church have been clear and uncontroversial for about two millenia, clearly reveal that something is wrong. The debate is not like other debates in the Church in the past. This debate is a symptom.

In the fourth century, there was something wrong with the Church in the form of Arianism. That is, there was confusion in the minds of many about the divinity of Christ. Beginning in the twentieth century, there is confusion in the minds of many about the humanity of Man—and if objection is taken to the use of the inclusive term "Man", this only reveals how deep the confusion actually goes. The heresies of Arianism about the nature of Christ were bad enough, since they effected what it means to be a Christian. The heresies about human sexuality are even worse, because they effect what it means to be a human being, whether Christian or not.

These distortions about gender roles are the main front and ideological battleground of the perennial contest between the Church and the World (or the secular zeitgeist, the spirit of the times). A secular spirit always exists in this age, challenging the Church. The nature of the challenge changes with the times. In our time, the challenge of secularism seems concentrated in the area of human sexuality, of what it means to be an authentic man or woman, husband or wife. Thus, as the traditional understanding erodes in our culture, divorce rates go up, the number of common law unions go up, there is increasing acceptance of casual sex, and of prostitution (now euphemised as "the sex trade", as if schools offered training and certificates), violence against women increases, and the use of pornography is increasingly normalized. One part of this complicated, varied, often contradictory, and systemic break-down of the traditional understanding of sexuality and sexual roles interacts with our culture under the banner of Feminism.

There is, of course, much that is laudable in Feminism, for Feminism is a very large tent, and contains

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under its roof a large variety of movements and demands—some political, some theological. Certain of its demands, such as the right of women to equal pay for equal work, should be granted by all concerned, since they are matters of simple justice. But the theological feminism which effectively is at war with traditional gender roles is another matter.

This theological feminism asserts that because both men and women equally share the image of God and because this common humanity which unites them is more fundamental than the gender differences which distinguish them, then these gender differences have no theological significance. I grant the premise (that both genders equally share the divine image, and that this is the most fundamental fact about human existence), but not the conclusion (that therefore gender differences have no theological significance). The conclusion simply does not follow from the premise.

In the 1970s, this conclusion, a part of the reigning zeitgeist, was behind the drive to ordain women to Holy Orders in the Anglican/ Episcopal Church. First it was declared that deaconesses were deacons, then women were ordained as deacons, then as priests, then as bishops. One verse of Scripture (Gal 3:28, “in Christ there is no male and female”) was wrenched from its original context and made to do service for a question foreign to that context—a question, moreover, which the author of the verse had already dealt with elsewhere in a contrary way. Proponents of women’s ordination announced that Jesus was far too revolutionary, daring and egalitarian to sanction something as repressive and patriarchal as an all-male leadership, and that the authentic Paul (the author of Gal. 3:28) approved of female church leaders too. The verses in Paul about women and men in his First Epistle to the Corinthians were by-passed, re-interpreted or dismissed as interpolations. The explicit denial of the possibility of women as teaching leaders in 1 Timothy was similarly dismissed as non-Pauline (as if that somehow negated its authority as part of the New Testament canon). The Fathers also were dismissed as too patriarchal, and anyhow, attention was called to how they said that both men and women equally shared the divine image. So there.

As someone who observed the entire process unfolding in the Anglican Church at that time, I find it instructive to observe how the cause of women’s ordination progressed. First, no bold assertions were made about Paul being crudely wrong. Theologians in seminaries, widening their eyes with as much innocence as they could muster, simply asked questions, like “Can we really regard the obviously non-Pauline sentiments in 1 Timothy 2 as binding for all places and for all times?” (They were just asking the question. The issue was, of course, very complicated, as everyone but fundamentalists recognized.) Debates were held, letters written by people on both sides of the debate to church newspapers. (No one blogged back then.) People warned of disaster, and were in turn dismissed as alarmist and too fearful. Motions in synods were made. Counter-motions were made. People lobbied. It looked as if something as basic to Church life as Holy Orders was to turn on attendance numbers at church conferences. Then the step was taken of ordaining women deacons. Relax everyone: not priests, just deacons. Then, since the Church obviously had no problem with women deacons, why not women priests? Relax everyone: just priests, not bishops. And there will be a Conscience Clause for dissenters, so no one need be afraid or alarmed. Then, since the Church obviously had no problem with women priests, why not women bishops? By then, the Conscience Clause turned out to apply only to the dinosaurs already ordained, and hopefully approaching retirement. New recruits must abide by the new orthodoxy. Appeals to love,

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compassion and broad-mindedness were made to the rank and file, and those still rejecting the concept of women's ordination were denounced as misogynist and ridiculed or pitied in turn. Anyone remaining in the Anglican Church of Canada now and arguing that women should not be priests enjoys all the credibility among them as that enjoyed in society by Holocaust-deniers and flat-earthers.

To repeat: all this followed from the conclusion, "Gender has no theological significance because what matters is one's humanity, not one's gender", so that the two-millenia old gender roles no longer applied. The next phase in the Anglican Church was the debate about same-sex marriage.

By this time, I had already figured out where the real Church was, and had become Orthodox. But observing this new process gave me a chilling sense of déjà-vu. Those in the Anglican Church, arguing for the legitimacy of same-sex marriage and of homosexual relationships in general, by then had a certain logic on their side, as well as a certain momentum. And the logic of women's ordination seemed to be irresistible: if gender didn't matter, then it didn't matter. It was no use saying that men and women were different enough so that homosexual marriage was impossible for Christians. In deciding to ordain women as clergy, the church had already decided men and women were to all practical intents the same. People still appealed to St. Paul in defence of the traditional understanding of sexuality, but St. Paul had long since been dismissed from theological thinking. Similarly with any appeal to history or tradition. The war promoting same-sex marriage was won without firing any real shots.

What is instructive to me is that we see the same scenario being played again in North American Orthodoxy. Once again, no one is boldly saying that St. Paul can go hang. The worst that is said about him is that he did not have the benefit of reading our modern studies proving that homosexuality is inborn and God-given. People are not openly denying the two-millenia old Faith, they are just asking questions, all the time dismissing their opponents who warn of disaster as alarmist and too fearful. Plus ça change...

We can, if we choose, deny the parallel with the fourth century, refuse to acknowledge that there is something wrong with us, and refuse to label it as heresy. We can, if we choose, balk at the painful and messy work of dealing with heresy, and insist that these are matters for legitimate debate. We will then continue proceeding down the path blazed for us by the Anglicans.

I think that it is time to recognize that debate is not legitimate if it is debate over things long uncontroversial in Scripture and Tradition. It is time to recognize that the present debate over gender in our Church is a symptom that we are dealing with an underlying heresy. It is not enough, of course, simply to cut off debate and to tell people to shut up and sit down. Thoughtful answers need to be provided—as they were provided to Arians in the fourth century. There is a difference between debating and answering. We debate to arrive at the truth. We answer when we know what that truth is.

The historic Church has long known what the truth is about human sexuality. It is time that these answers be authoritatively given.

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