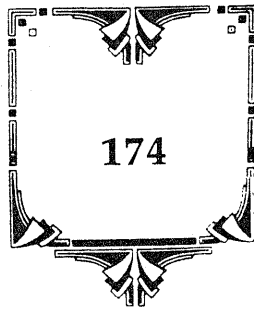


Letter to Marianne
on
The Ordination of Women

Maureen Mullins



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For Marianne Beck

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Dear Marianne,

Do you remember that afternoon last July when your mother invited Nora and me to tea, and there we were round the kitchen table with a great dish of strawberries and you had problems about the ordination of women, do you remember? In the Religion class, or the class of Social Studies, I can't remember which, you had been given the task of finding out what people thought about the ordination of women, and with the help of your mother you were making a very good job of it. "Right," said your mother, "here you've got Miss Mullins, find out what a *Catholic* thinks." And instead of wallowing in strawberries, I found myself wallowing in theology.

I started bravely enough. "Let's define our terms," I said, knowing that you had very little background and could expect little clarification from your teachers in school. "Ordination," I began. But then considering that you would tend to think of a priest as simply "a clergyman," as someone who is appointed to a job in the Church, even if you thought of it as a special and spiritual sort of job, I corrected myself: "You have to understand what a priest *really* is." And when I added, "A priest has a specific vocation from God," I sensed I was losing you. Whereas Catholics have at least a hazy idea of what the

word "vocation" means, it was obviously a new word to you.

There was another thread I could pick up on: "The essential role of the priest," I said, "is to offer sacrifice." It was then I began to think we were really in trouble: "What is sacrifice?" you shot back. You had some idea of the Last Supper, and that Christ had done something then and that Communion Services sprang from that, but I hesitated trying to explain the sacraments, critical though it is for the whole question. And then there was still another crucial consideration--tradition. You began to say, "That's the point. It's just a tradition." And when I tried to answer by explaining that "tradition" in the Church is not the usual "tradition" in the simple historical sense, Nora launched in with the distinction between the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood of the laity. If I remember well, I tried to salvage something from the confusion by leaving you with the idea that the first priests Christ ordained had been men and that in spite of the excellence of his own mother, he had not chosen to ordain her.

What a muddle! I'm sorry, Marianne, I'm never any good at explaining things off-the-cuff, like that. Maybe, however, as I'm better at writing, I can explain some things to you more clearly in a long letter.

What is a priest?

In very general terms a priest is a person (to avoid the loaded term "man") chosen out to be a channel of communication between all of us and God. Unlike the rest of material creation, we human beings can know something of God, and can deliberately direct ourselves to him. The priest is the mediator, an official go-between, on the one hand passing on God's message to us, and on the other offering our worship to God. There is a two-way traffic in this communication.

The worship that we humans offer to God has always taken the form of sacrifice and hence the

essential role of the priest, as opposed to the "minister" or the "pastor," is to offer sacrifice. That is why you will find the term "priest" used in the Jewish world of the Bible. The Jews were still offering sacrifices in the Temple at Jerusalem until its destruction in the year 70 A.D. They have not offered sacrifices since--so present-day Jews have "rabbis," teachers, but not priests.

The great Priest is Christ, who offered himself in sacrifice on the cross. Catholic priests offer the same sacrifice of Christ on the cross when they offer the Mass, and so we call them priests. Protestants hold a memorial service, remembering the Last Supper; there is no idea of sacrifice, and so they are not called priests. Some High Church Anglicans do have an idea of offering a sacrifice, and so they will also call themselves "priests." Some poor, benighted pagan offering sacrifice on behalf of the people to their gods, is a priest or priestess: he or she has been chosen, on behalf of the community, to offer sacrifice to God, and these are the essential elements that make a person a priest.

I do not know what idea you have about ordination, when you hear talk of the ordination of women. It cannot be just to constitute a person "a person for others," a social worker, a missionary, a teacher of Christianity, for these are things that women do, and have always done in some form. Even the idea of dedicating themselves publicly to God, as do religious, monks and nuns, is clearly not what ordination means. There is some further element there in the essence of ordination for the Anglican, something in the authority of teaching ("preaching" is the word used to distinguish it) and more than that, the authority to perform the Communion Service. And behind the doubts of many in the Anglican community is the intuition that although they may not like the words "priest," or "sacrifice," the person who is ordained in some way shadows the role of Christ who was a priest and

did offer sacrifice.

What is sacrifice?

So the priesthood is about sacrifice, but what is sacrifice? We are created and held in existence by God. Everything good comes from him. We need to acknowledge this, and thank him, and we find that it isn't enough to do it just by thinking inside ourselves. We have to express our feelings by external actions, otherwise we can never be quite sure that they are genuine. Not only do we need to express our gratitude. Our existence is complicated by the fact that we do wrong, and we try to reconcile ourselves to God. As individuals we do this by prayer, by acts of generosity to other people, by acts of self-denial to ourselves. But as a community the way to God has always been by offering him something valuable through the hands of someone chosen to be the mediator between God and ourselves: the priest.

This act of offering is designed to show that we acknowledge God's supreme dominion, and the destruction of the gift is a graphic demonstration of the passing of the gift from the giver to the Divine Receiver. We are not now talking about the little sacrifice that you can make when you switch the television channel from your favorite soap opera to the nine o'clock news to please your father (although there can well be a relationship). We are talking about the sacrifice that the human community and all who form it have needed to make to God. In this great sacrifice there needs to be something of value offered (in olden times it was usually a valuable animal, and it had to be a perfect one); this offering represents the giver. There has to be someone who has the authority to offer the sacrifice on behalf of the people. That means he or she does not choose themselves, they have to be appointed. And there has to be a reason for the sacrifice—to acknowledge God's sovereignty, to beseech his pardon. Finally there has to be a sacrificial act, the destruction of the victim, which really expresses the sentiments of the community.

I think you can see how Christ was the great priest. He was chosen by God to be the mediator between mankind and himself, and the sacrifice Christ offered was his own life. He was both priest and victim; his death was *the* great sacrificial act.

What is a vocation?

A priest has to be chosen, appointed, but given the nature of the sacrifice, the priest has to be chosen by God, and so we come to the term "vocation." Literally the word means "calling," and as your mother tried to explain, it is used about the conviction that a person can experience that God wants something special from him or her.

In strict terms, however, although a vocation does mean a calling from God, the feelings of the person concerned are not the deciding factor. Feelings change from one day to another. If you have a vocation the deciding factor is that someone else with the necessary authority decides that God is calling you. In the case of the priesthood it is the bishop who has the authority on behalf of the Church, to say whether or not a person is being called by God to be a priest.

Suppose it was you. Obviously you have some idea that a vocation may be in the offing by the very fact that you have come to the attention of the bishop. Then the bishop, who has many advisers, and who knows from much experience the personal qualities that a priest needs to have, decides whether you have those qualities, and whether your reasons for wanting to be a priest are good ones (or whether your reasons for *not* wanting to be a priest—for most people are frightened of a vocation—are valid ones). And then you may be told, "Yes, you have a vocation, God is calling you to be a priest."

At that point it is up to you to be generous and go ahead with it, or to decide that you can't cope. My goodness, that's when you need prayer! There's nothing in the world more uncomfortable than indecision about response to a voca-

tion. However, the point I am trying to make is that it is the bishop who decides whether or not you, the candidate, have a vocation from God, not you the candidate. What you have to decide is whether or not to offer yourself, and if it is confirmed that you have a vocation, whether or not to accept it.

This matter of the external judgment about a vocation is important when considering the demands of some women to be ordained. We'll come back to this later.

What is a sacrament?

And now we come to a point that I didn't try to explain to you that afternoon round the kitchen table. The sacraments are the way that God designed that his help should come to the individual. God helps the individual in any way he pleases, but the ordinary way, in his plan for us, is through the sacraments. They are seven: Baptism, Confirmation, Penance, Holy Communion, Matrimony, Holy Orders and Anointing of the Sick. Penance (for the forgiveness of sins) and Holy Communion are everyday sacraments, the rest are for key moments of a person's life. Our Lord, himself, when he was on earth, established the sacraments, taught the apostles about them and gave them the power and authority to effect them.

The apostles passed this power on to their successors and so the seven have come down to us, through the Church, to this day. They give God's help; and that help makes us pleasing to God—and these are two of the meanings of the term "grace". And so the catechism defines a sacrament as "an outward sign of inward grace, ordained by Jesus Christ, by which grace is given to our souls."

The essential thing about a sacrament—and this is the very meaning of the word—is that it is an outward thing, a thing that we can see and handle, and usually a very everyday thing with a most prosaic function, which by the will of God, under special conditions has a similar role for our

souls.

You know what the soul is, don't you? Its technical definition is the substantial form of the body, but unless you know some Aristotelian philosophy that will not say very much to you. It's the me, myself that I am on the inside, that I've always been, and that I'll always be, young or old, alive or dead. Body and soul are intimately connected: the soul directs the activities of the body (the Latin for "soul" is "anima" and the English "animate" means "alive"), and the well-being of the body or lack of it, affects the "spirits" of the soul. The soul is our thinking part and our will, it is our immortal part, and so the more important part. I've recently had to do with an old person close to death and it makes one realize how very unimportant one's body—let alone material possessions—become when the moment comes to die. Not for you yet, by the way—you take care of that body of yours, you're going to need it for a long time yet.

It's you on the inside, your soul, that will always matter, but it is easier for us to appreciate bodily things, and so God uses bodily things to produce effects on our soul. Mundane water washes the body, God gives the water of baptism power to cleanse the soul.

The mission of the priest is bound up with the administration of the sacraments. By the reception of the sacrament of Holy Orders, he receives the power to administer most of the rest. He is the usual minister of Baptism (although anyone can baptize in an emergency). When a man and a woman marry, they administer the sacrament to each other, but the priest is the Church's official witness. The priest is the minister for the Anointing of the Sick and for Confirmation (although normally done by the bishop).

And the everyday sacraments: Holy Communion and Penance—these particularly are what absorb the time and energy of the priest—or should. In the former God uses the materials of food—bread and wine—to fulfill our soul's central need, which is himself. In the latter he uses

the actions of the repentant person (repentance, confession and the determination to make up) and the words of the priest "I absolve you..." to effect his forgiveness in an unmistakable way. The power to effect these great acts of God are what an ordained priest has, he and no one else. You remember that I said that there is a two-way traffic in what a mediator does. The priest offers sacrifice to God, and through the priest's ministry in the sacraments, God brings himself to us.

But hang on to that idea of a sacrament being a symbol of something that is fairly easy to understand, like cleansing or feeding, that produces an effect that can be very difficult to understand, as is baptism or communion with God. A symbolic action that actually produces on the soul that which it symbolizes. That's a very important idea.

What our Lord did

Let's now have a closer look at the sacrament of Holy Orders, because that's the one that is debated in the question of the ordination of women. What we are after is to see if there is any reason why this sacrament has always only been given to men, and never to women.

I gave you the classic definition of a sacrament as being an outward sign of inward grace, instituted by Jesus Christ, by which grace is given to the soul. How does this definition apply to this particular sacrament? In the New Testament we have relatively detailed accounts of how our Lord instituted it. I'll copy for you that given in St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which of all the accounts we have, has the merit of being the first to be written down.

"The Lord Jesus, on the night when he was being betrayed, took bread, and gave thanks, and broke it, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body, given up for you. Do this for a commemoration of me.' And so with the cup, when supper was ended, 'This cup,' he said, 'is the new testament in my blood. Do this, whenever you drink it, for a

commemoration of me.'" (1 Cor 11:23-28). Then three days later, but in the very same room, when he came to them after the Resurrection, "Once more Jesus said to them, 'Peace be upon you; I came upon an errand from my Father, and now I am sending you out in my turn.' With that, he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit; when you forgive men's sins, they are forgiven, when you hold them bound, they are held bound.'" (John 20:21-23).

There are lots of complementary references, but these two show our Lord in the act of commissioning, ordaining, the first priests, giving them the power and the authority to administer the two special sacraments of the priesthood. Following the history of the first Christians in the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles there are many accounts of the Apostles passing on the powers that they received—ordaining more priests—and always by the ceremony of "prayer and the laying on of hands." And that is how the bishop even nowadays administers the sacrament of Holy Orders. He lays his hands on the head of the candidate, and says a certain short, prescribed prayer. It is something which only a bishop, that is a direct descendant of the Apostles, can do.

There's no argument about the fact that the people that our Lord ordained were all men. Likewise in New Testament times and indeed all down through the centuries only men were, and have been, ordained priests. Where there is perhaps room for argument, is in *why* this should have been so.

Background:

Our Lord's attitude to women

It is unlikely that it was by mere chance that Jesus ordained only men. "Chance" is not an explanation when considering the works of God. And in this case there is even stronger reason to see it as a deliberate choice: His decision to ordain only men was quite singular, for our

Lord's attitude to women was in stark contrast to the customs of the day.

If you read the gospels carefully, particularly that according to St. Luke, you will realize that there were lots of women among our Lord's immediate disciples, and respectable matrons many of them were too. It tended to be a family affair. There was his Mother of course, but also his aunt (also called Mary), she was the mother of a couple of his apostles, the brothers James and Jude. There was the mother of another couple of apostle brothers, James and John. Her name was probably Salome. Joanna was the wife of Herod's steward, and Susanna was another lady of whom we know no more than that, like the others I've named, she accompanied our Lord, looked after the needs of the crowd of young men around him, and was at the foot of the cross when the moment came. There were Martha and Mary who lived in Bethany, whose house Jesus used when he was in the Jerusalem area (Lk 10:38-42), and there was Mary Magdalen to finish the list of the women whose names we know.

But there are also lots of anonymous ones. To understand the force of what I am saying you must realize that in the world at that time and most particularly in the Jewish world, the customs governing the relations between men and women were very formal, and very strict. It was not done for a man to speak to a woman beyond those of his own family, and unheard of for a rabbi. Jesus was very young for a rabbi (they were usually at least fifty years old, and he was only in his thirties), you would have expected him to have taken more than special care to make sure he shocked nobody. And we find instead that he had many women among his traveling companions (Lk 8:1-3), had the kindest of receptions for women who were in difficulty (Lk 7:37), going out of his way to help them (Jn 4:4-42). In this last reference, if you read it, you will find the account of how, one hot mid-day, Jesus stayed by the well outside the town, while his disciples went off to find something to eat. It was Sa-

maritan country, so if you were a Jew, you did not want to have to do with anybody, let alone a woman. And this woman who came up was clearly in trouble because she couldn't face the evening's socializing when the women usually went for water.

In the Jewish law of the time, the testimony of a woman was not acceptable evidence in court—yet Jesus arranged that the first witnesses to the Resurrection should be women, agitating backwards and forwards at the tomb, and the menfolk didn't believe them (Lk 24:22-24).

So Jesus clearly felt a freedom to act as he pleased when it came to women and the conventions of the day. He had no qualms about flying in the face of convention when convention did not square with God's will. And it is precisely his attitude toward women that provides one of the best illustrations of this. Yet he ordained only men. Dying, on the cross, he said to his mother that she was to be the mother of the young apostle John, and in the figure of St. John Catholics have always seen all Christians represented: Mary was to be the mother of all Christians. Yet not even she was ordained. He only ordained men.

The Church's tradition

Tradition in this sense means, "What has always been done." The Catholic Church has never ordained women. In Roman times when Baptism was a more spectacular affair that involved being completely submerged in water (the Baptists still do this) there was an order called "deaconesses", whose principle function was to help in the baptism of women, but these deaconesses were not priests. From time to time the question of the ordination of women was brought up (which goes to show that the late twentieth century is not as avant-garde as it would like to think) and the decisions were always the same: only men can be priests.

Through two thousand years of history the Church has maintained a truly wonderful (some

people would say miraculous) continuity of personality and of teaching. As time goes by, different points of that teaching come under fire from one quarter or another, and then that particular point is clarified and made more detailed. But the general content of the teaching remains unchanged. It seems that the moment has come for this question of the ordination of women, or rather of the non-ordination of women, to be elucidated.

Notice that although the teaching of the Church has carried on in an unbroken and unswerving line, the social background through which the Church has functioned has certainly not been in a straight, unfaltering line. There have been lots of highs and lots of lows, and if someone tries to make you believe that through all these changes women have been passive and subservient, you can know that that person is no historian.

To come back to women in the Church. During the great centuries of monasticism, the Dark Ages, the Middle Ages (which are two very distinct periods please, one a low, and one a high culturally speaking) dignitaries in the Church were often territorial lords as well. A bishop might be governor of a large area, and so might the abbot of a big monastery. And, in her turn, so might an abbess. Here we have women exercising great authority, governing big communities and wide lands—maybe deciding who was and who was not to be ordained from among the people under their jurisdiction. Find out something about St. Hilda of Witby for example. From the point of view of ruling, they did everything that an abbot, that a bishop did at that time, but they were not ordained. Ordination was for men. What this indicates is the idea that tradition includes the positive decision on the part of the Church *not* to ordain women (in situations where it might well have).

*Background: What the Church
has done for women*

There are those who will say that these constant decisions of the Church are decisions made by a hierarchy that is exclusively masculine and that therefore of doubtful objectivity when evaluating the claims of women. I suppose if you view the Church as a merely human institution a case could be made for this argument. But a merely human institution that has maintained such constancy on this and on so many other issues for two thousand years? One day you must read what the historian Macauley had to say on this theme. Anyway, for the moment, let's look at some purely human facts.

The writings of the Old Testament include some beautiful tributes to women, and as we have seen, our Lord cultivated his friendships with men and women indistinctively, and in his teaching men and women both figure in the parables—whatever he had to say was for both. The emphasis of his teaching was on the Fatherhood of God, that God is not a distant figure to be feared, but rather one who wishes us freely to chose to become his adopted children. Think of the parable of the prodigal son. To be a child of God is of such god-like dignity that all others pale beside it.

What can matter differences of class, of race, of age or of sex compared with the eminence of being a child of God? A child of God has an eternal future and a god-like inheritance. A child of God: it was this mentality that eventually did away with the institution of slavery, this mentality that made people value children as small people with their own rights, and it was this mentality that made women immediately realize their parity with men. The women (no fools) reacted at once. People sometimes accuse St. Paul of being anti-feminist because he wrote telling some of them to watch it and not be making public spectacles of themselves trying to preach

in public. What St. Paul's critics miss is the fact that women were reacting—some of them too violently—to the message that Christ had taught that they had *the same standing as men*. But that did not warrant them flying in the face of the conventions of the time, which is what some of them were doing. The Church teaches not only that each person is, at least potentially, a child of God, but also that the way to serve God is to serve him precisely in that other person beside us: "When you did it to the least of my brethren here, you did it to me." It is the teaching of the parable of the sheep and the goats, which you can look up in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, chapter twenty five.

The Church has always insisted on the equal rights and duties of men and women in marriage—the much-maligned St. Paul was very emphatic about this. Christ taught, and the Church has faithfully maintained, that marriage is one man, one woman for life, "the two become one flesh," and this at once puts man and woman on a par socially. It is not fashionable to say this Marianne, but women are always the losers in the divorce stakes, no less than they are in polygamy.

There are two thousand years of history to study and to see how, as Christianity spread to tribe after tribe, nation after nation, the position of women improved and became more or less dignified. More or less, because there are always many influences at work, and when all is said and done, the dignity of the individual, any individual, will depend largely on the standards that that individual sets for him or herself.

There are some who would argue that Christianity, by imposing its strict code of morals, subjugated women. What you must watch for, in claims of this kind, are the credentials as historians of the people who make them. It is easy enough to use the odd example to illustrate an argument, but that is not academic, historical investigation. Where the influence of the

Church is felt, a woman is held in high respect. In high respect as a Christian soul, and in high respect for the sake of our Lady. And inasmuch as a society at large takes a Christian tone, so in that society, women have been thus honored.

The exaltation of Mary

For the sake of our Lady This is such an important element in the Church's attitude to women that I've given it a section to itself. I'm sure, Marianne, if you think of Catholics, you think of people who honor the Virgin Mary. And it's true. The Church has exalted her to the skies. You see, she is the one person of whom we can all be really proud. The poet Wordsworth called her "our tainted nature's solitary boast." What he meant is that whereas we've all offended God, she hasn't. I remember a priest saying (It must have been about the time that England won the World Cup—it did happen once.) that she was like a football team in whose reflected glory we could all bask.

Christ's mother was an ordinary human being, a very young one at the beginning of the story, whom God asked to be his mother. Think for a minute, Marianne: she was about your age, and initially she was bewildered and frightened by the angel, just as you would have been; and then, once over the shock, she bursts in on her cousin Elizabeth, who seems to be completely in the know, and she feels just like you did when you won the swimming competition. "My soul magnifies the Lord, . . . because he has looked graciously upon the lowliness of his handmaiden. . . all generations will count me blessed. . . " Well you haven't been brought up learning by heart chunks and chunks of Hebrew poetry, as children were then, but what she's saying is the same as you felt, "It's me, it's me, dear God, it's all happening, it's all happening, and you've chosen me, me. . . ." Some people see our Lady always as a sort of statue, but I think reading that bit in St. Luke's Gospel, that when she got to Elizabeth's house she was in the mood for sliding down

bannisters—just like you.

And she wasn't just mother to the Baby, motherhood never finishes you know. She was mother to the Boy and mother to the Man, and then if you read the New Testament carefully and with an open mind, you will find that she became mother to the Apostles, disciples and the first Christians, and as tradition demonstrates, mother to all us later Christians as well.

When the Church declares that such-and-such a person is a saint ("canonized" is the official word) she picks out someone saying, "Look what wonders the power of God can do with one of us human beings" and we are told about their merits, and they serve to us as good examples. Incidentally there are quite as many women saints as men, no one can accuse the hierarchy of being women-scorners on that account. Well, the declarations that the Church has made about our Lady are far beyond what has been said about any saint.

And indeed our Lady's position in the scheme of things is central. Jesus was both God and man. The fact that our Lady was a virgin shows that his origin was divine; the fact that she did indeed give birth to him shows that he was a real human being. There is no contact—flesh from flesh—closer than that between mother and child. God who is sinless took his flesh from hers, from the sinlessness of the God-man follows the sinlessness of his Mother. God preserved her from the guilt of the human race that we have all inherited from Adam. (That's what Wordsworth was referring to when he talked about "our tainted nature.") If you want to get round your father, and no one loves you like your Dad does, you get your mother to do the job. Well in something like the same way, we Catholics often get our Lady to help us to pray to God, in fact to do the praying for us: "... pray for us now, and at the hour of our death. . ."

All this, and libraries of books more, can be said about our Lady. But she was not a priest.

Christ did not choose to ordain women—not even one as exceptional as his own Mother.

Christ did not choose to ordain women. I think we've seen enough of the background: our Lord's attitude to women in general, and the Church's consequent attitude to women with the raising of the status of women that has always followed the coming of Christianity, the pre-eminent position of a woman, the Virgin Mary in God's scheme of things: we've seen enough to realize that if Christ did not chose to ordain any women it must have been by positive choice, and not mere chance.

Vocation is the right of no one

And we come back to the fact of vocation. It is God who chooses whom he wills. Vocation is not the result of personal initiative. It is true that an individual may feel, more or less emotionally, that they would like to do such and such a thing; but as we have seen, feelings and emotions are no guides to vocation. That is given by God, and is judged to have been given by an outside authority.

Thus fall the arguments of those women who say that they have a vocation, and that the Church is denying them their right to fulfill it. There is no question of right involved. God gives a vocation to whom he pleases, and whereas we all have a right to all the helps we need to live in dignity and to get to heaven, vocation is not one of those helps, and no one—man or woman—has a *right* to it.

George Bernard Shaw, the dramatist, once said, "there are no small parts, only small actors." It's something that needs to be repeated every time the school play comes around. Certainly in God's eyes, there is no distinction between leading roles and walk-on parts. Our Lady's life was the humdrum of any housewife, and yet she is the great star of the human race. Within broad limits God chooses the role that each one should

play, and then it's up to us to play it as well as we can. But in the works of God in the church, *no one* has the right to the key roles.

*The value of tradition
in the Church*

We have seen that our Lord chose to ordain only men. We have also seen that all down through history the Church has only ordained men. That has been the unbroken *tradition*.

Tradition is of great importance in the Catholic Church. Indeed the word has come to have a special, almost a legal, meaning. You see, when we are studying theology, what we want to know all the time is what our Lord taught. He himself did not leave us anything in writing. What he did, was to teach the Apostles, and then give them the authority and his special help, to teach everyone else. So we always have to go back to what the Apostles taught. Sometime after Jesus went to Heaven—quite a long time after—between twenty and sixty years, people were writing things down that they remembered, and the Apostles gave their sanction, approval, to some of these writings, and these are what we have in the New Testament.

So we have two ways of knowing what the Apostles taught. One is the writings they sanctioned, the scriptures, and the other way is what *they actually did*, they and their immediate successors. If the Apostles taught something, or such and such was being done in the time the Apostles were alive, and therefore with their knowledge and approval, then we know what our Lord taught them on such and such a point. This source of knowledge is called sacred or apostolic tradition. The two sources of our faith are the Scripture and apostolic tradition.

Scripture, sacred or apostolic tradition and the magisterium guided by the Holy Spirit combine to bring us God's "revelation" at any particular moment of time.

And it is the unbroken tradition of the Church

that the candidate for ordination has to be a man.

*The analogy of
the sacrament of Orders*

There must be some reason.

Do you remember when I was explaining to you about sacraments, I said that a sacrament is a material thing that has symbolic value and that it actually produces in the spiritual order the effect that the material thing symbolizes. Water cleanses, and Baptism cleanses the spirit; bread is food, and Holy Communion gives life to the spirit.

That difficult word "analogy" means just that: having something of the qualities of, or in a sacrament: producing the qualities of. . .

The sacrament of Orders makes a man a priest, and in his essential roles a priest acts in the person of Christ. When offering the sacrifice he repeats our Lord's words, using the first person, "This is *my* body. . . this is *my* blood. . ." When he administers the sacrament of Penance he says, again in the first person, "I absolve you. . ." It's a mysterious business this, mysterious in the sense of being something that is partly beyond our natural understanding. Our minds are built to understand the technicalities of this material world, they are not up to coping with things beyond that, and that's where we have to have faith, that if the God-man, Jesus, told us that a thing is so, we'd better believe him.

To return to the role of the priest when he acts "in the person of Christ"—and here we come to it. All through the Old Testament God used to refer to himself as "the bridegroom of Israel," and Jesus took that title to himself. "Can the wedding guests fast when the bridegroom is with them?" (Mk 2:19) he said, defending the disciples (the "wedding guests") because he (the "bridegroom") was with them. St. Paul used the mysterious idea in reverse when writing about Christian marriage—saying that the union be-

tween man and woman was like that between Christ and the Church. Our Lord, in his parables, likened heaven to a wedding feast. God presents himself to us as groom to the bride. When he took flesh he carried on the symbolism by doing so as male rather than female, and when he is represented, as he is in the sacrifice of the Eucharist and in the rite of the forgiveness of sins, his role must be taken by a man. The masculinity of the priest can be said to have a similar symbolic value to that of the alimentary value of bread in Holy Communion, that of the strengthening value of oil in Confirmation, and the cleansing properties of water in Baptism.

So Christ ordained only men, some men, and the Church has always done the same.

What really matters

Do you think that it is "unfair" of God to restrict the priesthood to men?

Written bluntly like that it seems an impertinent question, but I know that when pushed in an argument it is easy enough for the "fairness" or "unfairness" of God to be challenged, and what's the quick answer? Well one quick answer is: Don't argue! It's a waste of time! Give your opinion only when the other person is *really* interested and is ready to consider it—and that sort of opening comes up in calm, and in private.

But what about the "fairness" of God? Is it something that you wonder about yourself? If there is something that God does, or allows, that seems difficult to accept, then one thing we can be sure about is that it is *our* way of focussing the issue that is at fault, not God's. But I must not go off the point. A double precept that will always point us in the right direction is that God knows what he is doing and that our understanding is often very limited.

One could argue in the same way that it is "unfair" of God to restrict motherhood to the female sex. But as you and I are female, we are quite happy about that one—and glory, at least I

hope you do, that our lot in life is going to be similar to that of the greatest of God's creatures: his mother Mary.

What really matters, and here again we come back to the school play—except that in real life we *all* get chosen for a role, and are on-stage all the time—it isn't the role as such that is important, it is the way we play it that counts. Think for a moment again of Mary living out her life in a village up in the Galilean hills. There were frightfully important people around at the time. Mark Antony and Cleopatra had been dead about fifty years, but there were lots of other Roman socialites jostling for position—and their wives. Herod had a court not far away (did you know that one of his wives was also called Marianne?). I imagine Joseph—a well-known craftsman in the area—being called in to fix a couple of leaks in a roof, and Mary going along at mid-day to take him his sandwiches. What do you think Herod's wife (whichever it was at that moment, he had so many) would have thought as they passed in the court-yard? Not much.

And God? And God's mother? One day you can write a play about it.

What really matters is how we carry out what God has planned for us. Today. This afternoon. And God knows best how to organize the world he has created.

So if you must have a quick answer to the challenge that God is unfair maybe your reply can be that he is more likely to know what he is doing than we are! For the matter in hand, priestly ordination, he has the condition that the candidate be a man—and not any man, but only such men as he chooses—to whom he gives *that* vocation.

That vocation, because to each and every one of us he offers a vocation; there is a role in life that he invites us to play. A good part of the discomfort of youth is that uncertainty that each one feels about his or her vocation or "calling" in life.

Well, Marianne, certain indications—general, but useful—you have already, in finding out God's plan for you: you've been born in England, in the late twentieth century, and female.

Female. That means a vocation to love, to give life. . .

Well, I won't go off into that one—perhaps in another letter sometime if next year's strawberries coincide with some suitable end-of-year project from the religion teacher. But next year let me know in time, and I'll try to give you some help before you have to hand in your project, instead of several weeks later.

Meanwhile, lots of love,

Maureen Mullins