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The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Women

March 2023

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Last November, in a wide-ranging interview with the Jesuit magazine *America*, Pope Francis was forthcoming in his views about the ordination of women.¹

Noting that ‘it is a theological problem’, Francis first expressed his repeated view that the Church is more than ordained ministry – this is in line with his insistence that women can have roles of high visibility within the Church, with access to decision making, without being ordained. He went on to distinguish between *two* theological principles or categories: the Petrine (to do with ordained ministry and, by implication, proper to men) and the Marian (to do with the Church as Spouse, as feminine). The Marian principle is more important, since it is ‘more like the church, the church as spouse, the church as woman’. Francis then goes on to speak about a *third*, non-theological principle which ‘is not a theological thing’ and which he calls ‘the administrative way’: here he believes it is important to give more space to women, and gives several examples where he has already done this in the Vatican (in the Council for the Economy, for example) with beneficial effect – ‘when a woman enters politics or manages things, generally she does better’.

The reactions to the Pope’s musings were swift. Canonist Mary McAleese was characteristically blunt, reportedly accusing the Pope of ‘misogynistic drivel’, and attacking his ‘ludicrous lack of logic or clarity’.²

A more diplomatic, but no less decisive, response came from Professor Emeritus of biblical theology at the Pontifical Athenaeum of St Anselm in Rome, Marinella Perroni, writing in *L’Osservatore Romano* (Dec. 12, 2022). She noted the dependence of the Petrine/Marian distinction on the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, observing its good intentions, but commenting that ‘at the beginning of the third millennium, however, a reciprocity

1 *America*, November 28th, 2022

2 *The Tablet*, 10 December, 2022, 28

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that assigns to women the charism of love and to men the exercise of authority should at least give us pause'. This Balthasarian intuition, seductive because simple, is problematic, she argues, because it stereotypes the differences between men and women and gives them a hierarchical value – it is quite clear that 'forms of the mystical exaltation of the feminine are directly proportional to the refusal of public recognition of women's authority'. Perroni asserts that Francis is struggling to free himself from a patriarchal vision – '... The masculine-feminine bipolarity' featured 'obsessively' in Catholic theology when it was 'totally androcentric and patriarchal', but has lost credibility 'since women first became "the women's issue" and then, having shaken off this offensive expression, became full protagonists in social, political and ecclesial life'.³

Jesuit Vatican commentator Thomas Reese was equally unimpressed – he referred to the 'convoluted ecclesiology of the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar', noting that '... where laymen fit into the analysis is unclear. If laymen are included under the Marian principle, then why can't women be included under the Petrine?'.⁴

Finally, of interest beyond the issue of ordination, is the *methodological* question that surfaced: if the ordination of women had emerged as a concern in the synodal consultative process (which it had), was Pope Francis now effectively scuppering realistic discussion with a pre-emptive strike? And, if so, what did this say about the synodal pathway?

I want to offer some reflections here in an attempt to explore the issues raised.

HANS URS VON BALTHASAR: THE PETRINE/MARIAN PRINCIPLES

Von Balthasar (1905-1988) is generally recognized as a theological giant of the 20th century who, not least due to his literary and artistic way of proceeding, often escapes conventional classification.⁵ In his intellectual biography of Pope Francis Massimo Borghesi has shown the clear influence of von Balthasar on the thinking of Pope Francis, so it comes as no surprise to see Francis drawing on his thought, even without, in this case, explicit attribution.⁶

Von Balthasar is concerned to value the particular dignity and value of women by safeguarding their difference in a context

3 Cindy Wooden, CNS, Dec. 13th, 2022

4 *NCR*, Dec. 9th, 2022

5 O'Hanlon, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, 3-5.

6 Massimo Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis*, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2018

where, (back in the second half of the 20th century), he argued that an aggressive feminism was espousing equality by sacrificing difference.⁷ He does so by highlighting the proper association of the masculine with activity, authoritative power and leadership and the feminine with active receptivity, discipleship and love. In this way the masculine mirrors more precisely the creative and grace-giving divine, while the feminine is more in tune with the creaturely need for grace. This basic position, more an intuition than an argument, is then translated into the symbolic form of the Petrine and Marian principles, and support is sought from Scripture and Tradition. Throughout, von Balthasar is keen to stress that the naming of difference (within the hierarchical framework described) is not intended to deny equality – in fact, if anything, the feminine, with its association with love, is superior to the masculine. In a rather daring move, typical of his general theological approach, he locates this ‘*equality within difference*’ within the Trinity itself – there is a kind of ‘supra-sexuality’ within God where there is found the prototype (*Urbild*) of masculinity in the Father and his activity of generation, and of femininity in the Son in his total receptivity of being from the Father. To be noticed here is a welcome retrieval of the notion of receptivity as divine, but also a curious kind of sexual/gender fluidity within the Trinity which, when applied to the human and creaturely, somewhat arbitrarily takes the form that while men can be categorised under the Marian principle (as laymen within the Church), women cannot be allowed to assume the Petrine principle (and thus cannot be ordained). This general approach, which is pervasive in his theology, may be understood as a form of the ‘*theology of complementarity*’ which has become commonplace in the theological defence of the current Catholic teaching on ordination, and which owes much to its articulation by Pope John-Paul II.⁸ Critical reception of von Balthasar on this issue has been mixed.⁹ Most acknowledge his good intentions – the

7 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Kleine Fibel für verunsicherte Laien*, Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 69-75; *Neue Klarstellungen (New Elucidations)*, Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 109-115. See also Brendan Leahy, *The Marian Profile in the Ecclesiology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, New York: New City Press, 2000

8 For a critical exposition of the theology of complementarity see Mary Anne Hinsdale, IHM, A Feminist Reflection on Post-Conciliar Catholic Ecclesiology, in Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hahnenberg (eds), *A Church with Open Doors, Catholic Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*, Collegeville: Minnesota; Liturgical Press, 2015, 112-137

9 See, for example, Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans, 2012, ch 6, 123-146; Tine Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, especially 19-26 and Pope Francis, Sex and Gender, *The Tablet*, 17 December, 2022, 12; Corinne Crammer, One sex or two? Balthasar’s theology of the sexes, in Edward T. Oakes, S.J. and David Moss, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 93-112

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retrieval of the role of women is to be welcomed and, while there is ongoing discussion about what, if anything, one can name as properly ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ (the Anglo-American discourse tends to focus on equality and downplay difference, whereas the Continental European has more room for the old ‘vive la différence’ intuition), the question around a particular nature of men and women is entirely legitimate. What grates with his critics is the sense that, despite assertions to the contrary, Balthasar’s dipolarity on sexuality and gender is ultimately rooted in an asymmetrical, hierarchical inequality. There is even a sense that, despite himself, von Balthasar ends up with a one-sex anthropology: ‘I believe that despite his attempt to construct a two-sex theological anthropology ... ultimately Balthasar reproduces the one-sex model in which normative human being is implicitly male and Woman’s definition is based around Man, particularly around what Man is seen to need Woman to be’.¹⁰

ASSESSMENT

A comprehensive assessment of von Balthasar’s nuanced position is not possible based on a thumbnail summary like this. Nonetheless, what is possible is a partial assessment, sufficient to locate the status of his approach within the theological community.

One can say that what von Balthasar proposes has a somewhat provisional and controversial status, and has by no means won general acceptance. There is a sense that he has begun from a premise that is *intuitive*, and then proceeded to argue for it with selective use of Scripture and Tradition, rather than beginning with the *evidence* itself and allowing for the intuition/conclusion to emerge. Whatever about the legitimacy of his mode of proceeding (he is, after all, unconventional and poetic in his theological manner and it often bears great fruit, while here he is addressing a question that is still both open and urgent), his thesis had met with substantial objections. If, for example, the ‘feminine’ is more properly the sphere of laity (male and female) in the church (as receptive of grace, as Spouse of the Bridegroom who is Head of the Church), how is it that men, despite this receptivity, are allowed to become candidates for the male (representative of the divine) priesthood in a way that women are not? How is Pope Francis’ own adoption of the third-way ‘administrative principle’ (allowing for public leadership roles for women, as indeed is the case now more generally in Catholic Social Teaching) permissible within an anthropology which assigns such rigid and exclusive roles to male and female? If, as Brendan Leahy has rightly pointed out,

¹⁰ Crammer, *op cit*, 102.

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the positing of the feminine within the Trinity is a counter-balance to any simple predominance of one sex over the other, is it not also true that the notion of the Son as feminine (within the Trinity) gets very little purchase from von Balthasar, in particular when it comes to his interaction with us (where, as representative of the Father, he is always portrayed as male)?¹¹

It would seem to me that a rather genial and provisional intuition, highly speculative and somewhat arbitrarily and idiosyncratically developed in symbolic and poetic discourse, is then *rigidly* applied to intra-church organization, and has assumed an essentialist and almost ontological status which lays it open to charges of anachronistic stereotyping. We are all, of course, to some extent both facilitated by, and captives of, our own times: and, in this case, as Kilby puts it, we might have guessed in advance ‘that if examining a Swiss theologian of patrician background educated in the early part of the twentieth century, one might not find ideas about gender or sexuality that will exactly match our own, that will seem to most of us either wholly attractive or wholly persuasive’.¹² This does not, of course, absolve us from the task of *discernment* – perhaps, after all, there is some nugget of gold in what von Balthasar is proposing? – but it does very much preclude us taking his word as Holy Writ and using it almost as a conversation stopper in this matter of the ordination of women. What we have in von Balthasar is an original hypothesis with respect to an ongoing conversation, *not* a canonical, normative point of arrival.

THE ROLE OF THEOLOGY

Francis, in this interview with *America*, repeatedly returns to the notion that this (the issue of the ordination of women) is ‘a theological problem’. On first reading this can be taken as the reason why no further discussion is possible – a bit like the tag-line in Father Ted, ‘that would be an ecumenical matter’. But Francis – whatever about the rhetorical value of such an approach – is much too astute to understand the role of theology in this light, as a kind of tool of mystification to avoid difficult conversations.

The role of theology, I suggest, is at once more modest and more interesting. If one takes on board the distinction well made by Bernard Lonergan between understanding and judging in human knowing,¹³ it may be said that it is the Magisterium (episcopal and papal) which has the last word at the level of judgement, while theology operates more properly at the level of *understanding*. It

¹¹ See Crammer, 105

¹² Kilby, 133

¹³ Bernard J.F. Lonergan, SJ, *Insight, A Study of Human Understanding*, London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1957

does so by seeking to understand and explain what the Scripture, Tradition and Church teaching tell us about our own ‘signs of the times’, and the particular historical contingencies which allowed the late Pope Benedict to move beyond the simple dichotomy of a hermeneutic of continuity/discontinuity to propose a hermeneutic of reform, which admitted of change within the permanence of core principles. This understanding is couched by analogy with the understanding of human realities and the other mysteries of faith, often by way of explanations that draw on what is ‘suitable’ (*ex convenientia*) rather than strictly probative.

With regard to the ordination of women, theories like the Petrine and Marian principles, the notion that the priest must be ‘*in persona Christi*’, ideas of complementarity are all secondary to the current magisterial *judgement*, endorsed by successive Popes, that the Church does not believe she has the authority to confer priestly ordination on women.¹⁴ It is not theology, then, which is the obstacle here. But, in a modest way, theology can begin to point towards a solution, not least at this synodal time when it is clear that there is considerable unease among the faithful over this church teaching. Theology does this by, *first*, pointing out that the Church’s basic position that she has no authority in this matter is questionable given the provisional findings of the Pontifical Biblical Commission back in the 1970s that there are no clear grounds for this position in Scripture itself (and for the argument for Tradition to work, it surely must have an anchor in Scripture?)¹⁵ *Further*, when suitable reasons (*ex convenientia*) to support the current teaching are advanced, it is clear that theologies of complementarity, and recourse to the Petrine and Marian principles in particular, are hugely controverted, and by no means represent a firm theological consensus.

The International Theological Commission has laid out clear protocols for situations where church teaching has consistently failed to be received by the faithful.¹⁶ In such cases the Church must consider whether it needs clarification or reformulation, to the point, in dialogue with theology, of *revision*.¹⁷ This would seem to be the point we have arrived at today in our Church concerning female ordination: the synodal consultation (not a sociological survey but a real expression of the ‘sense of faith of the faithful’ – see Working Document for the Continental Stage, “*Enlarge the space of your tent*”, October 2022, n 8) has indicated clearly that the faithful want to see equality for women in the

14 See *Inter Insignores*, 1976, repeated in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, 1994

15 O’Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis*, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2018/9, 128-136

16 I.T.C., *Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church, 2014

17 *Ibid*, # 80, # 84.

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Church, are favourably disposed towards women deacons¹⁸ and are more divided on female priestly ordination. This latter may indicate a prudent waiting for the diaconate issue to be resolved and, if approved and tested affirmatively in real life experience, an openness to return to the issue of priestly ordination.

We ought, I think, to be grateful to Francis for sharing his thoughts on this issue with us. This is very much in the spirit of synodality, of the open speech (*parrhesia*) and accountability which are intrinsic to the process itself. At the same time it is clear that the contents of his musings are *contestable*: there is no rabbit from the hat here, no magic solution to what has seemed to many for so long a magisterial position that is weakly grounded. It is healthy for discourse within the church that Francis has been so forthcoming. It is likely, however, that many will continue to find the Church's current position unpersuasive.

CONCLUSION

The recent funeral of the late Pope Benedict was conducted in the simple, dignified and solemn manner that he desired, impressively so. However, if one stood back a little and took a second look, one other thing stood out starkly: there were all these serried ranks of clergy, dressed in black and white, in red and purple, up close to the altar – and all of them men! Where was the other half of the human race? Viewed through the lens of inclusivity – a *leitmotif* of the synodal consultation in Ireland and globally-the spectacle was incongruous and even *shocking* (considering that what looks like gendered apartheid is based on a doctrinal superstructure which, pending deeper investigation seems to rely on such questionable foundations). Does our ongoing insensitivity to regular spectacles like this mask the residue, however unconscious, of misogyny and patriarchy on our Church?

Sometimes it is said that this issue matters only to elites, that those who are uneasy with the current *status quo* or who argue for change are ideologues and a threat to orthodoxy. But it is clear from the synodal global consultation that this matters to more than just 'elites'. And those who warn of ideology and orthodoxy might well ask themselves if *failure* to address all the sources of evidence in a given matter (in this case the 'sense of faith of the faithful') is not itself an indication of ideology, which runs the risk, ironically, of imprisoning the church in an outdated orthodoxy which is not responsive to the signs of our times.

18 See Phyllis Zagano, *Catholic Women Deacons: Learning from Scripture and History, Doctrine and Life*, 72, November 2022, 2-12 and *Catholic Women Deacons: Contemporary Analyses, Doctrine and Life*, 72, December 2022, 35-50

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And this is the nub: how to be true to the gentle drawings of the Holy Spirit through the signs of our times and not simply be assimilated by the spirit of the world in a desire to be popular? This is the task of *discernment*, and it requires patience and perseverance, but it also requires, at a certain point, decisiveness, biting bullets. It would be perverse to decide *a priori* that just because a majority of Catholics think one way then, *ipso facto*, this must be wrong, a submission to worldly fashion. Pope Francis has done us a great favour by speaking out so openly: it is up to us to mull over what he has said with respect, and, in our turn, to engage and speak out.

The Wisdom of Surrender. The earth orbits around the sun and the little acorn grows into an enormous oak tree. To express these realities differently, the earth and the acorn are obeying God's will. God has a plan and design for the planet and for the acorn, and they follow God's plan. And in following God's plan, they blossom and thrive – and so do we. God takes care of these and of many other amazing processes of movement and growth that are constantly happening in this enormous universe of ours.

– THOMAS G. CASEY, *The Mindful Our Father*, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2022, p. 81.