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Women and the Threefold Ministry

J. J. VON ALLMEN (translated by C. D. W. ROBINSON)

[Editor's note

THIS is not the first time that Professor von Allmen has turned his pen to the subject of the ordination of women. An important article of his entitled 'Est-il légitime de consacrer des femmes au ministère pastoral?' appeared in *Verbum Caro*, vol. 17 (1963), pp. 5-28, and his present essay may be regarded as supplementing and updating his earlier one. The earlier article made the following points, among others:

1. That in this matter all is of grace: no one has a *right* to be ordained to the pastoral ministry, so the question of women's rights is irrelevant.
2. That the pastoral ministry is an institution of Christ, not an arrangement of convenience made by the Church, which can be altered at will.
3. That the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is irrelevant. Ordination does not admit one to the priesthood of believers, nor does the withholding of ordination exclude one from it.
4. That women are definitely upgraded in the New Testament, and that this shows their continued exclusion from the pastoral ministry by the New Testament not to be simply a cultural hangover but to be deliberate.

Professor von Allmen's earlier article was written against his own church background, which is Presbyterian. In his present essay, which is the substance of a long letter in reply to an enquiry from Miss Christian Howard, he considers the question how the matter is affected by being transferred to a setting in which there are bishops, and the normal or essential ministry is considered to be the episcopal ministry, the presbyteral ministry being merely dependant. Of course, not all episcopal Churches do consider the episcopal ministry to be the normal or essential ministry, and the presbyteral ministry merely dependant. Many Anglicans and Lutherans, for example, hold that the episcopate derives from the presbyterate, not the reverse, and that NT limitations

on women's ministry apply indirectly to the episcopate, but directly to the presbyterate.]

Three presuppositions: ministry and priesthood

MY REPLY IS BASED on three presuppositions. First, I am convinced that no one will solve the problem of ministries in general and of the ministry of women in particular by starting from the concept of priesthood; witness the almost desperate efforts of the expositors, both Roman Catholic and others, to explain why from post-apostolic times onwards it has been legitimate to speak of ministries in terms of priesthood when the New Testament does not do so—or does so only very rarely, as in Rom. 15: 16, for example, where the 'priestly service of the gospel' seems to be understood in the sense of the ministry of the evangelisation of the world by the Word (and baptism?) rather than in the sense of the ministry of the edification of the church by the eucharist. On the whole, the New Testament makes use of the category of the 'apostolate' and that of 'ministry' (which usually covers the function of bishop, teacher, pastor, presbyter, deacon etc.). The question seems to me not to be: *Is it legitimate to ordain women to the priesthood?*, but rather: *To which ministry is it legitimate to ordain women?* It must be said again and again that neither the indispensability of the ministry for the church, nor its institution by the Lord, is endangered by refusing to understand it in terms of 'priesthood'. Ministry is not sacramental because it is priestly, but because it is apostolic.

My second presupposition is that the tradition of the church must be given decisive weight: it has known from very ancient times three regular ministries: the episcopate, a major ministry of apostolic succession; the presbyterate, a collegiate ministry participating in the episcopal ministry; and the diaconate, also a ministry participating in the episcopal ministry, though in a more personal way. I am aware that this raises many historical questions, some of which have not been solved and doubtless never will be. One point, however, seems to be clear: these three ministries are distinct from each other not only by the tasks which they entail, but also by the necessity that each should have its own proper 'legitimation'. There is a legitimation peculiar to the episcopate, another peculiar to the presbyterate, a third peculiar to the diaconate. One other point also seems clear: it is the episcopal ministry which, of the three, by very ancient tradition carries the most weight. To attest its ecclesial character a local church, for example, does not point to its presbyteral college, and still less to the presence, in its midst, of deacons: it points to its bishop. It is he who, at the level of ministry, certifies a church to be a church. That is why one finds early on that a particular church, when providing a successor to a

deceased bishop, appoints one of its deacons or (later?) a member of its presbyterate, whereas one does not see a bishop becoming a presbyter or a deacon. Of course, the few historical exceptions which one always manages to unearth if one tries would have to be carefully weighed: but such exceptions would in fact only confirm the rule.

Sociological forms of the traditional ministry

THE last of the presuppositions, which constitute the basis of my argument, is that in the course of history there have been many structural or sociological variants by which this traditional scheme of ministry has been expressed, and that these variants have not necessarily compromised the faithfulness of those churches which adapted their own ministerial structure, as well as they could, to new conditions of place and time in which they were called to remain faithful as a church. The history of the presbyterate is particularly instructive in this respect, as is also the history of the relationship of precedence and prestige between the presbyterate and the diaconate, or that of the extent of presbyteral participation in the bishop's ministry. Because of historical vicissitudes, the faithfulness of a church lies not so much in perpetuating unconditionally a given sociological solution, adopted (to provide a framework for the relationship between bishop, presbyters and deacons) at a given time and in given circumstances. Faithfulness seems, rather, to depend on the two following factors: firstly, on the fearless desire to receive, practise and transmit faithfully the ministry of apostolic succession instituted by Christ and essential to the very existence of the church (the 'episcopal' ministry); secondly, on the flexibility and readiness necessary in order to adapt particularly the form of the presbyteral and diaconal ministries to the circumstances and needs of the church at a particular place and time, or in particular difficulties which it encounters in the course of its history. To take an example relating directly to the *Eglise Réformée* in which I was ordained: the Reformers were convinced on theological grounds that their rejection of the diocesan structure which distinguished a church from a parish—rejection not because of doctrinal stubbornness, but because the titular bishops of churches either would not hear of reform or seemed unconcerned about their church, giving it into the care of a suffragan—was not a rejection of the church structure required by the nature of the church, but merely of one *sociological* form which the structure can take. This conviction was due in large part to St. Jerome, whose hypothesis of the origin of the episcopate they had adopted, along with most of their contemporaries: according to him, the creation of the episcopate was a measure not of Messianic institution but of ecclesiastical law, a measure taken to strengthen the unity of the church by providing a structure for the presbyterate, itself recognised as the

original ministry of apostolic succession.

They were convinced that theologically it is not possible to draw a meaningful distinction between bishops and presbyters, since both are ministries of the word, the sacraments and the 'keys' (discipline and absolution). The distinction being purely sociological, it was therefore possible, in the view of the Reformers, to avoid interrupting the necessary apostolic succession, while rejecting the 'episcopal' form of the essential ministry, so as to transfer it to and practise it at the level of the parish rather than the diocese, i.e. at the presbyteral level. (It is interesting to note that the term chosen for him who has this ministry was 'pastor', cognate with 'episcopal', rather than 'presbyter' = priest.) Thus, theologically, the equivalent of the 'reformed' pastor is not the 'catholic' presbyter (who is sociologically his peer), but the 'catholic' bishop (who is sociologically his superior). I have gone into detail about this in my book: *Le saint ministère selon la conviction et la volonté des réformés du XVIIe siècle* [Neuchâtel, 1968], the fruit of thirteen years' research. This research has led me to distinguish the (variable) sociology of the church's structure from its (apostolic and so constant) theology. I am myself hesitant about following St. Jerome's way of presenting the origin of the episcopate. I must, however, say that my church—far from deliberately breaking with the current tradition, but rather basing its actions on belief in what St. Jerome and many other Fathers and Doctors affirmed—was convinced that it was upholding faithfully the ministry of apostolic succession instituted by Christ to gather together and edify his church until his return, since the succession of ordinations maintains the ministry of the Word, the sacraments and the 'keys'. It was also held that there was no reason to qualify or disqualify the church in and for which this ministry was exercised because of the sociological level at which it took place. This has had the following interesting and perhaps illuminating consequence for ecclesiology in general: in the *Eglise Réformée*, in Switzerland at least, the ordained ministry has been so reduced to a merely *pastoral* ministry that the relative status of the ministry of elders and deacons has become uncertain; indirectly, this provides proof that the faithfulness of a church depends not on these ministries, their ordination or the kind or degree of participation in the essential episcopal ministry that they have, but solely on the essential ministry.

This lengthy introduction was necessary to show how I approach the problem of the ordination of women to one of the traditional ministries of the church. Basically, and in principle, I stand by what I wrote in 'Est-il légitime de consacrer des femmes au ministère pastoral?' [*Verbum Caro*, 1963, a study reproduced in *Prophétisme sacramentel*, Neuchâtel, 1964]. Nevertheless, in view of subsequent literature I need to temper some arguments and strengthen others.

Three questions: women as bishops?

ATTEMPTING to transport myself in spirit to the Anglican situation, I see three questions which the Church of England has to face.

1. **Is it legitimate to ordain a woman to the episcopal ministry, i.e. to the ministry of apostolic succession which is essential to the church?** This is the question which faces you and which for us would be that of the ordination of women to the pastoral ministry. I start from the presupposition that the bishop is not a presbyter plus, but that he fulfils a ministry *sui generis* to which one must be specially ordained or consecrated in order to exercise it. In other words the difference between deacon, presbyter and bishop is of a different kind from that which distinguishes a bishop from an archbishop, a patriarch or the pope—a difference which (happily or not) exists within the hierarchy of the *same* episcopal ministry: the pope of Rome receives no higher degree of ordination to his ministry, if he is already ordained to the episcopate, than the archbishop of Canterbury, if he is already a bishop: both are *installed*, in all solemnity, to exercise their 'power of jurisdiction' in a new way.

Is it then legitimate to ordain a woman to the episcopal ministry? To this first question I answer in the negative. An affirmative reply would entail a twofold *theological* error, irrespective of the entirely different question whether such action would be politic or expedient.

The first error is ecclesiological, for it presupposes that the ministry is at bottom hardly more than a sociological measure necessary to the *bene esse* of the church, which, being a social body, needs officials. What would then prevent the recruitment of such officials by following the recruitment pattern of other social bodies? In a historical situation where officials for the other social bodies are recruited without the distinction between men and women being a deciding factor, if such a distinction is particularly unpopular with those who look forward rather than back, why should not the church adopt the same principles of selection as other social bodies, principles which ignore the natural distinction between men and women? I would go further: what, apart from an injurious attitude towards women, would prevent the opening of the most responsible tasks of the social body in question to women worthy and capable of them?

Theology and sociology

IT is clear that ecclesiology must involve sociological considerations. It is also clear that these considerations will be of particular importance in examining the application of doctrines of the ministry. The church is not, however, solely a social body: it is a mystery of salvation. The ministers are not merely officials of the church; they are witnesses and

bearers of the very presence of Christ, they have a sacramental and not merely a sociological basis. An attempt to solve the problem by adopting a solution in fundamental conformity to the present age (cf. Rom. 12: 2) would be an admission, contrary to unanimous ecclesiastical tradition, that the ministry of apostolic succession is based, essentially, on the sociological needs of the church, and that these needs are more important than Christ's institution of it.

The reply will be made that the ordination of a woman to the ministry of apostolic succession does not necessarily indicate the reduction of what is a mystery of salvation to pure sociology: without affecting the nature of this ministry one could confer it on women as well as men. The only difference would be the rejection of an outdated custom which says that there is a real distinction between men and women and that duties and rights should be withheld from women which have until now been the privilege of men alone. It is not impossible to make out a case on these lines, and this is why a rejection of the ordination of women to the essential ministry which is based solely on ecclesiastical considerations cannot suffice. Indeed, the objector will continue, since in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3: 28), it should be possible to confer this essential ministry on women as well as men without affecting its nature, particularly if society has changed its attitude on the role of women in society, and if one succeeds in showing that Jesus's not having chosen a woman as one of the twelve, or the church's not having replaced Judas by a woman, was due not to the lack of women able to fulfil the requirements (there must have been as many women as men able to do this!), but to prejudice or cautiousness, from which we have gradually freed ourselves by the light of the gospel. But *is it only a question of prejudice?* For me the question does not depend for its solution on sociological considerations but, in the last analysis, on the commitment of faith: human beings are not men and women by the accidental demands of reproduction, but are one or the other as part of their vocation, to the very depths of their being. Masculinity or femininity is a basic constituent of the human being, whether man or woman. This introduces the truly theological aspect of the problem: there are no grounds for believing that Jesus ceased to be Son by his resurrection. In this respect, I note that Paul in 1 Cor. 6: 12-20 relates sexual sins to the *resurrection* body. I note that it is not only for reasons of decency that the church has never considered turning homosexual relationships into marriage and giving them its blessing as being such. I note also the teaching on marriage in Ephesians 5: the writer states that there is between man and woman in marriage a relationship which ought to reflect that which unites Christ and the church—the man in Christ's position, the woman in that of the church. Christ and the church are not interchangeable. In short (and this seems to be a lesson from the history of heresies in the ancient church) one contradicts the doctrine of creation and with it biblical

anthropology if one does not respect the ontological nature of masculinity and femininity. The fact that males, in their pride and egoism, have been guilty of abusing the distinction, is no reason to reduce the distinction to anything less than a profound, inalienable characteristic of man or woman. Sexuality cannot be reduced to a reproductive mechanism; if it were, against the mainstream of recent works on marriage, one would be obliged to admit that the sole justification of marriage is to provide the normal framework for the ordered reproduction of the human race.

In short, if women as well as men can be ordained to the essential ministry, to the ministry by which Christ makes himself publicly present to the church and to the world, then by implication, on the theological level, in Christian anthropology the polarisation of human beings by sexuality is not a constitutive characteristic of man or woman. Perhaps one could sum up by saying that God's eternal Son was not made man rather than woman simply in order to bow to a cultural prejudice. There is urgent need to realise that the ordination of men rather than women to the essential ministry in which, ordinarily and publicly, Christ is present to the church and to the world, is not a privilege which denies a right to women. Ministry is never a right. It is always a grace, not only for the minister, but also for the church and the world.

I am the first to recognise that only those already persuaded will be convinced by this line of argument. But I would like those unconvinced to answer these objections to the ordination of women as bishops. They should tell us in what respect they are not 'conforming to this present age' by wanting to recruit for the church in the same way as for other bodies in society; they should give us their reasons for questioning the anthropology of Marcion or Montanus—and with it their doctrine of creation; they should say why they regard human sexuality merely as a means of reproduction or as a plaything which does not go to the very depth of one's being; they should state why Mary's child could just as well have been a girl as a boy; they should explain how to remove the quality of *representatio Christi* from the essential ministry of the church without making it something different.

Women in the dependant ministries?

2. Other ministers may share in the episcopal ministry: can women then share in it? First, note that, in accordance with New Testament teaching, the episcopal ministry is not the only ministry in the church, even if it is the only ministry essential to the church. It is a ministry in which the bearer may invite others to join, as Moses had others help him in a task which was too much for him alone (cf. Exod. 18: 13-26), as the twelve enlisted the help of the seven in order to concentrate on

the most important aspect of their ministry (Acts 6: 1-6), as Paul had Timothy, Titus, Silvanus etc. for fellow-workers. One of the best things in that fine third chapter of *Lumen gentium* adopted by Vatican II (if one puts brackets round its ponderous and frequent reference to the singularity of the ministry of the bishop of Rome) is the statement that the episcopal ministry is founded on the apostles' ministry, which it perpetuates, and that it is a ministry in which the other ministries which the church needs participate. Traditionally there are two such ministries: that of the presbyteral college and that of deacons. The question is this: may women be ordained either to the collegiate ministry of the presbyterate, or as deacons?

Over the centuries the participation of presbyters and deacons in the episcopal ministry has had various forms, proof that such participation is not bound to one rigid structure. Two examples: in the East it is traditional that a presbyter receives the right to confirm with the right to baptise, whereas in the West, traditionally, the bishop alone reserves the right to confirm; in the West the right of absolution is ordinarily part of the presbyteral ministry, whereas in the East, if I am informed correctly, this right is not so tightly linked with the presbyterate, since it can either not be conferred at the same time as presbyteral authority to preside at the eucharist, or can, exceptionally, be conferred on a 'staretz' or senior monk who is not a presbyter.

Note also, from the fourth century on, the growth of the system which, in order to avoid a piecemeal church, forbids the number of churches and so of bishops to equal the number of local congregations. This made small congregations *parishes* of the bishop's see, of the church. It entailed the dispersal of the college of presbyters and made their participation in most of the episcopal functions dependent upon the same relationship between presbyter and bishop as exists between the parish and the church. This system—roughly sketched—is rightly questioned at present as the *sole* system for the structure of the *local* church. Indeed, the participation of congregations in the life of the cathedral church can no longer be based solely on geographical factors in a society where social and residential stability and the fund of common interests are not so great as in a pre-industrial society. This is why in many places people demand that the church-parish relationship be reviewed, made more flexible and recast for the new situations of contemporary society. However, the abandonment of the geographical church-parish system as almost the only form of ecclesial participation would involve a serious review of the distribution of the participation of presbyters and deacons in the episcopal ministry; more diversity may grow up in the ways in which the service of presbyters and deacons is 'inserted' in their bishop's ministry; a presbyter will no longer be 'almost a bishop' because he heads what is 'almost a church', and a deacon will no longer be a man eager to become a presbyter. At the present time we have the chance—

similar to the opportunity in the fourth century, though different solutions will be needed—to rethink the way in which those other than bishops can be associated and integrated into the episcopal ministry.

Women as presbyters?

MAY women then be linked with the episcopal ministry by ordination as presbyters? Given that the sort of participation by presbyters in the episcopal ministry would be reviewed, would become less uniform and better adapted to the vocation and gifts of those fulfilling this ministry—given, in consequence, that the task of presbyter would no longer be to represent the bishop and, in him, Christ, at the head of a parish, and that the task would be determined specifically *ad personam* (and why not also *ad tempus*?) on the occasion of the ordination or the installation in new responsibilities, I can see no decisive theological reason to deny membership, by ordination, of the college of presbyters to women. I can, however, see two objections which must be taken seriously.

First, two of the traditional presbyteral tasks which are right in principle would probably not be included in a presbyterate in which women could be associated with the ministry of the bishop: the representation of the bishop, and in him of Christ, at the head of a parochial congregation (parishes will probably continue to exist for a long time alongside new forms of local church congregation), and the representation of the bishop and in him of Christ at the head of the eucharistic assembly (except perhaps in a female community). The tasks *ad personam* which would be given to women in the presbyterate would above all be the homiletic, catechetical and charitable responsibilities of the bishop. As a result, there would certainly be a sense of frustration among female presbyters, since they would not be candidates for a vacant episcopal see.

The second objection is that the tasks which would fall to female presbyters are those which have traditionally belonged to the diaconate. (I myself am very hesitant in subscribing to the idea that access to the ministry of the sacraments should be more closely guarded than to the ministry of the Word, but I see that tradition, even in the *Eglise Réformée*, has taken this line.) Consequently, it seems to me that it would be better to restore a diaconate which would not be simply a path to the presbyterate, but a ministry received as a grace in itself and for its own sake. What makes the church's acceptance of the vocations which the Lord had doubtless given to women a mockery is not the acceptance of women into the diaconate, but into a diaconate which is the *lowest* echelon in the hierarchy of ministries and which men rush to leave behind. If the diaconate could be once again a ministry of participation in the episcopate parallel to the presbyterate,

if its tasks and rights were put on a higher level, as a diaconate to which not only women but men would be ordained for life, I believe that, without leaving the bounds of authentic tradition, the church would have taken an important step towards the abolition of a discrimination which is insulting to women and ungrateful towards God.

I would thus answer the second question in the affirmative, but with a marked preference for the ordination of women to a recast diaconate rather than to the presbyterate (even recast).

Ecumenically expedient?

3. The third question is this: is it wise to settle the question of the ordination of women in the present ecumenical climate?

Clearly the answer is yes if it is ordination to a diaconate enjoying the respect which the church owes to God's graces. But if (as one must fear) the problem presents itself in terms of the entry of women into the priesthood, if the question of the ordination of women to the episcopal ministry is excluded in principle from the discussion, if the parish structure of the church is barely examined, if the diaconate does not rediscover its autonomy over against the presbyterate—in short, if it is simply a question of having, in the traditional way, female priests alongside male priests—are you to proceed?

If you do, you will strengthen the vital contact with churches ecclesologically 'left' of the Church of England and you will no doubt facilitate discussions on organic union with them. If you permit me to be completely frank about a church which I love, this contact is indispensable if you are to avoid a disturbing ecclesial anemia. I know only too well how ecclesologically equivocal some 'evangelical' Christianity is. But it does have one major point in its favour: it always points to Jesus Christ, dead and risen, and we all continually need to come back there. . . .

If you do not proceed, you will strengthen the vital contact with churches ecclesologically further to the 'right' than the Church of England. (By churches 'to the right' or 'to the left' I do not so much mean church people, for whom dividing lines between left and right are no longer denominational, I mean rather their leaders and representatives on whom, whether one likes it or not, the real decisions depend.) Is this contact, in the present situation, as important to you as the contact on your left? Indubitably so, if this contact is with the Roman Catholicism which breathes the clear air of Vatican II. I would be less certain if this contact is with the Roman Catholicism which is carried away by every new wind of doctrine or with the Roman Catholicism which mourns the time when Trent and Vatican I reigned unchallenged. Regretfully, I would be less certain, too, if this contact were with Eastern Orthodoxy, which presents itself, unfortunately, so

much more willingly as that which we ought to desire to be, than as a partner in a common return to our sources in the ecclesial consciousness of the Fathers.

If a truly universal council were around the corner, I would say no to the third question which your church faces. It would be for the council to study in depth this problem and to find a solution acceptable to all.

Four considerations

BUT since this council is not in the offing, I would like to think that your church will follow these four pieces of advice:

1. Whatever solution is adopted, regard it as a specifically denominational solution rather than as a universal one, and so leave the way open for a re-examination of the problem and its solution when a truly universal council is held.

2. Do not let the ministry to which women are ordained be that of bishop: let it not be the ministry which traditionally (as I see it, rightly) is constitutive of the ecclesiality of a church, because constitutive of the church itself: let it be one of the two other ministries which participate in the episcopate.

3. Upgrade the diaconal ministry sufficiently to allow for women who have the calling to serve God by proclaiming the gospel to the world and edifying the church, to be received not suspiciously and meanly, but respectfully and generously. In other words, abandon the idea that the diaconate is above all a ministry which opens the way to the presbyterate, and insist on the theological identity between the diaconal ministry of men and that of women.

4. If, however, the ordination of women to the ministry of presbyter seems the only equitable solution, make sure first that it is clearly understood that the presbyteral ministry is a ministry of participation in the episcopal ministry, and that the latter is apostolic rather than sacerdotal in nature. In this way, remove from the start the link between the presbyterate and the priesthood, a link which has given rise to so many misunderstandings in the church. Make it clear that the priestly aspect which characterises every authentic ministry is secondary, derived, illustrative, and that it is not this priestliness which makes the ministry constitutive of the church, but rather its insertion (directly, in the case of the bishop's ministry, indirectly, in the cases of the ministries of presbyters and deacons) in the apostolic ministry instituted by Christ.