



OLD CATHOLIC - ORTHODOX CONSULTATION

COMMON CONSIDERATIONS ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

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Common Considerations

Since the time in which the Old Catholic churches were constituted in the 1870s, the Orthodox and the Old Catholic churches have been conducting conversations. This led to an official theological dialogue (1975-1987) that produced a set of Agreed Statements. They witness to an agreement of both churches on the essentials of faith on the basis of the common tradition of the ancient church. One question that was touched upon only briefly at the time, but which since then has gained increasing contemporary relevance and significance as a result of social developments, is the question of the ordination of women: "Except for the as yet not fully understood arrangement with regard to deaconesses, the undivided church did not permit the ordination of women" (Agreed Statements, 5/7).¹

This situation led to a consultation of Old Catholic and Orthodox theologians, both women and men, who with the blessing of His Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch and His Grace the Archbishop of Utrecht, were commissioned to study the question of the position of women in the church and the ordination of women as an ecumenical issue.

The subject matter was presented and discussed on the basis of papers devoted to biblical exegesis, patristics, church history, systematic theology, ecclesiology, history of civilizations, sociology, and psychology.

The conversations took place in an atmosphere of mutual trust, openness, and honesty to oneself and to the others. It was a very pleasant experience that the participants achieved, with a large measure of agreement, a shared evaluation of the general issue.

The group came to the following considerations:

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

Thus we observe that today the churches justly emphasize the dignity of the laity and especially of women, and that they appreciate the fact that these people occupy an appropriate place in the mission of the church. This corresponds with the fact that the various tasks in the church are anchored in their being related to one another as members in the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12).

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

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

¹ The German term *Diakonin* presents a particular problem of translation, as to whether to render it as "deaconess" or as "(woman) deacon," terms that carry rather different connotations in English. Both terms are used in the English-language version of the Rhodes Symposium (Gennadios Limouris [ed.], *The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women: Inter-Orthodox Symposium, Rhodes, Greece, 30th October 7th November, 1988* [Katerini: Tertios, 1992]). Here I follow an earlier official translation. Elsewhere in this volume, I generally prefer "deacon" (or where necessary, "woman deacon") as this almost invariably strikes me as being truer to the intentions of the authors (DR).

united with God has been saved. It is human nature, common to men and women, that has been assumed by our Lord.

With regard to the preservation of communion in each church respectively, and to the unity we seek, dogmatic-theological arguments—however important they may be—are not of sole importance when dealing with this question. So-called non-theological factors determining the pastoral action of the churches in each place also play a role. This and the responsibility of each local church for the communion of the churches also need to be borne in mind when local churches are making decisions.

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