

13/6: Women as Leaders – Afternoon: Can women be spiritual leaders today?

- Today there are new opportunities for women. Many Protestant faiths have accorded priestly roles to women: they can administer sacraments, give mass, have an ecclesiastical career.
- Why is this the case? Mysticism has nothing to do with it, since there is less of it. And why within Catholicism the old prohibition is still in place (and even reinforced by Ratzinger who equated the support of women priests to heresy and pedophilia)?
- The point is that the Protestant church is less sacred. Already Luther had affirmed that the Church cannot give salvation, and we are saved through Christ only. According to Luther the man cannot do anything to manipulate God's will, who has already decided whether to save us or not. The sacraments, therefore, are reduced in number (only baptism and eucharist) and they not so powerful, as they cannot cancel the sins and they are more like a sign of our faith in God. The priest, therefore is a more modest figure, compared to that of the Catholic church. His role is more about reading the word of God and administering the human response to God's gift. Indeed Luther had even spoken of "universal priesthood".
- Catholicism, by contrast, sees sacramental rituals as channeling God's power, which can magically transform reality (our sinful condition, our religious status, etc.). The Church, on the other hand still believes that parts of the body of people who are considered holy can transmit magic power, protect people, cure from diseases, etc.
- Given these differences it can be understood why women are priest in protestantism and not in catholicism: where the sacred is not so strong, the supposed weakness and impurity of women is not so much of a problem. By contrast it remains a problem where the ritual is supposed to transmit the power of God.
- However, as historian I can predict that eventually also within catholicism women will be made priests. I believe this for two reasons:

- Our society has become less sacred, politics is more like a profession, not the worldly representation of God's power. Indeed women now can participate to all spheres of society. The same is happening with religion in general, which is more about universal peace, charity rather than about removing magically the sins of people or mediating supernatural forces.
- Furthermore, women are less seen in the misogynistic terms that we discussed. Since the 1960s, with feminism, it has become accepted that women are not inferior and irrational beings, they are not seen on the side of nature, polluting, powerful and dangerous. In this way they are no longer incompatible with cultural institutions of power.
- Third, there is an objective crisis of vocations, especially male vocations.
- For all these reasons (and especially where there are not enough men) in many places the church already uses women to undertake several priestly roles. Women may now be 'temporarily deputed' to be readers, Mass servers, cantors, preachers, leaders of prayer services, ministers of baptism and of holy communion. It is true that the ban on ordination remains in place, but perhaps it will change.

Now, let's see how catholic feminist deal with the problem of women's ordination. Today many Catholic women ask for the right to access priesthood. There are 7 reasons: 1. Men and women are equal in baptism and both become "another Christ"; 2. At the Last Supper Jesus empowered both women and men. Both can be ordained to preside at the Eucharist; 3. The Church barred women from priesthood because of cultural prejudices, especially because they were considered less than men in every respect: physically, intellectually and emotionally; 4. In the early Christianity women have been deacon; 5. Latent tradition: Mary is often described (as in Luke 2, 22-35) as a "sacrificial priest" (because she offered Jesus as a sacrifice at the Presentation in the Temple); 6. The wider Church accepts women priests: after serious study and prayer other Christian Churches now ordain women as priests; 7. Many women feel they are called to the priesthood in the Catholic Church; they are equally competent, motivated and worthy as male candidates for the priesthood.

Furthermore, there is another issue. Our conception of God will always be imperfect but the logic of the Incarnation suggests that it should be informed by contemporary thought. For example, the notion of a hierarchical church closed in itself and intent on ritual at the expense of issues of justice and love is anachronistic; and the emphasis on dogma does not go very well with a world where science is able to explain the creation and many mysteries. The issue of women priests should be also considered within this framework: there is no reason for sticking to an ancient prohibition.

However there are also counter-arguments, I think, which have obviously nothing to do with the fact that women are not apt for priesthood. For example, I found this beautiful definition which contrasts priesthood and female tradition: “By following priesthood, is there not a danger that also women will forget about a female tradition which does not see Authority as obedience which refuses dialogue, and defend fixed and dogmatic positions? This concept of priestly authority does not witness very convincingly to the presence of God who came amongst us as one whose power appeared as powerlessness and whose wisdom as foolishness. Indeed, it is not easy to see the present institutional Church as driven by ‘the irresistible pathos [of God] working for the oppressed and humiliated, moving them towards liberation.’”

Furthermore, aren't there arguments to say that Christ did not really want a church in the way it evolved? Christ talks about the Kingdom of God, which he describes in terms of inner conversion and of afterlife. What was the role of the priest according to Christ?

As we have seen Angela instead of advocating priestly roles to women, she gave a limited power to institutional roles, as many women did. Would it be possible to follow this route today?

Finally, is there an alternative priesthood that women propose?

What are your thoughts on these issues?

