

The Glory of motherhood and the question of women priests

THIS article will address the question of why the Catholic Church ordains only men to the priesthood. Furthermore, it will outline the irreplaceable complementary role of women in the Church.

The wonder and glory of motherhood – both spiritual and physical – and childbirth has been largely denigrated and reduced to an inconvenience, since many women now work full-time. Yet as bearers of physical life, women reflect in the most acute sense the creation of the world by God at the beginning of time. A woman brings forth new life into the world and shares in her feminine identity the vocation of the blessed virgin Mary. The mother of God and the mother of the Church is the supreme archetype of feminine religious expression. Only when sight of this glorious truth is lost does confusion of gender roles arise. Yet amid the cries of ‘equality’ and ‘reform’, the Catholic Church adheres to a tradition as old as Christianity itself. Why does the ordination of women as priests or deacons remain impossible?

Perhaps the weakest argument stems from sacred scripture, where St Paul states: ‘I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet’ (1 Timothy 2:12). Such a decree can be dismissed as on socio-historical grounds as deeply circumstantial and consistent with its first-century context. Yet Paul is identifying the common thread throughout all scripture that men and women, endowed with equal dignity, are assigned distinct yet complementary roles, in the family and in the church. Paul elaborates on this in his letter to the Corinthians, where he reminds us that ‘the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God’ (1 Corinthians 11:3). To invert this divine order by ordaining women would be to upset the social framework established by God himself.

Beyond scripture, the Magisterium (the teaching authority of the Catholic Church) has consistently upheld the male-only priesthood as a matter of divine law. This was reaffirmed with great clarity by Pope St John Paul II in 1994 when he declared, with the authority of centuries of unbroken tradition, that ‘the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women’. John Paul II’s declaration echoed the 16th century Council of Trent, which held that the sacraments, including Holy Orders, were instituted by Christ and could not be altered by human whim. The Church stewards the teachings entrusted to her as the enduring institution and eternal vessel not beholden to the changing social sensibility and whims of popular opinion.

To return to the Blessed Virgin, perhaps the strongest argument stems from the Protestant Reformation. When veneration of Mary was discarded, so too her role as the supreme archetype and role model for women was lost. Lacking female role-models, Protestant women experienced a crisis of gender identity manifest in the desire to imitate men. This loss of the complementarian aspect of gender identity led to increased competition and the desire to take on male leadership roles. The argument for women priests is thus rooted not in theology but in a misguided notion of egalitarianism that equates sameness with equality.

Equal in the eyes of God – equal in dignity, equal in worth – but equality cannot be conflated with interchangeability. To relegate men and women thus fundamentally discards the divine origin of male and female constitution. To return to the glory and wonder of childbirth, a man cannot be a mother any more than a woman can be a father. Each has a distinct, God-given role that complements the other for the edification of the whole as part of a prescribed moral order.