

# WOMEN, THE VATICAN, AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE: AN ECUMENICAL PROCESS<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*The prevailing position against women's ordination to the ministerial priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church presents itself as an ongoing ecumenical dilemma within and beyond its ecclesial borders. This paper is critical of current attempts at defending or opposing the Vatican ban for different reasons as these do not contribute constructively to unlocking the deadlock. Instead, this paper recommends that the Vatican engages in a strategic process with its dissenters and the broader Christian communion as a point of departure towards a more promising way forward.*

**Key Words:** Priesthood, Vatican, Women ordination

## **Introduction**

Here I wish to offer a brief response to the Pope's 1995 invitation on the way in which the papacy exercises its ministry of teaching and governance, in relation to its leadership around the issue of differing convictions of women's admission to the ministerial priesthood.<sup>2</sup>

In his keynote address at a major ecumenical conference in London on 17 May 2003, the president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Walter Kasper, noted that while the main obstacles to Christian unity can indeed be overcome, women's ordination remains an insuperable obstacle (Kasper 2003:29). In a later interview with a leading Roman Catholic ecumenical publication *The Tablet*, Kasper confessed: "...I do not see how to overcome this problem at the moment" (2003:29). Then, on being challenged as to why his church was not exploring the theology surrounding women's ordination, the cardinal pointed out that Pope John Paul II had pronounced against the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood. When asked if he was in favour of further exploration of the matter, Kasper remarked: "All things you have to explore, of

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<sup>1</sup> An adapted version of a paper delivered at the congress of the Theological Society of Southern Africa on "Gender and Theology in Africa" held at the University of Pretoria on 19 June 2003, as well as a follow-up of a previous article in *Scriptura* – "Women, the Vatican, and Hope for the Future: An Ecumenical Quagmire". I am particularly grateful for the constructive responses to the presented paper by Nico Koopman and Susan Rakocsy.

<sup>2</sup> By seeking to address papal leadership concerns I do not seek to imply that no concerns can be levelled against other players in the broader Roman Catholic and/or the wider ecumenical sphere. My focus here relates to the specific scope of this paper, but especially because of the pervasive concerns within and beyond the Roman Catholic Church setting vis-à-vis the manner of the exercise of the papacy.

course, but I do not see how our Church can change in this way. I must be honest, I do not see it. In practice, it would lead to schism in our own Church” (2003:29).<sup>3</sup>

### Discerning a strategic breakthrough

*‘I do not see how to overcome this problem at the moment.’*

It is no secret that the formal ecumenical movement has had to endure the overwhelming experience of stuckness and stagnation in recent decades.<sup>4</sup> It is not inaccurate, therefore, to refer to the state of the debate around the question of women’s ordination as characterised by stuckness.<sup>5</sup> Here is a term some strategic thinkers employ to refer to the lack of institutional progress or intense difficulty of moving forward in a particular situation in a social institution or organisation. I am suggesting that there is great insight to be gained from drawing from the wells of other disciplines, such as the strategic management arena,<sup>6</sup> in assisting us as ecumenical thinkers to work towards progress in our noble attempts at deeper communion.<sup>7</sup> In the matter of women’s non-admission to the ministerial priesthood, the notion of stuckness is helpful for gaining entry into the anatomy of the problem and its unavoidable intricacies.

According to Kenneth Halstead (1998), stuckness raises awareness of the ways in which we attempt to solve the variety of problems with which life confronts us. The following symptoms are identified as characteristic of stuck churches: Conflict and scapegoating that continuously repeats itself, continual comparisons to the way things used to be and attempts to recapture the past, clinging to traditions and methods that no longer work, and so forth.

<sup>3</sup> I suggest that Cardinal Kasper’s remarks not be trivialised or overlooked. He is a leading Roman Catholic theologian and has been the president of the Vatican’s ecumenical office, who is greatly respected especially by the ecumenical community. His words hold particular significance as we look ahead to the future of Rome and the issue of women’s ordination. In John Allen’s, *Conclave: The Politics, Personalities, and Process of the Next Papal Election* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), the author singles out “Women and the Laity” as one of five key issues that will feature prominently in papal elections (63-68) and discusses where those of the so-called ‘Reform party’ would position themselves in relation to the question of women’s ordination (151-57), naming Kasper as a good fit for this category of cardinals (167). According to Allen, what Kasper’s ‘type’ could assure the churches of in the future would be healthy debate (152): “None openly support the ordination of women as Catholic priests.... But they are by instinct men who believe debate is a healthy thing, and hence would tend to allow discussion on these issues to unfold in the church, rather than call it to a halt.”

<sup>4</sup> For a resourceful analysis of this state of affairs, see Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: WCC, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Respected Roman Catholic ecumenist, JMR Tillard’s remarks aptly reveal this stuckness at present: “Since we cannot affirm that the Catholic Church will accept the validity of Eucharist and ordination celebrated by a female minister, and since we cannot affirm that the Anglican communion *as such* will reverse the synodical decision to ordain women, one may evidently fear that there is a dead-end, a wall, a final stop we shall never cross, never bypass.” See his article “Roman Catholics and Anglicans: Is There a Future for Ecumenism?” in *One in Christ* (Vol. XXXII, No. 2, 1996), 108. See also Michael Attridge, “Reflections on Contemporary Anglican-Roman Catholic Relations: Where do we go from here?” in *One in Christ* (Vol. XXXIV, No.3, 1998), 214-217 (212-219).

<sup>6</sup> I am particularly grateful for the strategic thinking insights available through the “Church and Community Facilitation Network” (CFN) by David Newby at a facilitation seminar, 24-27 March 2003.

<sup>7</sup> This is precisely what the ecumenist Paul Avis has encouraged ecumenical theologians to pursue. See his article, “Seeking Unity by Stages: New Paths in Ecumenical Method” in *One in Christ*, Vol. XXXVI No. 1 (2000), 7-24. Here he pleads for an ecumenical theology that must be, *inter alia*, “credible” by which he means “that visions of unity must be related to what disciplines other than theology can tell us about the nature of communities and their identity, about tradition and the transmission of values and beliefs, and about authority, power and hierarchy” (10). An exemplary example of this approach is found in his prior work, *Authority, Leadership and Conflict in the Church* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1992), in which he makes a good attempt at setting up “a dialogue between biblical and theological views of authority, on the one hand, and what the social sciences and management studies can teach us on the other” (Preface).

When faced with challenges such organisations may, therefore, confront the problem in such ways as determining who is to blame, or shaming people into action, or creating more elaborate structure. No doubt these responses are carried out as well-intentioned solutions but, to put it more succinctly, Halstead would say that the (attempted) solution to an institution's challenges could often become the actual problem.

In providing a basic critique of the papacy in its handling of the question of women's ordination, Halstead's remarks are quite helpful. There is something to be said about the precise manner in which the papacy has attempted to make progress on the issue of women's ordination. On the one hand, the good intentions of the Vatican have presented a position in Roman Catholic teaching that is designed to provide clarity on an issue of great relevancy and to protect and preserve the communion in unity and truth in the face of differing opinions on different issues in the church and society. The Bishop of Rome has an immense responsibility in fulfilling a critical role as the visible principle of this unity and faithful guardian of the gospel tradition.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, the Vatican releases encyclicals, apostolic letters, homilies, speeches, and even rules of canon law, all as well-intentioned solutions to problems threatening the fabric of Roman Catholic faith and life.

However, in reality these well-intentioned solutions do not necessarily accomplish their objectives. These have been employed to apportion blame, to shame people into action, to create more intricate structures asserting power and authority in the church, to quell the freedom of expression to agree or disagree with official teaching, but all at the expense of resolving the conflict. To some extent the Vatican must take responsibility for its well-intentioned solutions that ultimately contributes to the current impasse. What emerged in the wake of the decision by the U.S. Episcopalians to ordain women in the 1970s, matched by the internal advocacy efforts for women's ordination, is that these well-intended solutions became an obstacle in itself. The Vatican unleashed what became a series of well intended, albeit hard-hitting, pronouncements and documents to preserve faithful assent to the church's doctrine of the ordained ministry,<sup>9</sup> but leaving numerous people alienated and hurt, frustrated and concerned, with the problem not a closed issue by any means.

I suggest that as a starting point, and in the much evident spirit of compassion, sensitivity, and forgiveness characterising John Paul II, the Pope should work towards an acknowledgement of some responsibility before the dissenting community, that the way in which the Vatican has exercised its pastoral ministry and leadership has sometimes contributed to the alienation and disillusionment that many women and men endure around the issue of women's ordination.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> I am not convinced, incidentally, by those non-Catholics, former-Catholics, or current Catholics who assume that the Roman Catholic Church is anti-women, or not concerned with issues affecting women, or critical of women in positions of leadership and decision-making. What the church has been dogmatic about is its position on women's ordination specifically, which I will hopefully prove has specific factors underlying this dilemma, as opposed to assuming that the church is opposed to women in leadership as a general rule. As a case in point, see Paul Hofmann, *The Vatican's Women* (St. Martin's, 2002/2003).

<sup>9</sup> Halstead has these well-intended solutions in mind that once worked in the past but now become the source and generator of stuckness when he writes, "The seeds of our stuckness are hidden in our past successes." Cited in CFN facilitation course material (unpublished).

<sup>10</sup> I am not naïve to expect the Vatican to reverse the ban at this stage (whether or not it will ever be reversed is another discussion!), so I am not expecting the Pope to invalidate the teaching of the church at this point, but rather to admit shortcomings in the way the church authorities have handled the issue itself and those concerned. In the light of Pope John Paul II's record of apologising to Anglicans and Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and even women in general, asking forgiveness in this case is not unfathomable. See Luigi Accattoli's insightful book, *When a Pope Asks Forgiveness: The Mea Culpa's of John Paul II* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1998). Accattoli's book contains a collection of ninety-four quotations of John Paul II admitting the

Even though the Pope cannot be expected to reverse the church's position on women's ordination in the near future, at the very least he could repeat his words of regret and pardon in earlier statements, which should now be related particularly to the realm of not handling the dissenting community in the most gospel-like manner. Referring to women in the time of Jesus, John Paul II noted:

In his time women were weighed down by an inherited mentality in which they were deeply discriminated. The Lord's attitude was a "consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 15)....

In the footprints of her divine Founder, the Church becomes the convinced bearer of this message. If down the centuries some of her children have at times not lived it with the same consistency, this is a reason for deep regret. The Gospel message about women, however, has lost none of its timeliness (Sunday Angelus, June 25, 1995).<sup>11</sup>

Certainly there are shortcomings on both sides. Many dissenters have acted far from Christ-like around this issue of disagreement. With the Pope taking the lead, his humble and gracious model would hopefully cultivate a new era in the church for relating to those who differ on issues that are most dear to us. Today in the church there are many people in pain; the Pope should assume his place as a pastor of the care of souls at this time. I am confident that this starting point would go a long way in facilitating a pathway out of stuckness around the issue of women's ordination, even though the precise solutions are still somewhat veiled.

*'All things you must explore...'*

It behoves the Pope, as spiritual and ecumenical leader *par excellence*, to seek a contribution out of stuckness and towards progress, rather than his own style of ministry becoming a stumbling block in itself for the faithful and the ecumenical community. Halstead talks about the role of leadership amidst stuckness as "freeing the flow" (i.e. removing blocks) and "fanning the flame" (i.e. unleashing bound-up energy and health).<sup>12</sup> I suggest that the leadership of the Pope would find great reception amongst the Roman Catholic faithful as well as the wider ecumenical movement if these two metaphors were more visible, with the following papal initiatives as some examples of a practical leadership in this regard:

- To reopen discussion on issues such as women's ordination, especially if they do not bear the status of divinely revealed doctrines.<sup>13</sup> Labelling the exclusively male priesthood as a closed issue does not lead to consensus in the church or resolve the conflict.<sup>14</sup>

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past faults of the church or asking pardon – and there are certainly more to add! Of special relevancy to this paper is the chapter on women (105-114).

<sup>11</sup> See Accattoli, 108-09.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in CFN facilitation course material (unpublished).

<sup>13</sup> In similar fashion to the Roman Catholic's 'hierarchy of truths', I tend to attempt a distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' beliefs. In my understanding, the former refers to those non-negotiable tenets of the Christian faith, such as the Incarnation or the divinity of Christ; for Roman Catholics these would be those divinely revealed truths. The latter refers to those negotiable beliefs around which we value the freedom to agree to disagree on the basis that these do not find consensus in our minds yet, and these do not lie at the heart of the Christian faith; for Roman Catholics these would be lower in rank of importance in the ordering of their doctrines. I would contend that the issue of women's ordination is of grave importance, although I remain unconvinced how the exclusion of women to the ministerial priesthood could be interpreted as a virtually primary point of belief.

<sup>14</sup> The accusation that John Paul II has stifled those within the church who disagree with him is not unheard of in the current dilemma. An anonymous source offered insight into the Pontiff's thinking: "Part of the problem is

On the contrary, it generates feelings of trivialisation, marginalisation, helplessness, hurt, and alienation. These emotions and dispositions should not be overlooked by the Pope.<sup>15</sup>

- To initiate a reflective process in which people on all sides are free to express their feelings, tell their stories, and to share their fears as well as their hopes. This is a major part of strategic leadership, since the primary emphasis in our ecumenical and ecclesial deadlocks is not really about structures as it is about relationships.<sup>16</sup> The value and dignity of all people, including women and including those who dissent, should be affirmed by the Vatican in a new and refreshing way.
- To assist the church as a theological mentor and spiritual director. It would be of great value for the Pontiff to assist the faithful in understanding their stuckness in theological terms; for example, to discern how the Spirit of God is present and active in situations where God's people experience stuckness? In other words, what is God doing in their midst even as they struggle together? Such reflections emerge from an environment of grace, rather than self-righteousness, pride, or defensiveness.
- To extend his consultation to the ecumenical leaders of the Roman Catholic and Reformation churches in seeking a more effective way forward. This does not need to imply that the Pope is watering down the tradition of the church, but that open communication and collaboration are all-important core values in his responsibility as chief pastor of the church. Already there is great symbolic and real value in his relationship with the Archbishop of Canterbury, as well as other denominational leaders, which could provide great resourcefulness in the Pope understanding the fears and hopes of ordinary believers on both sides of the fence when it comes to the question of women's ordination.
- To model a more credible way of relating to 'the other'. Conflict is painful and complex for all involved, but it is even more stressful when it becomes destructive. There is validity in all sides reflecting on their particular styles of conflict around the issue of women's ordination. For the Vatican, for instance, the conflict style has usually been an aggressive compelling or forcing, blended with a good measure of persuasion, which surfaces *inter alia* in the many documents, penalties, and general tone against any dissenters. Clearly it is limited in its strategic effectiveness, let alone its relational impact. I would encourage the Papal office to explore alternative styles of conflict that

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also his strength: He grew up in Poland where the church was persecuted by the Nazis and then by communism. The church was always under attack, and he developed a siege mentality. He has never really lived in a pluralistic, democratic society." "So even after the fall of communism, the model of the church is still one that is under siege. But now it's by secularism, critics in the church, consumerism or relativism. And he responds with this kind of siege mentality, where the church is at war over these issues. And when you're at war, you don't have democracy. You don't debate what you're going to do." In John Christensen, "John Paul II: Conscience of the world", at the website of CNN.com, <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1999/pope/legacy/>

<sup>15</sup> For example, a reader, Moya St Leger in a letter to the editor, had this to say: "There is a growing clamour of Catholic women around the world to have their opinions on the matter of women's ordination taken seriously by the Vatican. ... Women's efforts are in vain. At no point has the Vatican given any indication that it is prepared to consider the years of meticulous research and the mountain of historical evidence now available which would justify the readmission of women to the ordained diaconate. ... energy of women is being wasted on this lost cause. It is now over ten years since this realisation caused me to give up researching and writing about women and the diaconate. I have neither seen nor heard anything since which would provide grounds for me to reconsider this decision." See "Women unheard" in *The Tablet* (11 January 2003), 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> This finds congruency with what Konrad Raiser discerned as part of the new paradigm in ecumenism, "an approach taking relationships as its starting point, rather than structures or processes with specific goals" (79).

could feature more profitably and respectfully in relating to those who disagree with the official teaching of the church, such as collaboration or supporting.<sup>17</sup>

*'I must be honest, I do not see it. In practice, it would lead to schism in our own Church.'*

The problem of women's ordination in the Roman Catholic setting and within the ecumenical environment is of great complexity. As such it remains an elusive issue.<sup>18</sup> It cannot be treated as a linear process, i.e. a process in which we identify the problem, develop a solution, and then implement it. This may work well when one is discussing how to build something; the problem is simple. Gilbert Rendle (1998) talks about change in the context of church, and suggests there are fundamental differences between linear and chaotic change processes. In linear change the problem is clear and not complex, there is a low level of conflict, so the approach would thus be straightforward. In chaotic change, however, the problem is less clear with few, if any, obvious solutions, and the problem is complex with disagreement to the extent that a solution might not be readily available.

On the question of women's ordination, it is clearly apparent that we are dealing here with the prospect of chaotic change. What this cautions against, therefore, and I am thinking especially of those of us in the non-Roman Catholic traditions who have already embraced women as church leaders, is that the matter of change vis-à-vis women's ordination strikes different people differently. Some will resist change, others will be open to change, and still others will be ambivalent about it.

One of the key issues to raise here for the ecumenical churches, as well as for the advocates within the Roman Catholic Church, is to remain cognisant of the fact that we are dealing with people, not structures, and that each one is at a different place on the issue. It requires us, therefore, to work closely with the process by allowing the process to take its time and to respect the different stations at which people are. Changes often do not come about or do not come about in the right way because we focus on the changes itself but fail to pay attention to the transitions people must make to accommodate the changes (cf. Rendle 1998:107).

In the light of this, therefore, I can appreciate the burden confronting the church on this issue; to change this teaching would raise major questions about the authority and reliability of the Pope, about the validity of past and present teaching, as well as present the church with the prospect of a schism, perhaps not unlike that of the sixteenth-century split.<sup>19</sup> As one of the first steps, then, it may require from us all a renewed commitment to

<sup>17</sup> Speed Leas provides a brief but resourceful and insightful analysis of conflict, along with a "Conflict Inventory Tool", which is extremely helpful for any person or group seeking to improve their response to conflict situations. See his *Discover Your Conflict Management Style* (Washington: The Alban Institute, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Outgoing Archbishop George Carey stated in 2002: "The ordination of women is a big problem to Roman Catholics, and that probably means that for a time we cannot speculate about what kind of Church it will be." See Russell Twisk, "Carey's tough innings" in *The Tablet* (19 October 2002), 9. In an interview with John Allen, Jr. in July 2002, USA Talk Today asked the widely respected Vatican journalist the following question: "Do you think the church will change its stance on the role of women in the priesthood, even though it has firmly declared, several times, that women will never be priests?" Allen's reply was: "Certainly not anytime soon. Anyone counting on rapid change on this issue under a new Pope, I suspect, will be disappointed." See "The politics of papal elections: John Allen, Jr." at <http://cgi1.usatoday.com/mchat/20020711001/tscript.htm>

<sup>19</sup> To better understand the nature of a schism in Roman Catholicism, see François Jankowiak, "Schism" in Philippe Levillain (ed.), *The Papacy: An Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3 (Independence: Routledge, 2001), 1393-98.

respect people in the process, including the Pope and the curia. After all, Rome wasn't built in a day!

### **Concluding Remarks**

The question of women's admission to the ministerial priesthood will continue to be debated and advocated within and beyond the Roman Catholic Church, whether the Vatican likes it or not, whether the Vatican knows it or not.<sup>20</sup> It is an issue that strikes at the very heart of the doctrines of ministry, humanity, mission, and ecumenism.

My intention was to reflect on these aspects with great sensitivity and respect. The paper provides a brief critique of the Papacy in the manner in which it exercises its ministry on behalf of the church, with the issue of women's ordination foremost in mind. It is my hope that the few basic practical initiatives outlined could be explored by others on the ecumenical sojourn, but especially that in due course we will witness a more reformed papacy in the areas of dissent, communication, and tolerance. My main contention, therefore, is with the nature of the Pope's exercise of ministry, which I with all due respect believe has not helped the problem. To the extent that some small steps are taken in these areas, I would argue that there is something to hope for as we continue the work of overcoming the major church-dividing issues in our time.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For the foremost advocacy project on a worldwide scope for women's ordination in the Roman Catholic Church, see [www.womenpriests.org](http://www.womenpriests.org)

<sup>21</sup> I think there is something to be said about the eight roles of ecumenical leaders outlined by Rembert G. Weakland in his article "The Challenge of Church Leadership in an Ecumenical and Pluralistic Age" in *One in Christ*, Vol. XXXVI No. 2 (2000), 101-113: 1) To maintain and strengthen trust among all the Christian bodies; 2) To continue to find new symbols of reunion; 3) To become better Christians; 4) To become more spiritual in our approach to faith; 5) To outline the boundaries or limits of our participation; 6) To be ready to suffer more; 7) To learn to listen more and to try less and less to control everything.