



The following paper is one of a series written by members of WATCH (Women and the Church) in response to proposals contained in the Report of the Women Bishops Legislative Drafting Group (GS 1685, April 2008) and the Draft Bishops and Priests (Consecration and Ordination of Women) Measure (GS 1708, December 2008).

The papers focus on the proposals, some of which imply an underlying concept of taint with regard to women priests and bishops, and others which, if passed, would further erode the unity and damage the historic episcopacy of the Church of England.

The Consecration of Women and the Unity of the Church

by Revd Mark Bennet

These notes derive from an attempt to understand the ecclesiological fault-lines between those in favour of the consecration of women as bishops in the Church of England and those who are opposed. My concern is that, in seeking to be generous to those who are opposed, we will inadvertently build so complete a wall between us that we will hasten a separation rather than fostering such communion as we are able to share.

Just to be clear, I am unambiguously in favour of women becoming bishops, and have been since wrestling with the Biblical texts on the leadership of God's people during a week's silent retreat many years ago.

Concerns arise for me from the impression sometimes created that a significant proportion of those opposed see themselves as more closely linked with the Roman Catholic Church than with me as a fellow Anglican priest. My own links with Roman Catholicism have included the generous welcome I have received from Roman Catholic nuns, and here in Great Parndon where our ecumenical partnership shares a building where we worship, and much more in our common life. The fellowship we share has not been broken or diminished because some of the priests in the parish are women, nor because we are also joined with the Methodist Church (which has no bishops) and the United Reformed Church. There are things we cannot do together – but we do have a picture of the Pope in our vestry, and we work hard to share as fully as we can.

Another concern I have is about the sacramental language which is becoming more commonly used. 'Sacramental Assurance' is a term which appears in none of the classic Church of England formularies, and it is not quite clear what it means. Our sacramental confidence is asserted in Article 26, and relies on the generosity of God's grace to complete what is always humanly imperfect.

Now there is a point in saying that profound understandings of the sacraments, or scripture, or the tradition of the Church mean that some people will be unable – on those deeply held grounds – to receive the ministry of women who have been ordained or consecrated priest or bishop.

But there is in all this a deep question about the priestly and Episcopal ministry of men, because some of those opposed to

the ordination of women seek also to ensure that the men from whom they receive ministry are properly qualified to give it. And here there are assumptions and statements made which are simply confusing to me, and which have not, in the reading I have done, been adequately explained.

So let us look at some cases which might arise and explore how issues which might be conceived in relation to men might be dealt with.

Sacramental Confidence – Article 26

The 39 Articles are perhaps not as well known or as well read as they used to be. The foundation of our confidence is set out in Article 26, which reminds us that the ministry of the Church, though it may be in the visible charge of human beings, is Christ's ministry. This simple observation deals with much of the needless anxiety about the ordained ministry of men, and renders unnecessary some of the speculation about complex structures in the event that women become bishops in our Church.

XXVI. Of the unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacraments.

ALTHOUGH in the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good, and sometime the evil have chief authority in the ministration of the word and sacraments; yet forasmuch as they do not the same in their own name, but in Christ's, and do minister by His commission and authority, we may use their ministry both in hearing the word of God and in the receiving of the sacraments. Neither is the effect of Christ's ordinance taken away by their wickedness, nor the grace of God's gifts diminished from such as by faith and rightly do receive the sacraments ministered unto them, which be effectual because of Christ's institution and promise, although they be ministered by evil men.

Nevertheless it appertaineth to the discipline of the Church that inquiry be made of evil ministers, and that they be accused by those that have knowledge of their offences; and finally, being found guilty by just judgement, be deposed.

The case of a male priest

Matthew is a male priest ordained by a male bishop. He is in favour of the ordination of women, and there was at least one woman who laid hands on him with the bishop when he was ordained priest. I can see no problem with receiving sacramental ministry at his hands either by those in favour of the ordination of women, or by those against. Does it matter that he has also laid hands on women at their ordinations – this, of course, is an invitation given to all priests who are present – but it is the bishop who ordains. Are there any grounds for doubting Matthew's sacramental ministry as a priest? It seems unlikely that there is any reason within the tradition and discipline of the Church of England which would justify this, yet I have heard people say that they will not receive communion from such a priest. Even if there were issues to do with the worthiness of the minister (who has not been censured by the Church, note) these would surely be covered by Article 26?

The case of a male bishop – as a priest

Then there is the question of Mark, now a bishop who was ordained priest by a male bishop and all of whose consecrating bishops were men. Suppose this consecrating male bishop has participated in the ordination of women as priests, or taken part in the consecration of a woman as bishop in one of the other provinces of the Anglican Communion. And consider first Mark's priestly ministry in presiding at Holy Communion given Article 26 – is there any defect in this which the Article does not cover?

The case of a male bishop – as a bishop

Then there are the ordinations of men which Bishop Mark performs – is there any doubt that Luke was ordained priest and, given Article 26, does it matter at all that Mary was ordained priest on the same occasion? And is there doubt about the confirmations of John and Martha?

In the case of ordinations the Roman Catholic Church has criticised Anglican Ordination Rites for their defective intention – a view explicitly and strongly repudiated by the Church of England in what is now Canon A4. Over recent revisions the ordination rites have been modified to reduce the grounds for ecumenical criticism. If doubts are going to be expressed over the ordination of Luke, or the confirmations of John and Martha, it would be good to have an argument based on the faith as we have received it in the Church of England. Otherwise we can say with confidence that these acts are assuredly valid.

The case of another male priest

And here we can challenge the tendency of some to imagine long chains of acts as if they grow more and more doubtful as the chain gets longer. If Luke's ordination is valid, it creates no doubt in any chain of which he is a part.

A male priest ordained by a bishop who is a woman

Now let us suppose that John grows up and is eventually ordained priest by Bishop Rachel, whose orders and ministry are

accepted as legally and canonically valid, but whose ministry cannot be received by loyal Anglicans who cannot receive the ordained ministry of women. What defect might there be in John's ordination, and is it cured by Article 26?

If his orders are regarded as irredeemably defective, then in order for his ordained ministry to be received, he would presumably have to be re-ordained. This depends, of course on the view taken of ordination, and the extent to which it is a personal act of the bishop in contrast to an act of the Church (which, normally in the person of the archdeacon, presents the candidate to the bishop, and as a congregation assents to the discernment of vocation) and also in contrast to a gracious act of our generous God. Since there is no proposal on the table for re-ordination – though some have suggested the possible necessity of this – but since there is no official proposal, the suggestion that Article 26 does not give confidence in such a case would require a weighty argument. Such an argument, of course, to be persuasive within the Church of England, would be based on the authorities recognised within the Church.

In addressing the issue of John, I assume that he is prepared to receive the ministry of his bishop, who is a woman. If he were not, then clearly a male bishop would be required. Nor am I addressing the practical problem of a male bishop ordaining both men and women together – and one or more of the men being ordained being unable to receive the ordained ministry of a woman. This may or may not be problematic for deeper reasons, but in practical terms to have people present at the ordination of women whose understanding is that the women cannot be ordained, and whose convictions may be such that they would feel they had to object, would draw unnecessary attention to differences of view.

Sacramental assurance – a bad name for a bad idea

So in place of a doctrine of 'Sacramental Assurance' – which, in contrast to appearances is actually concerned with sacramental doubts, we see that our formularies enable us to build a secure foundation for working together, within which, according to the ancient wisdom of the Church reflecting on its own troubled divisions, the grace of God can be relied upon to repair any human failings or defects.

Article 26, with its traditional understanding of the efficacy of the sacraments, founds for the Church of England a sacramental confidence which should reassure all loyal Anglicans that they are not being deprived of the grace of God by human failings.

Doubtful questions – and apostolic succession

Of course there are issues which will divide us, and occasions on which we will not be able to join together – not least when a woman is exercising a ministry as priest or bishop. And there are 'what if' questions about the role of women in consecrating bishops and the potential breaking, for those whose understanding requires it, of apostolic succession by the laying on of hands. Yet the requirement for at least three consecrators is not, apparently, necessary – rather it is a precaution against defect. We can see this in the way in which single bishops from

churches, which have undoubtedly retained the apostolic succession, have been used to cure alleged imperfections in the chain of transmission through the Church of England. With this understanding, a consecration which might be thought to be invalid would happen only when a man was consecrated and all the consecrating bishops were women – at least three of them.

This is, at present, a remote circumstance – not to be entirely discounted, surely – but to be realistically assessed. The time when such a thing is possible – three women as consecrators, and no men – will be a very different time from the one we are now in, and any provision we make now is speculative.

Sacramental Confidence – the key to unity

Here in Great Parndon we know that there are things on which we don't agree – we are honest and straightforward with each other about these things, but we know our vocation in Christ to seek unity, to explore ways of working together for Christ.

Our confidence is an asset, because we engage with each other without fear and because, though we would see our roots differently, we are all, as we believe, rooted in Christ.

I wish I could see confidence rather than doubt in current debates within the Church of England – but somehow 'doubt your neighbour' has become the unholy game we all play. Fortunately our faith gives us grounds for confidence, and though we may differ on what we believe about the ordination and consecration of women, we can remain confident that the men who are ordained and consecrated in the Church of England are properly ordained and to be counted as such by all loyal members of the Church.

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and may not reflect the agreed policies and opinions of National WATCH.

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