

## Homily 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter 2024

Reflecting on the Liturgical Readings of the Easter Season and the high profile of women in The Resurrection Narratives and The Gospels in general, my thoughts turned to the role of women in Jesus' ministry and in the Christian Community today.

When I was a novice in 1971, I used to wonder why The Enclosed Dominican Sisters in Hamilton Avenue Pollokshields, Glasgow, just up the road from The Novitiate House, had to rely on a male to preside over the celebration of The Eucharist. No male priest no Mass! Yet in that monastery there were numerous very holy and extremely well theologically qualified women. I remember airing the question at one of our daily conferences only to be put firmly in my place with the simplistic and possibly highly inaccurate statement, 'The apostles were all men, and it was only men at The Last Supper when the priesthood was instituted.'

Whilst one might argue, based on Holy Scripture, that all the apostles were men it is more difficult to argue that only male apostles were present at the Last Supper and that the institution of The Eucharist was the monopoly of men and did not include other disciples, including women. All Synoptics in their accounts of The Last Supper, refer to either 'The Twelve' or in Luke's case 'the Apostles' (Luke 22:14-18) but Matthew and Mark refer also to the more inclusive term 'disciples'. (Matthew 26:17-29) (Mark 14:12-25). St John (John 13:1-20) does not mention 'The Twelve' nor 'apostles' nor indeed 'disciples' Is it not therefore, reasonably possible that Jesus' mother, Mary of Magdalen and some of the other women, all disciples of Jesus, were also present at and participated in The Last Supper?

That simplistic defence, over 50 years ago, of an all-male priestly caste is further weakened by The Gospels' unqualified emphasis on the important role women played in Jesus' ministry. We might ask ourselves, 'Who, according to Holy Scripture is the first to meet the Risen Christ and who is the first missionary disciple? Was it not Mary Magdalen who first encountered The Risen Lord, running to tell the other disciples, 'The Lord is Risen.' (Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:9, Luke 24:1-11) - even although John's account has her message, 'They have stolen the body and I do not know where they have put him.' (John 20:1-2). Mary Magdalen is interestingly sometimes referred to as "the apostle of apostles" in Catholic theology.

St Luke's Gospel, often described as The Gospel of Women (also The Gospel of The Gentiles, of Outcasts, The Gospel of the Underdog and The Gospel of Prayer and Praise), sees Jesus challenging the prejudice and discrimination often suffered by women, and other marginalised people, in the first century AD. Luke portrays women as taking an active role in Jesus' ministry: Luke gives a special place to women in his Gospel account. More women appear in Luke than the other Gospels. The events leading to Jesus' birth are told from Mary's point of view. We read of Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary, of Anna the prophetess, of the widow at Nain, and of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50). Luke tells us of the special friendship Jesus had with Martha and Mary and how Jesus transformed the life of Mary Magdalene. Luke also mentions many women who travelled with Jesus and the apostles as disciples, who "ministered to their needs" (Luke 8:1-3).

Luke also makes clear that the gospel was addressed to all without distinction, challenging all forms of prejudice and discrimination including against women. He speaks of Jesus as the "friend of outcasts", and women were arguably some of the most marginalised in Jesus' society. Luke shows Jesus giving approval and praising Gentiles for their faith, unthinkable for Jews at the time (Luke 4:25-27; Luke 7:9). He quotes Jesus' words, that "men and women will come from the east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29). Clearly St Luke understood, as an important part of Jesus' ministry, the challenging of social stereotyping and denounced prejudice and discrimination of all kinds, including that against women.

In The Early Church there appears to be no distinction between male and female as to who presides at The Eucharist: "Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2: 46-47) In (Romans 16:1-2), St Paul interestingly refers also to the woman Phoebe as a **deacon** and therefore arguably part of the ordained ministry. \*

We live in 21st Century not in a patriarchal society like Jesus', a system which he challenged unequivocally. We today, rightly abhor all forms of prejudice and discrimination including that against women. Surely the People of God, despite a blanketing by the Institutional Church, must first and foremost consider the wise Word of Scripture and accept that the institutional Church's barring of women from priestly ordination is at best an unjust and unfair anachronism which at least should be being discussed openly and transparently by those in ecclesial authority and those within the wider Church Community, The People of God

#### Postscript\*

There is at least one scholarly precedent that some softened-up Church of the future could dust off to justify the presence of female priests. In 1976, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, a body established by Pope Leo XIII, voted in favour of the position that nothing in Scripture alone prevents the ordination of women, and that it would not necessarily violate Christ's intentions were the Church to do so.