

To be male is less important than it seems to be

Catholicity and Gender focussing on: the Ordination of Women

*Catholicity is no uniformity.
Catholicity creates free space
for all Christian believers worldwide
and asks respect for all denominations.
Catholicity is binding all Christians together
and is accepting them all in their otherness.
To be male is less important
than it seems to be.*

Introduction

In this article I want to discuss why catholicity should not exclude women from the altar. All what I will say in the following pages could also be valid for other gender issues (like homosexuality), but I choose for focussing on the ordination of women. It is clear to me that catholicity is such a comprehensive notion, that all fundamental ecumenical problems and differences are in a way connected to it.¹ Ordination of women is really not only a problem connected to catholicity, but it certainly is one of the issues to be discussed on this occasion of Societas Oecumenica's gathering in Budapest 2014. This is at least what the Standing Committee assured me in an E-mail. But I was still hesitating to take up the issue and it took a long time before I finally decided to prepare a workshop on the subject. Why? Well, my focus is the ordination of women and this is rather barbed wire in the ecumenical discussion. Nearly everything has already been said and all the arguments have been shared over and over again. What I really don't want to do is flogging a dead horse. So finally I decided to speak to you today from the point of view of my own biography. I speak to you as somebody who has been ordained in 1972, nearly 42 years ago. I was one of the first women ordained in my church, which was one of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. I served as a minister in several congregations and I am also involved in many ecumenical bodies. If my church had not recognised my vocation in 1972, my life would have been totally different. So I am grateful to God for all the possibilities given to me to serve as a minister in the church. I also speak here as a theologian, specialized in the theology of the ministry. I wrote my dissertation on the Ministry Part of BEM² and I am really advocating my whole adult life in many ways for the ordination of women.

Two little stories

Firstly I want to tell you two little personal stories. The first one happened in Romania in 2011. I was defending the ordination of women for an audience of - for a large extent - Romanian orthodox theologians in Oradea. I was then invited by Nicu Dumitrascu, one of the members of the Standing Committee of the Societas Oecumenica. Afterwards I asked Nicu: "Wasn't I too passionate in defending my point of view?" He answered: "Not at all, that's why I asked you to come over to Oradea". My second story took place in the spring of 2014. I tried to put the ordination of women on the agenda of our own Dutch Council of Churches in the Netherlands. I finally succeeded in putting it on the agenda, but this time I had to choose my words very carefully. The meeting was friendly and respectful and I was happy we finally could get the subject on the agenda.³ But at the same time it was a rather disappointing experience and it showed clearly how difficult it is to handle these issues in a proper way, especially in your own context.

Every decision has a cost

My first article on the ordination of women appeared in 1978 under the title: *Resistance against women's ordination, how to handle it? If Canterbury admits women to the altar, the flirtation with Rome is over.*⁴ Well, Anglican women have been ordained since 1970. The Church of England finally allowed women to be priests indeed in the year 1993 and while writing this contribution in July 2014 the historic news came to me, that the Church of England on the 14th of July surprisingly said "yes" to women bishops also.⁵ But as we all know: every decision has a cost. Obviously we hear voices from the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic side saying the same thing: "*Canterbury admits women to the altar and the flirtation with Rome is over*". So we hear Metropolitan Hilarion⁶ and - among others - Mgr Keith Newton, Ordinary of the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, saying: "Having agreed to permit women priests in 1992, the Church of England's decision to allow women bishops is the next logical step. What is undeniable is that both developments make harder the position of those within the Church of England who still long for corporate unity with the Catholic and Orthodox Churches".⁷ So, my dear friends, here we have loud and clear the problem of catholicity, church communion and the ordination of women. I wrote several articles on the subject⁸ and I was also part of the drafting group of the CPCE Document about Ministry, Ordination and Episkope, accepted by the CPCE Assembly in 2012. But first of all I speak here as an ecumenical theologian who has been involved for a long time in the discussions about catholicity and the ordination of women. I want to draw your kind attention now to the following ten points of reflection.

1. My first point is - not surprisingly - that catholicity is not restricted to one of the churches, neither is it restricted to one gender. And also the ministry of the church cannot be restricted to one gender. So in my view the question is not why some churches ordain women, the real question is for what reasons some churches are refusing it. Ordination of women in my view is not the problem; the non-ordination of women is the problem. But as you all know: in many churches ordination is a matter of gender and restricted to male persons. Why is that? Not while women are not good enough. They are good enough. Not while women are not capable. They are capable. Not while women miss the needed spiritual gifts. They are very much spiritually gifted. Not while a woman cannot be called by God. A woman can be called by God indeed and many of them have received in their lives a true vocation. So why are not all churches ordaining women? You all know the answers. One of the answers is that women cannot be ordained because of a long tradition. So here we have to deal with the question of traditionalism. Another answer is, that women cannot be ordained because of a certain interpretation of Scripture, silencing the voices of women in the church. If that was true, I would not be here. Another answer is that women cannot be ordained because of the idea that Jesus choose only males as his twelve apostles. By the way - Jesus never choose Germans, Italians or males from Argentina. He choose just Jews as his disciples. There is a refusal to ordain women because the ordination of women is understood as to be against the will of God. My question: who knows that for sure? Women are refused to be ordained because a woman cannot represent Christ. My question is: why do you have to have the male sexuality in order to gain the possibility to represent Christ? Ordination is understood as a sacrament and it is said that sacraments are preserved for men only. Well, you all know this. I stop it. I know and you know all the arguments. There is nothing new and there is no need for repetition.

2. My second point of reflection is that Protestants are also Catholics. And sometimes some Protestants are more catholic than some Roman-Catholics are catholic. In the Netherlands we do have now a *Protestant Forum for Catholicity*.⁹ Catholicity can cover a wide range of significances. Catholicity means the whole world geographically, from the one end to the other. It also means the totality of all Christian teaching in orthodoxy. It covers the totality of all mankind (young and old, rulers and citizens, erudite and simply-hearted)¹⁰ and more. So catholicity cannot be restricted indeed to one of the churches, neither can it be restricted to one gender. Churches who ordain both women and men are more catholic, because they are not exclusive.

3. I come to my third point. Cyrill of Jerusalem (315-386) said: "The church is catholic because it has spread throughout the entire world, because it teaches fully and unfailingly the content of Christian belief (the doctrines) and because it brings under obedience all classes and races of men. Finally, it

deserves the title 'catholic' because it heals and cures every sin that can be committed in soul or body and because it possesses and spreads various spiritual charisms." Vincentius of Lerinum said: "The true faith is what everywhere, always and by everybody has been believed." This does not mean however, that we can never change a custom or a ritual. Many use the term 'catholic' meaning 'Roman-Catholic' without realising that this exclusive language in fact robs many Christians from their catholicity. No one is allowed to claim the term 'catholic' exclusively for one's own church or gender.

4. Now I draw your special attention to the female aspect of catholicity. As baptised and confessing members of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, women are not to be excluded from unity, holiness, apostolicity or catholicity. It has been said that in times of heathen antiquity women were not accepted in structures of teaching and preaching¹¹ and for this reason they were also not accepted in early Christian church ministry. But as far as I know this is not true. There were still women priests in antiquity. In the area of the priesthood, women were the equals of men.¹²

5. Many churches don't ordain women. Despite encouraging words of our new Pope Francis concerning the role of women in decision making processes of the Roman-Catholic Church and the decision for sister Mary Melone as the first ever female Rector Major of a pontifical university,¹³ women are still in too many churches kept outside apostolicity and catholicity, because they are still excluded from the ministry of word and sacraments. Beginning in the 19th century most Reformed, Lutheran, and Methodist churches opened their ministries step by step for women and finally established equal rights for everyone concerning all levels of ministry without regard to gender. Most Anglican, Baptist and Old Catholic churches did the same. I know very well, that it raises ecumenical problems. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches officially stated: "Some churches still do not ordain women although this is not supported biblically or theologically. Often the reason for not ordaining women is founded in the prevailing patriarchal social, cultural and religious environment of the nation in which a church exists. We need to help each other restore the supremacy of relevant theological insight over domination by non-theological factors. A full understanding of the Christian ministry is inclusive and supports the ordination of women."¹⁴ But it is also clear that not all Reformed Churches agree with this. Also the Lutheran World Federation took a stance. Their statement on the episcopal ministry (2007) says: "Today the great majority of Lutherans belong to churches that ordain both women and men. This practice reflects a renewed understanding of the biblical witness. Ordination of women expresses the conviction that the mission of the church requires the gifts of both men and women in the public ministry of word and sacraments, and that limiting the ordained ministry to men obscures the nature of the church as a sign of our reconciliation and unity in Christ through baptism across the divides of ethnicity, social status and gender (cf. Gal. 3:27-28)".¹⁵ Also the Methodist churches opened all levels of ministry to women and men: "Methodists ordain women because they believe that women also receive the call, evidenced by inward conviction and outward manifestation of the gifts and graces, and confirmed by the gathering of the faithful."¹⁶

6. In the Roman Catholic Church and in the Eastern Orthodox Churches it is totally different. Of course the discussion has been there too. *Inter Insigniores* (1976)¹⁷ said 'no' and *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994)¹⁸ declared the discussion closed. Roma locuta causa finita? What if we could restore catholicity for all churches and both genders? Take for example Olympias, a female deacon (±400 in Constantinople). According to John Wijngaards she was ordained in a sacramental way.¹⁹ So in his view this can become also a reality in our times: *E facto sequitur posse*.

7. In my view there are no valid biblical arguments to keep women out of the ordained ministry. All the arguments circulate already for ages and this will not help us any further. There is no need for new reflection on the old theological issues, like the concepts of *representation* or *the Twelve*, which have also been discussed many times. Recently (in May 2014) there was a new theological Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue in Tallinn (Estonia)²⁰ again focusing on the ordination of women. Like the discussion in the Dutch Council of Churches in June 2014 there was also in Tallinn a warm and good atmosphere²¹, but we still seem to be in a blind arm of a river (Sackgasse) now. Churches are really in need of reformation these days and guided by the Holy Spirit, they cannot remain captured by old traditions of earlier times.

8. In our modern society women are active in the whole alphabet, working as an artist, bibliographer, curator, driver, economist, flute player, general, housekeeper, industrial, judge, king, lawyer, minister, notary, optician, professor, queen, radiologist, soldier, teacher, usurper, volunteer, wardress, yachter and zapper. Sometimes the Protestant churches are accused of only following changes in social structures, lead by feminist ideas. Certainly such modern social developments are important and influential, but they are not the only reason and they do not automatically lead to the ordination of women.²² Protestant churches that ordain women do so as a result of their biblical interpretation and their theological insights. As it was already stated in the BEM Document: “*Those churches which practice the ordination of women do so because of their understanding of the Gospel and of the ministry. It rests for them on the deeply held theological conviction that the ordained ministry of the Church lacks fullness when it is limited to one sex. This theological conviction has been reinforced by their experience during the years in which they have included women in their ordained ministries. They have found that woman’s gifts are as wide and varied as men’s and that their ministry is as fully blessed by the Holy Spirit as the ministry of men*”.²³

9. So my question is again: how can churches be fruitful and recognizable in our modern society while ordination of women is still rejected? And how is it possible, that in the new document of Faith and Order, *The Church, towards a common vision* (2013)²⁴, the whole question of women’s ordination is hardly mentioned?²⁵

10. It is well known, that the Vatican states that protestant churches lack the fullness of sacramental ordination. They suffer from a ‘defectus ordinis’. I dare say today that all churches that still refuse to ordain women in my view have also a ‘defectus ordinis’. Is this an accusation? Not at all. But we shall have to continue our ecumenical talks in friendship and mutual respect in order to overcome our differences. But it is true: In stating the non-negotiability of female ministry, I can understand, but I cannot accept that other churches make a gender difference for their (ordained) ministries.

Margriet Gosker, Venlo, August 2014

¹ H. Berkhof, *De katholiciteit der kerk*, Callenbach, Nijkerk, 1962, p. 7.

² M. Gosker, *Het ambt in de oecumenische discussie, de betekenis van de Lima-Ambtstekst voor de voortgang van de oecumene en de doorwerking in de Nederlandse SoW-Kerken*, Eburon, Delft, 2000.

³ http://www.raadvankerken.nl/pagina/2962/dilemma_rond_vrouw&highlight=vrouw

⁴ M. Gosker, ‘Weerstand tegen de vrouw in het ambt. Hoe pak je dat aan? Als Canterbury vrouw toelaat is flirt met Rome voorbij’, in: *Ouderlingenblad* 56 (1978) p. 655, quoted in daily Newspaper *Trouw*, 16-10-1978.

⁵ <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2014/07/church-of-england-says-yes-to-women-bishops.aspx>

⁶ <http://www.virtueonline.org/villanova-pa-metropolitan-hilarion-blasts-anglicans-renouncing-faith>

⁷ Cf. M.J. Van Dyck, *Worden Rome en Canterbury één*, Lannoo, Tielt, 1990, pp 223-227.
<http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2014/07/15/ordinariate-reaches-out-to-anglicans-after-women-bishops-vote/>

⁸ M. Gosker, ‘Gods ‘ja’ en het ‘nee’ van de kerk. Ambtstheologische notities bij de vrouw in het ambt’, in: M. de Baar, F. Cossee, M. van Veen en A.Voolstra, *Honderd jaar vrouwen op de kansel, 1911-2011*, Verloren, Hilversum, 2011, 53-65. ‘Mogen het ook pumps zijn? In de schoenen van de apostelen. Over apostoliciteit van vrouwen in de kerk’, my Lecture given for a Study Day of the Dutch Council of Churches on the 5th of March 2012 in Amersfoort, published on their website (link of 14-07-2014):
http://www.raadvankerken.nl/pagina/1850/apostel_naar_letter_en_geest&highlight=apostoliciteit

⁹ <http://forumkatholiciteit.nl/#.UJvJgnDiYuc>

¹⁰ Cyrilus, *Catecheses* XVIII, 23.

¹¹ J. Müller, *In der Kirche Priester sein. Das Priesterbild in der deutschsprachigen katholischen Dogmatik des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Echter Verlag, Würzburg, 2001, p. 198 Anmerkung 57: “ So war beispielsweise für den sukzessiven Ausschluss von Frauen aus Lehr- und Verkündigungsfunktionen die fehlende Akzeptanz in der heidnisch-antiken Gesellschaft ausschlaggebend, wie Rosemarie Nürnberg nachweist (“ Non decet neque necessarium est, ut mulieres doceant.“ Überlegungen zum altkirchlichen Lehrverbot für Frauen, in: *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 31, 1988, pp. 57-73).

¹² J.B. Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007.

¹³ <http://saltandlighttv.org/blog/vatican-connections/vatican-connections-woman-named-president-of-pontifical-university>

¹⁴ ‘A new community. Affirmations of The Ordination of Women’, in: *Walk my Sister. The Ordination of Women: Reformed perspectives*, ed. Ursel Rosenhäger, Sarah Stephens, [Geneva] 1993 (Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, volume 18), p. 5.

¹⁵ The Lund Statement, no. 20.

¹⁶ ‘The Apostolic Tradition’ (Methodist – Roman Catholic Dialogue 1991), no. 96 (in *Growth in Agreement II*, p. 616). Cf. also the Anglican-Methodist document ‘Sharing in the Apostolic Communion’ (1996), no. 55: “God’s calling of women to serve the ministry in all its forms is accepted throughout Methodism.” (ibid., p. 67).

¹⁷ http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_df76ii.htm

¹⁸ Ordinatio Sacerdotalis came out on Pentecost 1993:
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis_en.html

¹⁹ J. Wijngaards, *The Ordained Women Deacons of the Church's First Millennium*, The Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2002.

²⁰ <http://www.lutheranworld.org/news/spiritual-community#sthash.MFuyjSqr.dpuf>

²¹ This was also the experience of Rev. L. van Reijendam-Beek. L.W. van Reijendam-Beek, ‘Vrouwen in het Vaticaan, gewenst?’, in: C.P. van Andel, R. van den Beld, *In gesprek met het Vaticaan*, Kok, Kampen, 1986, pp. 60-75, 65.

²² We read in a study of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches the following: “As a part of the human community, the Christian community is bound to be shaped by the changes that take place in that larger community. A glance at the history of Christianity gives us enough evidence to show that the Christian community does not slavishly follow whatever changes take place in the human community. It applies its own judgment based on its interpretations of the Bible, traditions, dogmas, doctrines, ecclesiastical practices and so on. Such encounters also vary since the practice of Christian communities is not homogenous throughout the world or even within regional and national situations.” H.S. Wilson, ‘Towards a new understanding of ministry: some theological considerations’, in: Ursel Rosenhäger, Sarah Stephens, (ed.) *Walk, My Sister - The Ordination of Women: Reformed Perspectives*, Geneva, WARC, 1993, p. 75.

²³ BEM, Ministry, no. 18, commentary.

²⁴ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision>

²⁵ “Christians disagree as well over the traditional restriction of ordination to the ministry of word and sacrament to men only”, *The Church*, p. 26 (Paragraph 45).