

Not if we want to continue to celebrate free will as something at the very core of our understanding of the image of God, found in male and female human beings.

As we have learned over the past few years, there were women in leadership positions in the Early Church - perhaps even some who were counted as successors to the Apostles. Then how is it that some of the greatest of the “Church Fathers” made such horrible statements about women? John Chrysostom, whose second name was a description of his “golden-mouthed” great preaching, said, “Amongst all the savage beasts none is found so harmful as woman.” Thomas Aquinas said, “Woman is an occasional and incomplete being, a misbegotten male. It is unchangeable that woman is destined to live under man's influence and has no authority from her Lord.”

Putting all these ideas together, I finally realized that, since women were not considered fully human in the world surrounding the Early Church, the phrase, “Male only priesthood,” as used in some of the ancient Councils, really meant “human only priesthood. Men's assumptions excluded women because they were not fully human, not just because of their sex.

As we have begun (and we have only just begun) to realize that women are equal to men in their full humanness, I believe it is time to realize that kind of equality has been our message from the moment of the Call of Mary (which I propose as a substitute title for the feast

we celebrate on March 25). We didn't or couldn't hear our own message, but the word was out. It took around 1,900 years for that message to come back at us from “the world” in the feminist voices, but those voices were speaking our message.

The ordination of women is not a matter of “letting the world set the agenda for the Church,” but a matter of recognizing that the world has set our agenda for 1,900 years, and that it is time to stop that.

The Catholic tradition is a “human-only priesthood”. Anglo-Catholics need to lead the way to the fullness of that priesthood toward which God pointed us in the “Call of the Blessed Virgin Mary”.

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“Male Only Priesthood”

How the Taliban helped an Anglo-Catholic further understand the ordination of women

When the Taliban took control of both government and society in Afghanistan a few years ago, they forced a great number of women who were physicians, attorneys, professors and teachers to abandon their professions and stay in their homes. Suddenly, these women could not leave their homes unless they were obscured from view by clothing and veils, and “properly” accompanied by father, husband or brother.

I began to realize that I was getting a glimpse of the world the way it was in the time of Jesus and the Early Church. I had known, of course, that Jesus broke several “rules” of the society of his day by talking with women in public, but I never had been able to imagine the depth of the power of the rules he was breaking.

These images linked in my mind, eventually, with something I had seen on a visit to the Holy Land several years ago. We had toured a restored ancient synagogue, and had seen the heavy scrollwork of a screen through which women could observe (barely) the men’s prayers and rabbinical discussions, but could not take any active part in them.

With the Taliban images in mind, I began to see far more clearly how outraged the men in the synagogue were on the day that Jesus healed a crippled woman during the Sabbath liturgy. For Jesus to call the woman out from behind the screen into the area reserved for men was shocking. That he would call her a “Daughter of Abraham”, a term that implied her equality with circumcised men, was even more shocking. That his gift of healing enabled her to stand straight and tall, seemed far more powerfully symbolic than I had previously noticed.

I came upon these thoughts from a solid, Anglo-Catholic, background. My formation as an Anglo-Catholic began in the Diocese of Dallas, before it was split into two dioceses.

I owe much of my formation to three priests who were the “great Triumvirate” of the High School sessions at the Diocesan summer camp, Dudley Reed, Homer Rogers and Richard Hayes. These solid teachers contributed to my formation by such images as: (1) “The Blessed Virgin is the only person who ever gave God anything He didn’t already have - a human body,” and (2) “God, the angels, and the whole host of heaven held their breath, while they waited for Mary to say yes to the task of bearing the Christ child”.

For the first two decades of my life in the Episcopal Church, it never occurred to me that there was any thought about ordaining women as priests and bishops.

When I began to hear that ordaining women was being seriously discussed, I had to put the issue into the context of Anglo-Catholic theology and practice. ...but I began to wonder...

Seeing the world of Jesus and Mary through the Taliban experience helps me to affirm some of the changing I did back then in my beliefs, and some of the reasons why I had come to believe that an Anglo-Catholic could believe that God was calling us to ordain women and to stay within the Catholic tradition at the same time.

At the very core of the Catholic teaching about the Gospel was a story about a woman who made a decision, on her own, without permission from or obedience to her father, brother, or her betrothed. I realized that my own mother, 1,900 years later, couldn’t have

done that when she was Mary’s age. My mother lived long enough to vote in public elections and to be considered competent to sign a contract for services with her own name, but she died before a woman could have a credit record in her own name.

I realized that, for the first 17 years of my ordained life, I had used a marriage liturgy that had different wording for the man’s vow and for the woman’s vow. The man’s “I plight thee my troth” was a full-fledged vow/contract. The woman’s “I give thee my troth” was a word of honor from a person who could not legally complete a contract.

This, from a Church in which the very source of our faith and of the redemption of the world lay in a woman’s binding decision!

No! It wasn’t from the Church! I realized that the Early Church had let a Taliban-like world set the agenda for the Church for all these centuries. Without realizing it, perhaps, the leaders of the Early Church changed the image of Mary from an independent, decision-making woman, to a “properly-submissive woman”.

We have all the Biblical stories of the “Call” of Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other men, but we refer to Mary’s experience as the “Annunciation” - an “announcement” of the job she had to do. The men could argue, then decide whether or not to accept their call, but Mary could only submit to the announcement? I think not!