

The Hierarchy of Holiness

By Father John Catoir JCD

There are two hierarchies in the Catholic Church, the hierarchy of governance, and the hierarchy of holiness. The recent canonization of Mother Teresa made me think that women excel in holiness. Some do not of course, but generally speaking I think most do.

St. Teresa of Calcutta was kind, self-sacrificing, humble and loving. Women often have that quality of mercy, which makes them so fit for motherhood. They're generally more compassionate and caring than men.

Granted, men can and often do rise to high levels of holiness. Some show extraordinary compassion, like St. Francis of Assisi, and our own Pope Francis. But the charism of men is different.

They are fathers; the heads of families and corporations. Only men are eligible for membership in the hierarchy of the Church. They have to become bishops before they are trusted with the governance of a diocese. Some of them excel in administration, but alas, some do not. Pope Benedict XVI, is a holy man, but he admitted that he was not one the best administrators the Church ever had.

I am well aware that the ordination of women is a closed issue. Women are not eligible for ordination. Please understand that I have no intention of lobbying for the ordination of women; however, I do think that a theological perspective on the issue is important for the health of the Church. I don't foresee any drastic changes taking place in Church discipline regarding women's ordination any time in the near future, but then again, one cannot rule it altogether.

Women can and often do rise to high positions in the Church. They administer parishes; and run religious orders, schools and colleges. Some even hold high administrative positions inside the Vatican. Many women administer property and people very effectively all over the world, but, in spite of their gifts, they cannot be ordained.

We see ordained women in other Churches. There are even women bishops in the Episcopal Church. They seem to function very well. So the issue is not that women lack the charism for leadership. Many of them have demonstrated excellence in that capacity.

What then is the issue? The issue is tradition, not theology. According to a public statement made by Pope Paul VI, "There are no theological obstacles to the ordination of women."

This may surprise you, but it's true. It means that tradition is the primary obstacle. For instance, the Church of Africa is a patriarchic society, and their bishops would be shocked and outraged if women were suddenly allowed to be ordained. There are even many lay women throughout the world who would object. Nevertheless, traditions do change, both in the world, and in the Church.

For example, in the formative, Apostolic Catholic community, all the priests were married men. This tradition lasted for a thousand years, until mandatory celibacy was introduced by Pope Urban in 1095; imagine, a thousand years with a married clergy.

A census taken in 2012 revealed that there were about 450,000 priests in the world. That number has remained the same until 2016. However, the overall population of the Church has nearly doubled since then, to about 1.2 Billion Catholics. This raises a question. Will the sheer need for more priests affect our traditions? That remains to be seen.

In 2011, I had a total knee replacement done at Duke University Medical Center in North Carolina. Duke University is non-denominational, but it has thousands of Catholics in its student body. While recuperating from surgery, a TV prayer service was beamed into my room each day at noon. A young college girl, vested as the celebrant, prayerfully read from a missal the very words of the Catholic Mass liturgy, right down to the words of consecration. At first I was shocked, then, after a few days, I found it pleasantly devotional because of her sincerity. She was ministering to us.

St. Paul said, "Help carry one another's burdens, in that way you will fulfill the law of Jesus Christ." The inner promptings of conscience are very often the voice of the Holy Spirit within us. The Holy Spirit is always there helping us to go beyond ourselves in order to fulfill the law of love. This very truth is what governs the hierarchy of holiness.

Visiting the sick for instance, or feeding the hungry, which includes putting food on the table for your children; are acts of holiness prompted by the love of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit is the force behind all the supernatural love and joy in the world. Many women feel drawn to the vocation of the priesthood. I respect that. I remember feeling drawn to the priesthood myself, but at the same time I was afraid. I wanted a normal life, with marriage and children. I didn't want to be a priest, both because of the demands it would make, and because of my fear of failure.

The power of the Holy Spirit lifted me above my fears, and I decided to accept my calling. That was 56 happy years ago. The Holy Spirit moves us in directions we may not have chosen for ourselves. This same principle applies to the Church? We are often surprised by the Holy Spirit.