

On Apostolic Succession and the Ordination of Women

This short paper begins with a preamble in order to establish authority. Listen carefully, there is a test at the end.

In order to understand the importance of Apostolic succession, it is necessary to state that all ordained ministry starts with two happenings. First one must truly and prayerfully believe they are truly called by God, and secondly they must be sent to do the task. In John's Gospel (20:21) we read as Jesus speaks to the Apostles, "as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." They were called and then sent with the authority of Jesus to perform their ministry.

Apostolic Succession is simply stated as the handing on of the authority from the Apostles to the Bishops of the Catholic Church in unbroken succession to ensure that the authority of Christ is maintained in the Church. Therefore the Consecration of Bishop's is performed by no less than three Bishops in order to ensure this succession. In this way succession is not a sort of pipeline but rather a network. If any one Bishop is not properly consecrated this is covered by the presence of the others during the consecration.

The Church of England held claim to Apostolic Succession by virtue of two Catholic missions, the Celtic founded by St. Aiden, Bishop of Durham and the Latin founded by Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury. The Celtic was entirely independent of Rome and Augustine was ordained by the Bishop of Lyons and the Bishop of Arles which introduced succession from St. John who was Bishop of Ephesus. Theodore the 7th Archbishop of Canterbury, brought about the union of the two missions. He was consecrated by Vitalian, Bishop of Rome and introduced the Latin succession from St. Peter.

It is within the authority of the Bishop that a priest is ordained to celebrate the Blessed Sacrament as well as performing other ministerial duties. Through Apostolic succession it is on the authority of Christ that he does so. The Catholic Church held this as one of its basic tenets. It is not a theory or a plausible supposition, it is a fact. Therefore any priest can say with certainty to the question, Who sent you? With the response that he was sent by Christ.

The orderly preservation and transmission of the Episcopate was of the highest importance in the early Church. Tertullian (190) says, "If any dare to mingle themselves with the Apostolic age, so that they may appear to be handed down from the Apostles, we are able to say, let them produce the origin of their churches, let them set forth the series of their Bishops, so running down from the beginning by successions, that the first Bishop may have some of the Apostles, or Apostolic men who continued with the Apostles for their author or predecessor. For in this manner, the Apostolic Churches trace their origin; as the Church of Smyrna, having Polycarp, relates that he was placed there by St. John; as that of Rome doth, that Clement was in like manner ordained by Peter. In like manner also, the rest of them show that they

have grafts of the Apostolic seed, who were appointed to the Episcopate by the Apostles.”

Irenaeus writes, “We can enumerate those appointed by the Apostles Bishops in the Churches, and their successors, even unto us. The Apostles wished those to be very perfect and irreprehensible in all things, whom they left their successors, delivering to them their own place of government. By this ordination and succession, the tradition which is from the Apostles and the doctrine of the truth hath come even to us.” I include these quotes simply to emphasize the importance of Apostolic Succession to the Church throughout the ages.

I would not wish to undermine the work of protestant denominations in any way, their ministries are valid and important but it is a different form of ministry. Ministers are a devout people who feel called to serve God and do much wonderful work in his name. They are called by God and sent by their congregation to do Christ’s work on their behalf. They are responsible to their congregations and not to a Bishop who holds the authority of an Apostle the authority which was passed on to them.

A priest on the other hand is called by God but through Apostolic succession is sent by Christ through succession as a necessary requirement for offering His sacrifice upon the altar.

Now on to ordination. We have tried to show that a Bishops authority which comes from Christ, is the only one who is authorized to ordain people to the priesthood. Bishops, in a sense, share their authority with their priests. It is why a priest crosses the stole when celebrating Mass. It shows they are acting on behalf of the Bishop.

Now let us presume that a Bishop within Apostolic succession decides to have an ordination and in front of him are three candidates. One is well educated, quick thinking and has many talents, he can even play the organ, we will call him Andrew. The Bishop does ordain him. Is Andrew a priest with authority from Christ through his Bishop,? I think you would agree that he is. The second candidate is quite uneducated, in fact he is a bit of a dolt. He has no perceivable talents whatsoever. We will call him Will. The Bishop decides to ordain him anyway, though reluctantly. Is Will a priest with authority from Christ through his Bishop? You can only say yes because he was duly ordained. The third candidate is a new graduate with an M.Div. degree. Grew up in the Church and is knowledgeable about Church life, has talent but doesn’t play the organ. The Bishop ordains this candidate also. Is that candidate duly ordained a priest with authority from Christ through the Bishop? Oh, I forgot to tell you, her name is Mary. Is

Mary a priest as are the others? You can only reply based on facts, not feelings or tradition, for these are not reasons, they are excuses.

The test is entitled 'The Ordination of Women'. There is no writing to be done. It is measured by attitude and acceptance. If you pass you will get a grade of 'C'. C stands for Catholic. If you fail you can grade yourself however you like, but it will not be a 'C'.