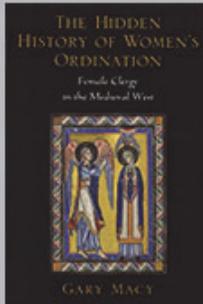




BOOK REVIEW



The Hidden History of Women's Ordination

Female Clergy in the Medieval World

BY GARY MACY

Reviewed by Linda Lawler

Dr. Gary Macy is amply qualified to write this book. He has a degree in historical theology from Cambridge University. At the time of publication he was a professor of theology at a Catholic Institution, Santa Clara University, and previously taught at the University of San Diego.

He starts his book by saying that this is a book that he never intended to write. With a specialty in Christian ritual in the medieval church, he describes a time when he had given a lecture to a Catholic audience where he indicated that there was evidence that women in the middle ages had presided over communion ceremonies. When a woman colleague of his, a competent scholar as well as an ordained minister, suggested that he had “proven” that women had been ordained in the Middle Ages, he protested that he never suggested that and never believed that women had ever been ordained. But her remark caused him to wonder if women were distributing communion in the middle ages because they really were ordained. So began his research and the outcome is this book. This book is written from the viewpoint of Roman Catholic theology.

Dr. Macy begins by telling the reader that Christian theologians and Christian historians ask different questions. The historical question this book addresses is whether or not women were ever “ordained” in Christian history. But the term “ordain” has to be defined by what it meant at that particular time in history. In contrast a theologian will read a modern definition of the term, “ordination” back into that history and draw different conclusions. If ordination meant something different in a different time, then a theologian may conclude that a person wasn’t really ordained by today’s standards. Dr. Macy makes it clear, “This study is concerned first and foremost with the historical question whether women were ordained in the past, that is whether they were considered ordained by their contemporaries according to the definition of ordination used at that time. Theologians may judge that definitions of ordination used in the past were inadequate or invalid or both... Such decisions are not of immediate concern to historians, however, and the two separate tasks of theology and of history should not be confused.” (pp 5-6)

He comments that though there are many references to men being ordained in Christian history, no one has ever questioned the validity of their ordination, but similar references to the ordination of women in Christian history have been denied, redefined or explained away. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries it came to be believed that women were incapable of ordination and had never been ordained. He defines the goal of this book to, "...uncover how it happened that women came to be considered incapable of ordination." He says, "Implied in this question is the broader question of whether the definition of ordination changed in such a way that it excluded women, and if so how it changed." (p 6)

His first chapter includes a brief survey of the most recent studies done on this topic. He discusses the medieval viewpoint that spiritual purity was often defined as living a life committed to sexual abstinence and defines the different ways that was expressed. Clergy were permitted to marry but were expected to take vows of abstinence for the remainder of their marriages.

Chapter two addresses the definition of ordination in the Middle Ages. He shows that the term ordination has its root in the word, *order*, and that its earliest meaning was associated with creating order in the community. The community itself ordained individuals from within the community to perform various functions. The term was used interchangeably with the term consecration and referred to any position in a church or in the community. It was applied to those who served as a doorkeeper, porter, exorcist, abbot, abbess, acolyte, king, queen, as well as a deacon, deaconess, priest, bishop, and many other functions. Its primary meaning was in association with performing a function, taking on a new vocation. The leader in a church community was the one who was recognized as the one who was skilled at building up the community. It naturally followed that such a leader would be the one who would administer the sacraments and perform the liturgy. Dr. Macy asserts that for the first thousand years of Christian history it did not occur to the Christian community that only priests could perform a liturgy or administer the sacraments, "In the older definition of ordination, one officiated at ceremonies because one had been chosen by the community to lead the community. In the later understanding, one led the community because one was empowered to perform the ceremonies." P 42

In chapter three Dr. Macy reviews the evidence for ordained women. He looks at manuscript evidence that specifically names women as *episcopae*, (female bishops), *presbyterae*, (female presbyters), abbesses, and deaconesses. He examines descriptions of ordination rites for these offices and compares them to ordination rites for males in comparable positions. He also examines manuscript evidence which describe women as performing the liturgy, administering the sacraments, hearing confessions, giving penances, and absolving the penitent from sin. He points out that there is evidence of male bishops condemning the activities of women who were serving at the altar. But he argues that the church in the medieval era was very diverse and decrees in one diocese were not binding on every diocese throughout Europe. He concludes that in the earlier centuries of the Middle Ages the evidence is overwhelming that women were receiving ordination to many ministries. He says, "Further, the ministries to which these women belonged encompassed ritual actions that came to be reserved only to the male diaconate and *presbyterate*. Some bishops allowed women to serve at the altar leading the Mass or at least celebrating with men at the Mass. Some bishops allowed women to distribute communion, and the liturgies for those services have survived. Abbesses at least certainly heard confessions, gave penances, and absolved from sin. Both abbesses and *episcopae* administered churches that were equivalent of, and sometimes were, dioceses." (p86)

In the next chapter titled, "Defining Women Out of Ordination," Dr. Macy turns his attention to the events in the eleventh and twelfth centuries that resulted in the belief that women were not capable of being ordained and had never been ordained. Beginning in the late eleventh century there was a reform movement which looked back to the early church and determined that the only legitimate church offices

were those instituted by Jesus. These reformers pointed out that the New Testament only names the offices of the *presbyterate* and the diaconate. The result was that any order, or office, which could not be defined as part of the *presbyterate* or the diaconate was defined as beneath the requirements for ordination. At first this new definition did not exclude women, as both abbesses and deaconesses were included in the diaconate. But these reformers also came across a fourth century commentary written by a man named Ambrose of Milan (aka Ambrosiaster) who argued that any references that Paul makes to women as deaconesses, such as Phoebe in Romans 16 and the requirements for deaconesses in 1 Timothy, were really an appeal for women to act in as respectable a manner as a male deacon would. Ambrose concluded that Paul would be contradicting himself if he was really referring to women as deaconesses because he commands women to remain silent in other portions of Scripture.

Commentaries were being written in the twelfth century which drew from the writings of Ambrose. Some commentators interpreted Paul's references to deaconesses as referring to wives of deacons. Others argued that women had never been a part of the diaconate. They argued that such references were only to wives of priests and deacons and the meaning was that they were expected to take a vow of continence. One commentary in particular argued that no one could become a priest who did not serve as a deacon first. Once the argument was made that it was impossible for women to become deaconesses it became impossible for women to advance to the priesthood.

Not everyone agreed with this new theology. One commentator, a scholar named Abelard, (married to an abbess named Heloise,) launched a vigorous defense of women. He argued that women had been ordained to the diaconate, pointing to Paul's reference to Phoebe in Romans 16. He quotes the early Christian thinkers, Jerome and Origen, and argues that Jerome interpreted 1 Timothy as referring to deaconesses, not wives of deacons or chaste women. Abelard points to women in leadership positions in the Old Testament, as well as women in the New Testament such as Anna and Elizabeth, who were "prophets to the prophets." (p95) He described Mary Magdalene as an "apostle to the apostles" and the Samaritan woman as, "the first preacher to the Gentiles." (p95)

The commentators who opposed the ordination of women were forced to explain away earlier references to women *presbyterae* and deaconesses and the record from the Council of Chalcedon (451) which listed requirements for ordained deaconesses. Finally, a canonist named Rufinus solved the problem by arguing that real ordination was only for those who served at the altar and that references to ordained women only referred to women who did not serve at the altar. Rufinus's argument won out. Macy points out, "Within roughly a century, women lost all standing as ordained clergy. They could not be ordained even if they underwent a ceremony of ordination. They had never been truly ordained as '*presbyterae*,' deaconesses, or abbesses, despite any authorities to the contrary." (p102)

In the last chapter Dr. Macy turns his attention to understanding how such a change in the understanding of ordination and liturgy could have taken place so rapidly and why the larger society was willing to buy into these ideas. One reason was the political climate. Political struggles were occurring between the papacy and the secular lords. It was customary for feudal lords to appoint clergy. Church leaders felt that these lords exerted too much control over the affairs of the church. So the church fought back by upping the standards for the priesthood. They argued that only a priest was capable of making the risen Lord present in the liturgy of the sacrament of communion. To set these priests apart they upped the standards for priesthood by requiring priests to take a vow of celibacy. Priests were no longer permitted to be married. They argued that only a pure priest could perform the liturgy to make the risen Christ present in communion. To justify this position, they turned to denigrating women and defining them as more sinful, full of lust, and impure. They were able to convince their congregants to shun priests who were not celibate. During this era the writings of the ancient Greek philosopher,

Aristotle, were rediscovered. His writings provided the rational the church needed to justify their teaching that women were inferior beings and could never have been ordained. Aristotle taught that women were inferior to men both intellectually and morally. He argued that they were unfit to lead and needed to be under the government of men. According to Aristotle, women were really deformed males, the result of a mistake during conception. They were incapable of controlling their emotions. Thus, according to the church, they would be incapable of maintaining the pure state of celibacy necessary to administer communion and perform the liturgy. The Medieval thinker, Thomas Aquinas, seized on the ideas of Aristotle and integrated them into church law. It was only logical that if women were inferior beings to a man, then they could not be ordained, nor could they ever have been ordained.

Dr. Macy's book is a scholarly one that will appeal to academics and theologians. He includes two appendices with copies, in Latin, of the prayers and ordination rites for deaconesses and abbesses. In his conclusion he expresses his hope that the evidence for the ordination of women in the early Middle Ages will provoke discussion about the definition of ordination in our era.

Linda Lawler (M.Ed. University of Pittsburgh) combines sewing and video to put difficult passages regarding women into their historical context. She brings the research of theologians and scholars to life in the thirty minute video: "The Apostle Paul Wrestles against Pagan Rituals and Gnostic Heresies" in The Untold Story of Ephesus. The video is available as a [free digital download from CBE's Bookstore](#).
