

THE SOCIETY FOR ECUMENICAL STUDIES

The Catholic Priesthood and Women (Sister Sara Butler, Hillenbrand Books 2007)

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Sister Sara is a nun, the first American woman appointed by the late Pope John Paul II, to the International Theological Commission. She teaches at a seminary in New York and is also a member of ARCIC. Her book is an extremely lucid exposition of official Catholic teaching on the non-eligibility of women for presbyteral ordination.

Sr Sara was formerly an advocate of the priestly ordination of women, but now avows herself a firmly convinced supporter of the line most recently endorsed in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. She argues that the practice of Jesus in selecting only male apostles was a matter of deliberate decision, contrasting with the radicalism of his affirmation of women in so many other respects. She further shows that the practice of Jesus was followed by the apostles themselves in choosing their ministerial successors and that mainstream Roman Catholic tradition has always discounted the possibility of the ordination of women, sometimes of course for reasons that would now be discounted as inadequate, but also sometimes for reasons that have continued to be affirmed and which are certainly not derogatory to women as such. She thus, for example, quotes Innocent III as asserting that though the Virgin Mary excelled all people in virtue, nevertheless it was to the apostles and not to her that the Lord confided the keys.

Sr Sara also shows that the continuing refusal of the Catholic Church to alter its traditional teaching is in no way related to a failure to revise its teaching on the position of women in other respects. She notes the way in which Catholic teaching on the equal dignity of women was considerably updated in the mid to late twentieth century and notes the ways in which both laywomen and religious have been accorded more positive roles in the life of the Church.

Sr Sara examines many counter-arguments that have been advanced by advocates of the ordination of women, both within the Catholic Church and other churches, and finds them wanting in terms of the specifically Catholic understanding of the sacramentality of ordination and the role of the presbyter as representing the ministry of Christ to the Church.

I have two difficulties with this book. The first is that I am not as sure as the author of the water-tightness of her contrast between the radicalism of Jesus in other respects and his allegedly carefully thought out decision not to choose women apostles. Granted that Jesus was distinctly radical in much of his practice, the very fact of the Incarnation surely means that there may also have been limits to this radicalism that may not have been a matter of deliberate holding back, more a matter of inability to conceive otherwise; in particular, was it conceivable to Jesus (or anyone else) that women might embrace an itinerant way of life that went so against all concepts of family (as to a degree the Gospels show they also did for men)?

The second is with the rather sweeping generalisations that are made about Protestant ministries and their contrast with the Catholic priesthood. While it is true that some radical and liberal Protestants conceive the ministry very much in the purely representative manner that Sr Sara describes, it is also true that the classical concept of the pastoral office, as held by the early Wesleyan Methodists, sees ordained presbyters as under-shepherds to the Great Shepherd, their ministry as the gift of the Spirit to the Church (and not just as arising within it), and thus as conformed in a certain way to the Great Shepherd and set apart and aside for ministry to the Church. It has for some good time now been the conviction of many Anglicans and Protestants that the Holy Spirit has given to certain women the gifts and graces for such a ministry and that the Church has duly discerned these gifts and authorised their public exercise in the name of Christ.

There is thus, I believe, a continuing ecumenical debate to be had on this issue. Nevertheless, I concede that Sr Sara has written the best and most lucid defence of official Roman Catholic thinking on the matter that I have yet read.