

Beautiful Questions

My 9 year old niece made her debut as an altar server. Her excitement was palpable as she embraced the sacred task. As her family we were pleased, but not surprised. So accustomed are we to ponytailed youth serving at the altar that we barely registered this event as a 'first' in the history of our family. My niece was happily oblivious to the fact that a generation earlier this role of service had been reserved to boys alone. My, how times change! And how quickly we acclimatize to the new reality.

The naturalness of seeing a little girl serve at the table of the Lord leads us to appreciate the naturalness of asking why a woman cannot preside at the altar as an ordained minister of the Catholic community. Certainly, we can rush to take sides on this question, arming ourselves with all kinds of doctrinal, scriptural and historical evidence. What I wish to muse upon here, however, is how beautifully 'natural' is the question itself.

The question is not only natural, it is family-oriented. Every family needs a mother and a father, and the Church family is no exception. At this point in our history as Catholics we find ourselves belonging to a single-parent family; a Church shepherded with wonderful paternal generosity, to be sure, yet governed by men alone. It is natural to enquire into this gender-specific leadership.

In an era where 'communio' has been embraced as a key concept in unlocking insights into ecclesial identity, and where the relational complementarity of male and female is at the heart of Catholic teaching about sexuality, it is understandable that one might enquire into the possibility of having this male-female 'communio' visible in our sacramental and hierarchical structures.

It is natural for those who love and treasure the Marian dimension of the Church to wonder why we have never had a Marian office to complement the Apostolic office that guides the faithful through history. After all, the female figure of Mary is found at the deepest root of our ecclesial beginnings, even as the male figure of the Apostles is foundational to ecclesial existence. Catholic teaching tells us we need both to understand our origins and identity as a Church.

It is natural that a bishop, attentive to his responsibility to identify charisms within the body of Christ and having observed the stirrings of a 'priestly' call in women and girls, should wonder about the possibility of ordaining women, especially when the apparent 'call' is found not only among feminists but in children, in the saints, and in women from traditionalist communities who would never dream of undermining the authority of the magisterium.

Given the fact that so many of the advances in gender equality are less than 100

years old, it is only reasonable that people should harbour a healthy suspicion about sexist-tainted assumptions lingering on in a 2,000 year old religious institution. It is perfectly reasonable that those who have studied the theological arguments for reserving ordination to men alone should want to continue exploring the veracity of these arguments in the face of persistent questions; questions which, in the schema of history, remain brazenly new.

These are beautiful questions, holy ponderings, necessary avenues of searching which won't go away until they have been whole-heartedly embraced and convincingly answered on multiple fronts of academic, pastoral and spiritual enquiry. When asked with love, with respect for Church teaching, in a genuine search for truth, and in the appropriate forums, they are questions that can lead us all to a deeper understanding of who we are as a Church, and what it means to live as a communion of love and a witness to truth.

We must learn to love the questions that are right and fitting for their times. Questions need time and space, respect and humility. Perhaps we need to be a little less quick to present 'the' answer (on whatever side of the debate) and more enamoured of the intriguing depths of the mystery. Bright-eyed, ponytailed youthful servants at the Lord's table, evoke questions in us, and disarm us with wonder. •