

## **Gender Inequality And Roman Catholic Priesthood: A Philosophical Examination**

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**ABSTRACT:-**As a religious expression, a priest is referred to a person that serves as a link between the world of human beings and the world of the divine. In Roman Catholic Church, priesthood is seen as an exclusive preserve of men. Women are not allowed to be ordained as priests. This singular practice points to the reality of gender inequality in the Roman Catholic Church. The pertinent questions now are: Why are women being excluded from the Roman Catholic priesthood? Does the inclusion of women into Roman Catholic priesthood demean the authenticity of the institution? What are the effects of women's exclusion from the Roman Catholic priesthood on the contemporary society? These and the related questions have bothered the mind of the researcher. Therefore, employing the philosophical methods of phenomenology and critical analysis, this study observed that the exclusion of women from Roman Catholic priesthood is practically based on dogmatic practice and prejudice against women. Such practice lacks merit before the court of reason. More so, the paper submits that there is nothing essentially wrong in ordaining women priests in Roman Catholic Church especially in our dynamic contemporary society. It therefore recommends for equal opportunity for men and women in the socio-religious sphere of the Roman Catholic Church. This study calls for total acceptance and practice of Gender equality especially with regards to Roman Catholic priesthood.

**Keywords:-** *Gender, Gender Inequality, Gender Equality, Catholic Priesthood, Women Ordination*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The talk on gender issues has taken centre stage in many academic, political and religious discussions. Many people are currently becoming aware of the existence of gender inequality and the necessity of gender equality. This awareness is not only in the political or academic sphere, it is also manifest in the religious sphere. Experience has shown how some people are denied some opportunities simply because the person belongs to a particular sex group. This type of attitude points to the reality of gender inequality in our society. Simply put, gender has to do with the classification of human beings into male and female with particular role attached to a particular sex. This presupposes that it is the society that creates the roles that are assigned to a particular sex. Ferrante (2008) observed that gender is a "social distinction based on culturally conceived and learned ideals about appropriate appearances, behaviour, and mental and emotional characteristics for males and females" (p. 269). For Macionis and Gerber (1999), the whole talk about gender is society-based. This means that gender issue is a social construct and not a biological construct. In this sense, gender inequality is seen as an unequal treatment given to a particular person simply because the person is a male or female. It is seen as an outright discrimination among human beings on the basis of the particular sex that one belongs to.

It is an existential fact that today Roman Catholic Church excludes women from ordination. Women are not seen as equal with men as far as ministerial priesthood is concerned. This study, therefore, is set to investigate the manifest gender problem inherent in the Roman Catholic Priesthood. We shall quickly take a look at the nature of Catholic priesthood and thereafter look at the position of the Roman Catholic Church on women ordination. The study will also beam its phenomenological and critical searchlights on ordination and gender inequality. This will be followed by a discussion on the effects of women's exclusion from ordination. Finally, the study ends with a concluding reflection.

### **II. NATURE OF ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIESTHOOD**

The word, priest, is a term generally used in the religious sphere. Etymologically, it is derived from the Greek word 'presbyteros' which simply means 'elder'. In this sense, a priest is seen as an elder in the community of God's people. A priest is not only an elder but he/she is a person designated either by God or the community to offer sacrifices to God. This is why the general understanding of a priest is the one that acts as an intermediary between the world of the divine and the world of human being. One thing that is clear is that there is no religion that is devoid of the understanding of priest. Boudinhon as cited in Ezeogu (2008) observed that "every religion has its priests who functions essentially as intermediaries between men and the Divinity," (p.

16). In the view of Bucher as cited in Ezekona (2008, p. 1), priesthood is seen as a sacred institution in a religions setup whose sacred officiates are ordained and dedicated for the service of a particular cult especially in sacrificial and other allied matters. Bucher's position ties priesthood with sacrifice. A priest is meant to offer sacrifice to God/gods on behalf of the people.

In the Roman Catholic Church, a priest is understood as ordained minister who is responsible for administering sacraments, preaching and ministering to the needs of the congregation. However, there is also this general understanding of the priesthood of all the baptized. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) affirmed that "the whole community of believers is, as such, priestly" (No. 1549, p. 382). This means that every baptized Christian is regarded as a priest since she/he shares in the eternal priesthood of Christ. This type of priesthood is all-embracing: it accommodates both men and women. However, this notion of priesthood is not our major concern. The concern of this paper is on the ministerial priesthood, that is, the ordination of some people selected from among the baptized. One thing to note is that not all the baptized are priests in the strict sense. It means that ministerial priesthood is meant for a selected few among the baptized. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) admonished in this regard:

While the common priesthood of the faithful is exercised by the unfolding of baptismal grace – a life of faith, hope and charity, a life according to the Spirit, the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood. It is directed at the unfolding of the baptismal grace of all Christians. The ministerial priesthood is a means by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church, (No. 1549, p. 382). The point here is that the understanding of priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church is twofold: the general priesthood of all the baptized and the ministerial priesthood of the ordained. Our concern is on the ministerial priesthood.

### **III. ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND WOMEN ORDINATION**

Simply put, ordination in this context has to do with the consecration of an individual to participate in the ministerial priesthood of Christ. It is seen as a sacred ministry set apart for a selected people. In the Roman Catholic Church, ordination to the ministerial priesthood is not open to all the baptized Christians. According to the Code of Canon Law (1983) it is emphatically stated that "only a baptized man can validly receive sacred ordination" (No. 1024, section 1, p. 183). The implication here is that women are absolutely excluded from ordination to the Catholic priesthood. The Roman Catholic Church is very mean as far as ordination is concerned. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994) gives a detailed discussion in this regard:

Only a baptized man (*vir*) validly receives sacred ordination. The Lord Jesus chose men (*viri*) to form the college of the twelve apostles, and the apostles did the same when they chose collaborators to succeed them in their ministry. The college of bishops, with whom the priests are united in the priesthood, makes the college of the twelve an ever-present and ever-active reality until Christ's return. The Church recognizes herself to be bound by this choice made by the Lord himself. For this reason the ordination of women is not possible (No. 1577, p. 389).

There is no ambiguity concerning the admission of women into Roman Catholic priesthood. One basic thing that is clear is that women are excluded from ordination. In this sense, ministerial priesthood is an exclusive preserve of the male-folk alone. Women are not qualified to participate in the ministerial priesthood of Christ.

It should be recalled that when the Anglican Communion began to consider the ordination of women, the then Pope, Paul VI expressed worry. This led him to write a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury. In the words of the Pope, the Church:

holds that it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood, for very fundamental reasons. These reasons include: the example recorded in the sacred scriptures of Christ choosing his Apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his Church, (Paul VI as cited in Robinson, 2005, par. 1).

The understanding here is that the exclusion of women from ordination is a divine mandate. The argument of Paul VI is that since Christ did not select women among his apostles, it will be acting against the divine injunction to ordain women to the Catholic priesthood. This view of Pope Paul VI is in the line of thought of his successor, Pope John Paul II. It was in 1994 that John Paul II issued an Apostolic Letter to address the lingering issue of women ordination. He made it emphatically clear that the authority to ordain women to the priesthood does not reside with the Church. His Apostolic Letter reads:

Although the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and Universal Tradition of the church and firmly taught by the Magisterium in its more recent documents, at the present time in some places it is nonetheless considered still open to debate, or the Church's judgment that women are not to be admitted to ordination is considered to have a merely disciplinary force. Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which

pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk. 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitely held by all the Church's faithful. (John Paul II, 1994, pars. 11 – 12).

One can easily infer from the position of John Paul II that since Christ selected apostles (all men) and commanded them to continue his ministry, the apostles selected only males to replace them, it then follows that in order to change this tradition, the Church has to go back to the initiator of the ministerial priesthood – Christ. This is what John Paul II meant when he said that the Church has no authority to ordain women. The present Roman Pontiff, Pope Francis is very categorical as regards the ordination of women. Following the debate on women ordination, he said, "The Church has spoken and says no ... that door is closed" (Pope Francis as cited in McClory, 2013, par. 3). So for Pope Francis there is no going back concerning Church's decision to exclude women from ordination. The practice of excluding women from ordination, as stated above, has become part of the Roman Catholic tradition. Therefore, having taken a look at the position of the Roman Catholic Church on the ordination of women, the next sub-topic that follows shall focus on the manifestation of gender inequality in the Roman Catholic Church with particular reference to ministerial priesthood.

#### **IV. ORDINATION AND GENDER INEQUALITY**

Following the discussion above, the logical implication is that Roman Catholic Church supports gender inequality as far as ordination is concerned. The Church, as portrayed in the previous sub-topic, is chauvinistic. Roman Catholic Church is gender biased with regard to priestly ordination. However, some people have argued that the Church is not chauvinistic but simply following the divine mandate. John Paul II as cited in Haskins (2003, p. 114) apologized for the Church's failure to recognize the contributions and importance of women. He went further to praise women's contributions to the Church and society and urged for change to make women's equality a reality. He called for equal opportunity for men and women; equal pay for equal work; protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancement and equal family rights for men and women. The position of John Paul II seemingly shows that the Church supports equality of men and women. But one glaring fact is that in principle, the Church preaches equality of all human beings, but in practice, she (the Church) has some reservations. This implies that her position is one-sided. The position of John Paul II as stated above is a contradiction to the Church's position that women are not to be ordained to the ministerial priesthood. This is premised on the fact that the Roman Pontiff (John Paul II) called for equal opportunity for men and women. But since the Pope called for equal opportunity for men and women, why should the Church admit only males to the ministerial priesthood? Does it mean that the Church is now talking with two different tongues? Certainly any rational and sound mind will perceive the Church as being self-contradictory. Haskins (2003) observed:

Statements by various Church leaders praising women and their historical contributions, emphasizing their importance in public life, and stressing the ideal harmony that will result from eliminating gender bias, directly contradict the statement by the Sacred Congregation that insists the Church cannot authorize the ordination of women as priests (p. 115).

The fact is that if the Roman Catholic Church is talking about the elimination of gender bias, she must start with herself. It is a clear manifestation of gender bias for the Church to exclude women from priestly ministry. Granted that Christ did not choose any woman among his apostles, we must also not forget the fact that Christ had many female followers as recorded in the gospel of Mark 3: 9 – 11. More so, St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians 3:28 noted that in Christ Jesus there is no longer any distinction between men and women. The question now is: How real is this statement of St. Paul in view of the manifest gender bias in the Church? If there is no distinction between men and women in Christ Jesus, then the exclusion of women from priesthood is highly discriminatory and unfair. At this juncture, this study wishes to state categorically that the exclusion of women from ordination to the Roman Catholic priesthood is a clear manifestation of gender inequality in the Church. The fact that men and women are not given equal opportunity to participate in the ministerial priesthood of Christ is a contradiction to the teaching of the Church on equality of all men and women. This means that until the Church begins to change her position on women's ordination, she cannot be said to be a vanguard of gender equality.

#### **V. EFFECTS OF WOMEN'S EXCLUSION FROM ORDINATION**

The fact that stares everyone in the face is that the exclusion of women from Roman Catholic priesthood has some negative effects on the contemporary society. It is no gainsaying the fact that women's exclusion from ordination is geared towards the promotion of sexism. Roy Bourgeois (a Catholic priest who was dismissed from priesthood by the Vatican for his support of women's ordination) argued profusely that "refusing women the priesthood based on their femaleness is a sin; specifically the sin of sexism" (Bourgeois as cited in Messina-Dysert, 2014, par. 3). He further argued that male-only priesthood arguably is the most damaging, for it renders the Church as a model justification for the view of women as sub-human being. This implies that the Church is a promoter of gender bias and gender inequality.

More so, studies have shown that the widespread objectification of women is engendered by denial of right of ordination to women. Objectification is understood in this study to mean such instances in which women are viewed as objects to be acquired or possessed. With this understanding, the exclusion of women from ordination objectifies and oppresses the women-folk. This view sees the women as means to an end, instead of end in themselves. We must recall the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant which states that a human person is an end in himself/herself and not a means to an end (Kant as cited in Omoregbe, 2003, p. 226). This means that the human person should not be treated as an object. Both men and women are human beings and should not be objectified in any form or guise. But the exclusion of women from ordination gives support to the objectification of women. This is rationally impermissible.

Today, we experience proliferation of churches. This is one of the resultant effects of exclusion of women from the Catholic priesthood. Many women decamp from the Church to establish their own churches as a result of manifest gender inequality in the Catholic priesthood. Gender inequality in the Catholic priesthood raises series of issues for feminism. One of the issues is the rejection of the notion of God as having male gender. The point here is that a situation where we have only the male-image of God is tantamount to rendering femininity as a taboo, sacrilege and useless. It is also important to note that gender inequality as manifested in the exclusion of women from Catholic priesthood is a promotion of masculinity. It is an existential fact that the contents and practices of masculinity are socially constructed; they are not natural to the human person. And if they are not natural to the human person, it is a clear manifestation of marginalization of women by the men-folk. The exclusion of women from ordination marginalizes women as creatures unworthy of respect and incapable of holding office of authority among men. This marginalization is also premised on the notion that men are more like God than women. In St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians 11:7, we read that "man is the image of God; but the woman is the glory of the man." This negative notion breeds the spirit of superiority complex on the part of men and inferiority complex on the part of women. In short, the exclusion of women from ordination downplays the dignity of women as human beings.

The worst effect of the exclusion of women from ordination, in the view of this paper, is that it does not give room for the full development of leadership potentialities on the part of women. It downgrades the humanity of womanhood. Humanity is not restricted to male-folk alone. Muonwe (2014) argued that "Each person (male or female) is fully human; no single sex can claim to represent humanity at the exclusion of the other" (p. 110). The exclusion of women from ordination is a serious crime against humanity.

## **VI. CONCLUDING REFLECTION**

One thing we must note at this point is that the exclusion of women from Catholic priesthood is not based on any rational justification. We know that any claim that lacks rational justification is discarded. This is why this paper calls for the total overhauling of the Church's position on women's ordination. It is clear from the religious perspective that it is God that calls people to the priesthood. If this is true, why should the Church refute such call from women? God/Nature created both men and women equal. The humanity of men is neither superior nor inferior to the humanity of women. In this sense, Church's discrimination against women in matters of ordination is condemnable. The Holy Scriptures reminded us that in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28). This means that God sees all of us as human beings; not as a male or female. We are all human beings and should be treated as such. It is pertinent to note the words of Roy Bourgeois in his letter to Rev. Edward Dougherty when he (Roy Bourgeois) was asked to recant his stance on women's ordination: After much reflection, study, and prayer I believe that our Church's teaching that excludes women from the priesthood defies both faith and reason and cannot stand up to scrutiny. This teaching has nothing to do with God, but with men, and is rooted in sexism. Sexism, like racism, is a sin. And no matter how hard we may try to justify discrimination against women, in the end, it is not the way of God, but of men who want to hold on to their power ... I firmly believe that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is a grave injustice against women, against our Church, and against our God (Bourgeois, 2011, par. 4, 7).

Following from the view of Bourgeois above, the position of this study is that any form of discrimination against women either on religious, cultural or social grounds defies human rationality. In this sense, the discrimination against women's ordination does not hold water before the 'Court of Reason'. Studies have also shown that there is no valid reason to deny women the opportunity to participate in the ministerial priesthood. Ruether (2011) relates:

Catholic Biblical studies have shown that there is no valid case to be made against the ordination of women from the scriptures. Rather this rejection reflects fundamentally a sinful prejudice against women similar to traditions that believed that Blacks were inferior and should sit in the back pews of the Church (par. 3).

We are in a dynamic society and as such, the Roman Catholic Church should not be static in her approach to issues concerning women's ordination. The Church has to move with the trend of the study as far as it is morally and rationally permissible. This study strongly calls for gender equality in the Roman Catholic

priesthood. Both men and women should be given equal opportunity to participate in the ministerial priesthood of Christ. The fact that a particular human person is a male or a female, does not make the particular individual a higher or a lesser human person. Muonwe (2014) relates the views of Jane Martins in this regard: “the distinction of the sexes does not necessarily diminish the humanity of any of them, but rather shows them as naturally relational, equal, and full human persons” (Martins as cited in Muonwe, 2014, p. 121). One basic fact here is that the acceptance and practice of gender equality in Roman Catholic priesthood recognizes the divine truth that God does not discriminate between male and female. More so, the full acceptance of gender equality in Catholic priesthood will positively affect our contemporary society towards holistic human development. We cannot talk of the full actualization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) when there is manifest gender inequality in the Roman Catholic Church. The Church has to open her door to the invitation of reason to enable her see the reason for inclusion of women in the ministerial priesthood.

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