

The thin end of the wedge



‘“Pope in condom row”, say the headlines. In fact, this row has nothing much to do with condoms. The prophylaxes in question, which might or might not have been distributed by an outreach project run under the auspices of the Knights of Malta, are merely the trigger for a dispute that is more important even than the rights and wrongs of contraception, an issue the Catholic church has struggled badly with for over a half a century.’ So says Joanna Moorhead in an article for the Guardian 26 January 2017. She continues ‘The real issue in the row that resulted in the sacking of the British head of the Knights of Malta is the most important question of all in the Catholic church: what is the right way to represent Christ’s teaching in the world of today?’ While hugely popular across the globe with Catholics and non-Catholics alike, Francis is struggling against fierce opposition from the Vatican establishment to haul the Roman Catholic church into the 21st century.

The dispute between the more conservative members of the Knights of Malta and the Pope has revealed the bitter divisions inside the Church between those supporting Pope Francis vision for a more flexible compassionate Catholicism rooted in discernment and dialogue and their opponents, who are determined to return to a church of unbending rules. Rules that are made at the top and unquestioningly adhered to by those at the bottom. The old order represented by Matthew Festing the erstwhile Grand Master of the Order of Malta and the

archconservative Cardinal Raymond Burke are deeply dismayed by Pope Francis and what they see as his unacceptable liberalism. This is particularly highlighted by *Amoris Laetitia* which in effect he told the church’s bishops to make local decisions about the divorced and remarried and their receiving of communion. Cardinal Burke has tried to call Francis’s bluff by challenging him to define exactly what he meant by *Amoris Laetitia* with its apparent contradiction of traditional church teaching and the move to allow the clergy at the coalface to make decisions. It is this that the traditionalists see as the thin end of the wedge.

Cardinal Burke said it saddens him that some would “suggest that I am an enemy of the Pope and that I am somehow working against the Pope.”



Pope Francis has changed the Catholic church in a truly fundamental way, and he has changed it forever. That’s what people like Festing and Burke realise, and that’s why they’re stopping at nothing to challenge him. Because what Francis has done is this: he has replaced rule-bound, traditional, unbending Catholicism with what we might call instinctive Christianity- a shift to a more pastoral church. That’s why the world loves him. And that’s why he’s so dangerous to the old order of the Catholic church.

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Exciting discoveries of two unusual frescos

Two frescos have been recently rediscovered and restored (in 2011) in the catacombs of San Gennaro in Naples, Italy. These are women said to be Cerula and Bitalia.

They have the “chi-rho” symbol of Christ over their heads. Cerula is also surrounded by Paul and (arguably) Peter, who look over her. Most significantly, they are represented with the open volumes of all four gospels above their hands.

This is a unique occurrence – no other representation we know of portrays a women with the four open gospels. In Roman sarcophagi, there are occurrences in which the deceased is represented holding or reading a scroll, to indicate that he or she was highly educated and wise.

However, Cerula and Bitalia are represented not with a general, unidentified scroll, but rather -

and strikingly - with the four open volumes of the gospels, with the name of each evangelist clearly written so as not to leave any doubt about what those volumes are. This suggests those women were somehow linked to the gospels.

One interpretation could be that the painter simply wanted to say that they lived in accordance with, and guided by, the gospels. A more daring interpretation is that both women were publicly known to be very knowledgeable about the gospels. That might

have been because they read the gospels in the liturgy, preached or taught about them.

There is one major piece of evidence that supports such a bold interpretation. Around the same time of those frescoes, in 495 CE, Pope Gelasius I wrote to the bishops of Southern Italy (an area which included Naples) a famous letter in which he states that he had heard that

“...divine things have undergone such contempt that women are encouraged to serve at the sacred altars, and that all tasks entrusted to the service of men are performed by a sex for which these [tasks] are not appropriate.”

We might just have found the names and portraits of two of those “culprits”! In reality, it supports other archaeological evidence of women exercising priestly roles in those areas.

For more information see

www.womendeacons.org/cerula-and-bitalia

News on websites updates.

Our Word Press site for www.womendeacons.org has been up and running for over a year. It will provide vital information as the commission set up by Pope Francis to look into the question of women deacons meets.



The fresco of Bitulia.

We have been delighted to receive offers of help with translations and there are now 9 documents in Spanish and 2 in German with more promised.



Luca speaking at the UN about the Scholars declaration on Contraception.

This year we have worked hard on the new website www.catholicsandcontraception.com. It centres on the Scholars' Statement we launched last September at the UN and reported on in our last newsletter. We have given important details of the history of the Church and contraception and more recently the pastoral concerns involved.

In the course of this work I have been particularly impressed by the book published by Professor Joseph Selling in 1977 on the worldwide response to *Humanae vitae*. It is a lengthy and scholarly work which gives a balanced detailed analysis of reaction to HV from around the world. We have uploaded it in full.



Professor Joseph Selling, Moral Theology (Emeritus), Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium.

During his long career, Professor Selling has specialised in studying the theology of Marriage and the Family. His doctorate dissertation consisted in an analysis of the responses to the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. Later he published a detailed report on the 1980 Synod at Rome on the Role of the Family.

It shows the preoccupation of bishops' conferences for several years after the publication of HV was the advice they should give on the pressing pastoral problems raised by the encyclical. There was considerable stress on the primacy of conscience for couples trying to develop a responsible attitude to parenthood relative to their individual circumstances, often with reference to Vatican II. Then very gradually the importance of the Authority of the Vatican seemed to assume greater importance.

Selling also talks about the status of encyclicals. The reaction to HV has naturally led to the consideration of the weight of various papal statements and the role of the central magisterium in moral teaching. "This genre of papal teaching is an elusive one, including an entire gambit of topics and importance and having a rather short history. The term "encyclical" is best translated "circular letter" and came into frequent use only in the 18th century. Benedict XIV (1740-58) issued the first "encyclical" that was addressed widely and presumed to be a teaching for the whole church, *Ubi Primum*. Since that time, a number of popes have used this means of communication and set forth some important teachings, especially in the area of social doctrine. But many, if not most, encyclicals have quickly become outdated and overruled, even by the same popes who issued them, and one would be hard pressed to find very many important examples which still accurately represent the current teaching of the church."

Heartfelt letters.

Here are 2 letters one by one of our supporters to the office of Cardinal Nichols which she allowed us to share and the other by John Wijngaards in the 25/02/2017 issue of the Tablet.

'I would like to register my extreme disappointment about Pope Francis's recent statement that Pope John Paul 11's declaration against women's ordination is definitive. I do not believe that Pope John Paul 11's declaration was, correctly speaking, infallible but that it was his own opinion based on a now outdated tradition.

Many women have already left the RC Church and become Anglicans because they know they have priestly vocations. I am too old for ordination as a priest to be a consideration for me, but all the same I am finding it increasingly difficult to remain in such a male-dominated church. Apart from the nuns I know who would be wonderful priests if they had the opportunity, I know many lay women who have vocations which the Church is suppressing. Increasingly, I go to C.of E. women priests for confession instead of to Catholic priests because they understand and listen to what I am saying wisely. Ordained C.of.E. women have the benefit of theological training which Catholic women do not have, giving them the confidence to work positively for God. Being ordained means that their word is listened to, for example, in prisons, where a chaplain with a clerical collar is more greatly respected than one with no outward sign of authority. As women, I believe we Catholic women have been cowed and infantilised by the Church.

The reason I am writing to you is that I have no idea how else I can stand up and be counted if the Diocese wishes to know how many women are horrified that they are still not to be brought into all positions of trust and authority. Having spent a long time in Singapore and conversed with maids, I know that the ordination of women is particularly urgent in the Philippines where bishops have long countenanced enormous families without listening with compassion to the plight of women.

Please could you convey my disappointment to

the Bishop or whoever might be collecting statistics about reactions to the Pope's pronouncement.

With thanks and regards

Pamela Perry

The letter below is in response to a recent statement by Cardinal Nichols

On the male, celibate priesthood and the possibility of women deacons, Cardinal Nichols said he personally valued both celibacy "and the fact that [the priesthood] is restricted, as I would believe is the wish of the Lord, to men."

He also appeared to express scepticism about the idea of women deacons, saying, "I also find it difficult to separate the diaconate out of the one Sacrament of Holy Orders."

Cardinal Nichols is, of course, entitled to his personal appreciation of "both the celibacy of the priesthood and the fact that it is restricted, as I would believe is the wish of the Lord, to men". Neither do I question his belief that such is the wish of the Lord. But how do we assess what the Lord wishes?

As to celibacy, Jesus was well aware of Peter being married. And, although Jesus praised voluntary celibacy for the Kingdom, he did not reject Peter as his priest nor ask him to separate from his wife.

With regard to restricting the priesthood to men, Jesus did not express a clear wish. For the 12 he chose only men, because in his time only men could exercise leadership. But Jesus promised the Spirit of Truth. "The Spirit will lead you to the complete truth ... He will explain future things to you" (John 16:13-14). Does this not mean that we should hear the Spirit speak in the "future things" God's People ask for, and discern the wish of the Lord for the pastoral reality of our time?

John Wijngaards
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