



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – May 2008

St Dunstan's Day 2008

THOSE WHO look to the Bishop of Ebbsfleet, and other traditionalist bishops, have a variety of views on the ordination of women as bishops and priests. Some say that such ordinations are 'for ever impossible'. Some say that they are impossible until the churches of East and West, from whom and with whom we share our Catholic Faith and Order, agree to take this step. Others cheerfully accept the orders of women bishops and priests but find coherent Catholic Faith and vigour in Anglicanism only within the traditionalist Anglo-Catholic community. Others belong to us because they 'just do': none of these matters concern them or interest them.

On 19th May I am asking everyone who looks to me to join in a Day of Prayer. Different parishes will do it in different ways: here a vigil before the Blessed Sacrament, there a special Mass and a good deal of praying at home. On that day, St Dunstan's Day, the Bishops will meet at Market Bosworth to begin discussion of the Manchester Report. What will the Manchester Report tell us and how will the Bishops in May and the General Synod in July react to it? It will be an attempt to find a framework in which women can be ordained bishop in the Church of England without causing an exodus of traditionalists who cannot accept that such ordinations are possible within a Catholic framework. In other words, it will seek to provide us with an ongoing framework for Catholic Order within a rather looser Anglican family.

Was the diocesan bishop (one who himself ordains women priests) right when he said that, in 1992, the Church of England decided finally that it was a Protestant Church? Certainly much hinges on what you think the General Synod can and cannot legitimately decide. Could it alter the Bible? Could it change the Creeds? Could it modify the Sacraments? If the answer to these is 'no', then it probably can no more admit women to Holy Order on its own authority than it could change wine for beer in Holy Communion or swap cough linctus for olive oil in the Sacrament of the Sick. It's a matter of authority not logical argument: there are very good reasons for editing the Bible – for instance putting the books in better chronological order, or omitting a book or two altogether – but logic alone doesn't give us authority to do it.

The Pope has publicly expressed his admiration for a national Church which, though it is 'nonsensical' to extend 'the majority principle to questions of doctrine' and entrust 'doctrinal decisions to...national churches', 'consciously admits bishops who are not for women's ordination and who provide a sort of refuge for the Catholic part of Anglicanism.' He goes on to say that 'a strong Catholic potency has always remained in Anglicanism, and it is becoming very visible again in the present crisis' (*Salt of the Earth*, Ignatius Press 1997, p 145). That this may be so and that we may discern ever more clearly our ecumenical vocation, as I said in the Chrism Mass sermon this year, we must 'Watch and pray'. On 19th May and thereafter.

May God bless us and reveal his will to us as we seek that Unity which Christ wills.

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