27. Women pastors and priests

Often heard: "Catholics don't let women be priests, but they make Mary almost divine." / "Some Baptist churches now have women pastors; why can't Catholics?"
Also heard: "If Scripture alone is enough, why can't Baptists agree whether women may be pastors?"

Settled from Scripture; Protestant churches divided

HELD BY Lutheran ELCA yes, LCMS no | Reformed PC(USA) yes, PCA no | Anglican most provinces ordain | Methodist ordain women | Baptist SBC no, others yes

Protestant churches settle the question from Scripture and have divided over it: most Methodist churches, most Anglican provinces, the ELCA and the PC(USA) ordain women as pastors, while the Missouri Synod Lutherans and the Presbyterian Church in America keep the pastoral office for men. Among Baptists, the Southern Baptist Convention (BF&M 2000, art. VI) limits the office of pastor to men qualified by Scripture, while affirming women's gifts in other ministries; in 2023 the SBC upheld the removal of churches with women pastors, including Saddleback Church. Other Baptist bodies (American Baptist Churches USA, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship) ordain women.

VERSES CITED

Restrictive: 1 Tim 2:11–14; 3:1–2; Titus 1:6; 1 Cor 14:34–35. Egalitarian: Gal 3:28; Rom 16:1–7 (Phoebe, Junia); Acts 2:17–18; 18:26; 21:9.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Women preachers appeared among early General Baptists and Quakers in the 17th century; Baptist women were first ordained in the U.S. in the late 19th century, among Freewill Baptists (M. A. Brennan, 1876) and Northern Baptists (May Jones, 1882), and more widely in the 20th.

Priesthood reserved to men by Christ's choice

HELD BY Catholic definitively held | Orthodox deaconess debated

The Church has no authority to ordain women as priests, a teaching John Paul II said is to be definitively held (*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, 1994). The reason is not inferiority but that Christ chose only men as apostles, and the priest acts in the person of Christ the Bridegroom toward His Bride, the Church. Women serve in many roles, and the highest human person in Catholic devotion is a woman, Mary.

VERSES CITED

Mark 3:13–19; Luke 22:14–20; 1 Cor 11:3; 14:34–35; Eph 5:25–32; 1 Tim 2:12.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

Tertullian (*On Baptism* 17; *Prescription* 41) and Epiphanius (*Panarion* 79) reject women in priestly roles. The early church had deaconesses who assisted at women's baptisms; their status is debated.

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 1577–1578; John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994) and *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988).

Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

The Church holds that it has no authority to ordain women as priests, a teaching to be definitively held, because Christ chose only men as apostles and the priest acts in the person of Christ the Bridegroom. The full case is set out above.

Sources: John Paul II, Ordinatio Sacerdotalis (1994); CCC 1577-1578.

Orthodox

The Orthodox Church ordains only men as priests and bishops, keeping the Church's received practice. The ancient order of deaconesses appears in its canons. The Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Alexandria decided on 16 November 2016 to restore the order, and on 17 February 2017 Patriarch Theodoros II made a catechist, Theano, "Deaconess of the Missions" in Kolwezi, Congo. Other Orthodox churches have not followed, and the step is debated.

Sources: Quinisext (Trullo) canon 48 (a bishop's former wife may become a deaconess); Patriarchate of Alexandria, Holy Synod decision of 16 Nov 2016 and consecration at Kolwezi, 17 Feb 2017 (reported by Pravoslavie.ru/OrthoChristian).

Lutheran

Lutherans are divided. The Lutheran Church in America and the American Lutheran Church voted in 1970 to ordain women, and the ELCA, formed from them in 1988, ordains women as pastors. The LCMS teaches that "only men are to be ordained into the pastoral office." WELS holds that women may serve in the public ministry except where the work involves authority over men, citing 1 Tim 2:11-12.

Reformed

Reformed churches are divided. The PC(USA)'s predecessor bodies ordained women as ruling elders from 1930 and as ministers from 1956 (Margaret Towner), and the southern PCUS ordained its first woman minister in 1965. The Presbyterian Church in America holds that, in accord with Scripture, the offices of elder and deacon are open to men only, and that unordained people may not take the titles pastor, elder or deacon.

Sources: ELCA, 50 Years of Ordained Women (elca.org) and synod resolutions on the 1970 LCA and ALC votes; LCMS Reporter, 27 Oct 2006 (CTCR executive director S. Nafzger); WELS, This We Believe, Church and Ministry 10.

Sources: Presbyterian Historical Society blog (pcusa.org), on the women who paved the way; PCA Book of Church Order 7-2, 7-3.

Anglican

Anglicans differ by province. The Church of England's General Synod approved women priests on 11 November 1992, and the first 32 were ordained at Bristol Cathedral on 12 March 1994; legislation for women bishops followed in 2014, with a House of Bishops' Declaration providing for those who cannot in conscience accept it. As of 2023 three provinces, South East Asia, Papua New Guinea and Melanesia, still ordained no women.

Sources: Church of England press release, Celebrations mark 25 years of women's ordination to the priesthood (2019); General Synod, Amending Canon 33 (2014); House of Bishops' Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests; The Living Church, 7 Nov 2023.

Methodist

Methodists generally ordain women, pointing to women who preached in Wesley's own movement, such as Mary Bosanquet Fletcher. The Methodist Protestant Church ordained Anna Howard Shaw in 1880, and on 4 May 1956 the Methodist Church granted women full clergy rights, including ordination and guaranteed appointment, a position the United Methodist Church inherited.

Sources: UMC, Ask The UMC: When did the church first ordain women? (umc.org); UM News, Why the 1956 women-clergy vote matters.

Baptist

The Southern Baptist Convention limits the office of pastor to men and in 2023 upheld the removal of churches with women pastors, while other Baptist bodies ordain women. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Baptist Faith and Message (2000) art. VI.

Where it gets contested: The line does not run between Baptists and Catholics: Catholics, the Orthodox, the Missouri Synod Lutherans, the Presbyterian Church in America and the Southern Baptist Convention keep the pastoral or priestly office for men, while the ELCA, the PC(USA), most Anglican provinces, Methodists and other Baptist bodies ordain women, so it runs within several traditions as well as between them.

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