

A Church divided over women priests

THE debate on ordination of women priests — likely to create schism within the Church of England — is rocking the foundations of the Anglican Church in Australia.

Ms Ruth Sturme, a co-ordinator of the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW), believes the ruling in England to draw up legislation for the ordination of women priests will speed action in Australia.

"It's about time," she says. "This will make it much harder for the opposition in Australia."

She believes that although theological reasons are put forward as the major reasons, the fear of change is the underlying obstacle.

"Traditional belief in the Christian Church is that God ordained that women should be subject to men in the Church and the family," she says. "Thus women have been denied positions of authority in teaching, administration and the sacrament."

"Prevailing evangelical arguments against the ordination of women priests are based on spiritual headship, that man is the head in spiritual matters."

Ruth Sturme says the additional prevailing arguments within the high Anglican Church are:

JESUS appointed male apostles and to stay true to that tradition the priesthood must remain male.

BECAUSE women menstruate their blood renders them unclean and they are therefore unable to participate in the blessing of the Eucharist.

ORDINATION of women would disturb the relationship with the Church of Rome.

The move towards acceptance of women priests in some quarters is demonstrated by the first Australian ordinations of women to the diaconate — the first stage of priesthood — which took place in February 1986.

The Sydney diocese has a difference of opinion between the Archbishop and the Synod over the ordination of women.

The vote last week by the Church of England Synod to draw up legislation for the ordination of women priests threatens to create a possibly irreconcilable division. BERWYN LEWIS looks at how the ruling may affect the Anglican Church in Australia

"Those who opposed these ordinations lodged an objection to the Appellate Tribunal, the legal body of the Church in Australia, saying the ordinations were illegal. The Appellate has yet to decide whether to uphold that objection or whether the constitution allows it," explained Ms Sturme.

She believes the opposition's arguments disguise the real issues: a perceived threat to the hierarchy of Church and the family and a threat to the authority of the Bible and tradition.

Father John Fleming, an Anglican priest who is president of the Union of Anglican-Catholic

Anglican consensus and fellowship is breaking down.

"The Archbishop of Perth recently asserted that he thought those who could not accept the ordination of women should shake the dust off their feet and go elsewhere. The new liberal establishment do not want dissension. You fall into line or you move out."

"I don't think there will be a place in the Anglican Church of Australia for those who disagree with the ordination of women."

"It is not right for the Church to proceed until these substantial theological objections are resolved."

Father Fleming says he does not believe the ruling in England will necessarily result in the full ordination of women priests.

"Christ chose 12 male apostles which is essential to the nature of the priesthood," he says. "One of the great fathers of the early Church, St John Chrysostom, stated that the exclusion of women from the priesthood was according to divine and not human law."

"The argument that this is imitating the prejudices of the day is not sustainable."

"The proponents of women's right to be ordained abandon theology very quickly. They simply assert the issue of discrimination but to hold that God is prejudiced against women is nonsense."

"The priest is the icon, or image, of Christ. Because Christ is male the priest must represent directly what he is. A woman cannot play the part of Christ in the direct, special, sacramental sense."

"Liberals would argue that they are not changing the priesthood, that they're just admitting women to it."

'The Anglican fellowship is breaking down'

Priests in Adelaide, says he does not believe the ruling in England will affect the situation.

"They can get a majority of their General Synod to bring in legislation. That's different from passing it. They'll be struggling to find full support. It will not be a goer in England."

"In Australia the ordination of women may produce schisms which will result in some dioceses

going their own way, perhaps withdrawing funds. There will be leakages to Rome and the Orthodox. There is a distinct possibility of a complete breakaway church. This is foreshadowed in England. The



In an historic ceremony last week, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Robert Runcie, ordains as deacon one of 15 women candidates

"In proceeding to ordain women, Anglicans demonstrate that they speak with a forked tongue, that they are dishonouring their word to the ecumenical enterprise between Rome and the orthodox Anglicans," Father Fleming says.

The General Synod in Australia is holding a meeting in August devoted to the question of women which, according to Dr Patricia Brennan, national president of MOW, is an indication of the importance of the issue.

"Normally the Church meets every four years and discusses a whole range of issues," she says. "This meeting is being held only two years after the last one."

"In 1977 in the General Synod of the Anglican Church it was decided that there were no theological objections which constitute an obstacle to the ordination of women. Ever since then there has been legal wrangling. It's a decade-

long last-ditch stand to stop women."

"An overwhelming majority of bishops, clergy and laity support the ordination of women."

"When women were first priested the laity came across wholesale in Canada, the United States, Singapore, New Zealand and in African countries. Australia is one of the last to make the change."

"But the word is getting around. The woman priest is normal," says Dr Brennan.

The Primate of Australia and Archbishop of Brisbane, Sir John Grindrod, whose wife, Mrs Dell Grindrod, is one of the contributors to a book titled *Opening the Cage, Stories of Gender and Church*, says he cannot comment until the Appellate Tribunal decides on the legality of women priests.

This ruling is expected soon.