

The Ordination of Women as Priests

From time to time, the subject of the ordination of women to the Catholic priesthood is questioned, sometimes even by good-intentioned “Catholics” who do not fully understand their faith. Radio and television media will pick up on these public challenges [it seems] with the intent to stir up controversy in an effort to engage their audiences rather than bring clarity to this important topic.

The teaching of the Church on this matter is quite clear.

The Church’s Teaching

The Catholic Church has never considered that priestly ordination could be validly conferred on women. “The Church’s tradition in the matter has been so firm in the course of the centuries that the Magisterium [the Church’s teaching office] has not felt the need to intervene in order to formulate a principle which was not attacked, or to defend a law which was not challenged.”¹

Pope John Paul II addressed this issue in his insightful letter on the dignity of women: “*In calling only men as his Apostles, Christ acted in a completely free and sovereign manner. In doing so, he exercised the same freedom with which, in all his behavior, he emphasized the dignity and the vocation of women, without conforming to the prevailing customs and to the traditions sanctioned by the legislation of the time. Consequently, the assumption that he called men to be apostles in order to conform to the widespread mentality of his times does not at all correspond to Christ’s way of acting. ‘Teacher, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men’ (Mt 22:16).”*²

The Church’s teaching regarding the ordination of women is repeated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Under the heading, “Who Can Receive This Sacrament?” the Catechism affirms:

“Only a baptized man (*vir*) validly receives sacred ordination,” citing the Code of Canon Law # 1024. Then it adds, “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 Church recognizes herself to be bound by this choice made by the Lord himself. For this reason the ordination of women is not possible” (CCC # 1577).

¹ “Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood,” *Inter Insigniores*, from the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, published under the authority and direction of Pope Paul VI, October 15, 1976, # 1.

² *Mulieris Dignitatem*, August 15, 1988, # 26.

To further clarify the matter Pope John Paul II wrote an apostolic letter on May 22, 1994, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* – Priestly Ordination. In this brief letter he affirmed the “absolutely necessary and irreplaceable” role of women in the life and Mission of the Church.³ Nevertheless, he also reaffirmed the definitive nature of the restriction of priestly ordination to males:

“Therefore, the teaching on the priestly ordination as reserved only to men has been preserved by the *constant and universal tradition of the Church*, and has been *constantly and universally taught by the Church*, and has been *taught firmly by the Magisterium in its recent documents*, even though in our time and in diverse places it is considered open to discussion, in the sense that there is to be attributed a merely disciplinary value to the decision of the Church not to admit women to such ordination. Thus, so as *to remove every doubt* regarding a question of such great importance, which entails the divine constitution of the Church, and in virtue of my ministry to confirm the brethren in the faith [cf. Lk 22:32], *I declare that the Church does not possess in any way the faculty to confer priestly ordination on women, and that this statement ought to be considered as definitive by all the faithful of the Church.*”

In spite of the clear and definitive language of Pope John Paul II’s apostolic letter, a question arose regarding its doctrinal weight. Therefore, Pope John Paul II approved the following clarification to be issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger on October 28, 1995:

“Dubium [Question]: Whether the teaching that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women, which is presented in the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* to be held definitively, is to be understood as belonging to the deposit of the faith?

Responsum [Answer]: In the affirmative.

This teaching requires definitive assent, since, founded on the written word of God and from the beginning constantly preserved and applied in the tradition of the Church, *it has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal Magisterium* [cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 25.2]. Thus, in the present circumstances, the Roman pontiff, exercising his proper office of confirming the brethren [cf. Lk 22:32], has handed on this same *teaching by a formal declaration, explicitly stating what is to be held always, everywhere and by all as belonging to the deposit of the faith.*”

Why does the ordination of women continue to be questioned?

For faithful Catholics the question is closed. The ordination of men only is part of the deposit of faith handed to the Church by Christ. It will never change. The discussion is over. Why, then, does this question linger?

³ *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, # 3.

It's important to recognize that in our secular culture, which rejects the centrality of God's action in the world, all organizations are viewed as merely human constructs that can change with the will of the majority or by the whim of those in power. As a result there is little appreciation of a Church that is formed by the God-man, Jesus Christ, and that must always conform to the structure and principles he established.

In the distorted secular viewpoint, a priest is merely considered a functionary who is not essentially different from a president, a senator, a business executive, or a Protestant minister. Much less do they consider the priesthood a vocation that fundamentally comes from a divine call, not innate qualities, personal ambition or desire. Therefore, the judgment is made that women suffer discrimination because they can't be ordained. This perspective illustrates an appalling lack of understanding of the nature of the Catholic Church and of the priesthood.

In addressing the charge of discrimination, John Paul II wrote:

“Furthermore, the fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, received neither the mission proper to the Apostles nor the ministerial priesthood clearly shows that the non-admission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them. Rather, it is to be seen as the faithful observance of a plan to be ascribed to the wisdom of the Lord of the universe.”⁴

All ancient societies were patriarchal, yet all had women priests with one exception – the Hebrew people. That is because they understood that a priest represented God's fatherhood to the people he served. Clearly, this was not a role suitable for women. So we see in the Book of Judges that a man named Micah asks a Levite: “Stay with me. . . Be father and priest to me” (Judg 17:10). Afterward members of the tribe of Dan approach this Levite. The Danites asked him: “Come with us and be our father and priest” (Judg 18:19). The connection between fatherhood and priesthood is also evident in the New Testament. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

“Even if you should have countless guides to Christ, yet you do not have many *fathers*, for I became your *father* in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (1 Cor 4:15).

Although the priests of the Old Covenant and the priests of the New Covenant image God's fatherhood, there is a radical difference between these orders. For one thing, Catholic priests stand in the *Person of Christ* (CCC # 1548),⁵ who is depicted in Sacred Scripture as the heavenly husband wedded to his bride, the Church (cf. Jn 3:27-30; Rev 19:6-10). Clearly a woman attempting to image Christ, the heavenly bridegroom, would be a distortion.

⁴ *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, # 3.

⁵ Priests functioning “in the person of Christ” is an expression used by St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 2:10, when he speaks of his forgiveness. Unfortunately, the New American Version gives a weak translation of the passage: “Whomever you forgive anything, so do I. For indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for you in the presence [Greek *prosopo* literally “Person”] of Christ.”

The unique role of a Catholic priest undergirds the sacredness of the office, the great responsibility connected with it, and the discipline of celibacy.

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