

Why Not Women Priests?

ISSUE: Did Jesus Christ, God the Son, institute the all-male priesthood and, if so, why? Is it an unchangeable teaching or a rule that can be modified as times change?

RESPONSE: Jesus instituted the all-male priesthood to help fulfill His plan of salvation for all men and women. Jesus is the bridegroom who laid down His life for the sake of His bride, the Church. Similarly, priests carry on this bridegroom role, acting “in the person of Christ the Head” on behalf of the faithful (Catechism, no. 1548). Therefore, only men can become priests, and this is an unchangeable, infallible teaching that God ordained, not man. Recent Church documents have reaffirmed that this teaching is divinely mandated.

Christ’s teaching on the ordained priesthood should not be construed as divine discrimination or that women are inferior to men. Rather, as the Church has consistently taught for 2,000 years, men and women have equal dignity in the eyes of God, though they have different and complimentary roles in living out God’s plan of salvation for mankind.

DISCUSSION: In May 1994, Pope John Paul II wrote an apostolic letter on the subject of women’s ordination, which was entitled *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone). John Paul II begins *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (OS) by stating that priestly ordination in the Catholic Church has “from the beginning always been reserved to men alone.” He concludes his presentation by clearly stating that the teaching is unchangeable and therefore infallible:

Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church’s divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk. 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful (no. 4).

Despite Pope John Paul II’s clear teaching, there were still some lingering questions and misinterpretations among some people in the Church. So the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) issued a response in November 1995 to provide even further clarification. The CDF, which is the Vatican congregation responsible for preserving and authentically interpreting the Faith, reaffirmed that this teaching is divinely mandated:

Reply to the question concerning the teaching contained in the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*.

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 faith.

Response: 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. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 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 faith.

In explaining the Church’s teaching, the Pope restates in OS the reasons given by Pope Paul VI in a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury of the Anglican Church:

These reasons include: the example recorded in the sacred Scriptures of Christ’s choosing His Apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is

in accordance with God's plan for His Church (OS, no. 1).

John Paul II continues by explaining a fundamental reason for the Church's teaching as expounded by the CDF's *Inter Insigniores* (*The Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*, 1976): The Church "does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination" (OS, no. 2). He says that the Gospels show how "Christ chose those whom he willed (cf. Mk 3:13-14; Jn 6:70), and He did so in union with the Father, 'through the Holy Spirit' (Acts 1:2), after having spent the night in prayer (cf. Lk. 6:12)" (OS, no. 2). Christ called the 12 men to an office which was intimately associated with Him and His mission as the Redeemer. This function could not be exercised by just any member of the Church, and so "the Apostles did the same when they chose fellow workers who would succeed them in their ministry. Also included in this choice were those who, throughout the time of the Church, would carry on the Apostles' mission of representing Christ the Lord and Redeemer" (*ibid.*).

"In calling only men as his Apostles," the Pope says, quoting his 1988 apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women), "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" (OS, no. 2). Here the Pope hints at the fact that Jesus did not permit priestesses like the dominant pagan religions of his time, while he also implies that Our Lord was countercultural in other ways, e.g., including Mary Magdalene and other women among his close associates.

"The presence and the role of women in the life and mission of the Church, although not linked to the ministerial priesthood, remain absolutely necessary and irreplaceable," says the Pope. In fact, he proclaims that the mission of women is "of capital importance both for the renewal and humanization of society and for the rediscovery by believers of the true face of the Church" (OS, no. 3). It is the Church that has defended and promoted the dignity of women, and there are many examples of women in the Church who are true disciples and witnesses to Christ. The Pope illustrates this point by again quoting *Mulieris Dignitatem*: "They are the holy martyrs, virgins, and mothers of families who bravely bore witness to their faith and passed on the Church's faith and tradition by bringing up their children in the spirit of the Gospel" (OS, no. 3.). He then states that the hierarchical structure of the Church is ordered to the holiness of the faithful, and he calls on everyone to the better gift: love. He emphasizes that all the faithful are called to become saints.

If the Church admits that men of all races can validly represent Christ, why should she deny women this ability to represent Him? The CDF's *Inter Insigniores* (II) provides further explanation. As the CDF says, we must first recognize "that in human beings the difference of sex exercises an important influence, much deeper than, for example, ethnic differences: The latter do not affect the human person as intimately as the difference of sex, which is directly ordained for the communion of persons and for the generation of human beings. In biblical Revelation this difference is the effect of God's will from the beginning: 'male and female he created them'" (Gen. 1:27; II, no. 5).

Explaining the significance of the difference between men and women, the Vatican newspaper (*L'Osservatore Romano*) commentary on *Inter Insigniores* makes a crucial point:

It must be affirmed first and foremost that the fact that Christ is a man and not a woman is neither incidental nor unimportant in relation to the economy of salvation. In what sense? Not of course in the material sense, as has sometimes been suggested in polemics in order to discredit it, but because the whole economy of salvation has been revealed to us through essential symbols from which it cannot be separated, and without which we would be unable to understand God's design. Christ is the new Adam. God's covenant with men is presented in the Old Testament as a nuptial mystery, the definitive reality of which is Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The Declaration briefly presents the stages marking the progressive development of this biblical theme, the subject of many exegetical and theological studies. Christ is the bridegroom of the Church, His bride whom He won for Himself with His blood, and the salvation brought by Him is the New Covenant. By using this language, the Bible shows why the Incarnation took place according to the male gender, and makes it impossible to ignore this historical reality.

"That is why we can never ignore the fact that Christ is a man," says the CDF document itself. "And therefore, unless one is to disregard the importance of this symbolism for the economy of Revelation,

it must be admitted that, in actions which demand the character of ordination and in which Christ Himself, the author of the Covenant, the Bridegroom and Head of the Church, is represented, exercising His ministry of salvation—which is in the highest degree the case of the Eucharist—His role (this is the original sense of the word *persona*) must be taken by a man. This does not stem from any personal superiority of the latter in the order of values, but only from a difference of fact on the level of function and service (II, no. 5).

So Scripture tells us that Christ is the bridegroom of the Church. Because a priest sacramentally represents Christ at Mass, a priest must bear a resemblance to Christ, i.e., must be a man, something a woman cannot do because of her God-given gender. A woman cannot be a bridegroom: “For this reason, only a man can take the part of Christ, to be a sign of His presence, in a word ‘represent’ Him (that is, be an effective sign of His presence) in the essential acts of the covenant” (*L’Osservatore Romano* commentary to II).

“Furthermore,” the Vatican newspaper adds, “the proposal that women should be admitted to the priesthood because they have gained leadership in many fields of modern life today seems to ignore the fact that the Church is not a society like the rest. In the Church, authority or power is of a very different nature, linked as it normally is with the sacrament.”

Does this mean women are inferior to men or that God is a chauvinist? Of course not. God has just delegated, in His infinite Wisdom, specific roles for men and women:

Equality is in no way identity, for the Church is a differentiated body, in which each individual has his or her role. The roles are distinct, and must not be confused; they do not favor the superiority of some vis-à-vis the others, nor do they provide an excuse for jealousy; the only better gift, which can and must be desired, is love (cf. 1 Cor. 12-13). The greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven are not the ministers but the saints (II, no. 6).

Finally, concerning equality, some people might invoke Gal. 3:28, which says that in Christ there is no longer any distinction between men and women:

But this passage does not concern ministries: It only affirms the universal calling to divine filiation, which is the same for all. Moreover, and above all, to consider the ministerial priesthood as a human right would be to misjudge its nature completely: Baptism does not confer any personal title to public ministry in the Church. The priesthood is not conferred for the honor or advantage of the recipient, but for the service of God and the Church; it is the object of a specific and totally gratuitous vocation: “You did not choose me, no I chose you; and I commissioned you. . .” (Jn. 15:16; cf. Heb. 5:4; II, no. 6).

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