

TEN FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESERVATION OF PRIESTLY ORDINATION TO MEN

A Pastoral Response by the Committee on Doctrine of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops
1998

Introduction

Once, when Christ looked over the crowd following him and noted the abundance of the harvest but the small number of laborers, he instructed his disciples to pray to God to send workers into the harvest (Matt. 9:37-38; Luke 10:2). In this way, he showed us that, despite the great and immediate need, no one could take up the task of being a laborer in the harvest without being sent by the Lord of the harvest to do so. The twelve apostles were chosen by a free decision of Jesus himself following upon his own prayer (Mk 3:13; Lk 6:12-13; cf. Jn 15:16). The Church has always understood that the prayer for workers has in part been answered in Christ's sending of the Apostles and their successors as laborers to continue his work in the harvest of salvation. In the sacrament of Holy Orders, by which bishops and priests are ordained for service in the Church, we see an essential part of God's splendid answer to our prayers for workers in this harvest. Giving praise and thanks to God, the Church confesses that the ministerial priesthood is nothing less than Christ's gift to us, his priestly people.

This faith provides the context for understanding and accepting the teaching that the Church has no authority to ordain women to the ministerial priesthood and why this teaching does not deny the equality or God-given rights of human persons. Partly in order to foster this understanding and acceptance, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1994 offered a pastoral reflection on women and society, *Strengthening the Bonds of Peace*, which considered "ways in which women can exercise leadership in the Church." The pastoral concern of the bishops' Committee on Doctrine now moves us to present answers to frequently asked questions about women and priestly ordination. The purpose of these questions and answers is not to "prove" the truth of the Church's teaching, which must be accepted in faith, but to offer some background to assist the faithful in their acceptance of what the Church teaches.

1. What is the Catholic Church's teaching on priestly ordination concerning women?

In the apostolic letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, Pope John Paul II reaffirmed that the Catholic Church has no authority to confer priestly ordination on women. This teaching is to be held definitively by all the faithful as belonging to the deposit of faith. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith clarified the authority of this teaching by stating that it is founded on the written Word of God, has been constantly preserved and applied in the Tradition of the Church, and has been set forth infallibly by the universal ordinary magisterium.

2. What does it mean to say that a teaching "belongs to the deposit of the faith"?

To say that a teaching belongs to the deposit of faith is to affirm that it belongs to, or is necessarily connected with, what the Church has received from Christ. The Church believes that the sacraments are entirely the gift of Christ to the Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: "As she has done for the canon of Sacred Scripture and for the doctrine of the faith, the Church, by the power of the Spirit who guides her 'into all truth,' has gradually recognized this treasure, [i.e., the saving power of the sacraments] received from Christ and, as the faithful steward of God's mysteries, has determined its 'dispensation.' Thus, the Church has discerned over the centuries that among liturgical celebrations there are seven that are, in the strict sense of the term, sacraments instituted by the Lord" (1117). In other words, the essentials of the celebration of these sacraments are matters which—like the canon of Sacred Scripture and the doctrines of the faith—the Church has discerned and explained but not invented or generated on her own authority. The Church has called these essential elements the "deposit" or treasury of the faith, which is Christ's legacy to his people and from which they continually draw. Scripture, doctrines, and sacraments are gifts which the Church has received and must guard because they express the divine wisdom that is constantly at work in leading us to the communion of life and love that is the Blessed Trinity.

3. What are some of the Church's reasons for this teaching?

Ordination to the ministerial priesthood is reserved to men because the Church is bound to follow the example of the Lord, who chose only men as his Apostles. The sacrament of Holy Orders—which hands on their office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing—has always been reserved to men, in fidelity to Christ's example and to apostolic practice. The Church considers this constant and universal tradition to be in accordance with God's plan and to constitute a permanent norm.

4. Is it arbitrary for the Church to limit ordination to men?

The basis for this teaching is the authority of Christ himself. There is a parallel in the theology of the Eucharist. Bread and wine are essential to the celebration of the Eucharist. It could be argued that other foods or beverages would be more appropriate for cultural or other reasons and that the restriction of the Eucharist to just these foodstuffs is merely conventional or arbitrary. Just as the only Eucharist is the one Christ instituted, so the elements he employed cannot be considered optional. The Church must accept the fundamental structure of sacramental order as inherited from Christ. Sacramental signs reflect the deep symbolism of actions and things and also link Christians of every age to the constitutive events of Christianity and to Christ himself. Just as the Church cannot alter the elements of the Eucharist, so the Church cannot determine the recipients of priestly ordination in a manner that contradicts the actions of Christ.

5. What is the scriptural authority supporting this teaching?

The Church claims biblical authority for this teaching because Scripture attests to the fact that Jesus chose only men as members of the Twelve, and that this example was followed in the apostolic community. Nevertheless, it is by means of a tradition of practice that the Church acquires certainty about the normative character of the biblical example. Biblical research and scholarship contribute to, but cannot fully determine, what the Church should teach. In faith, the Church reads, interprets, and proclaims Scripture as a coherent, inspired whole which communicates God's revelation. The Church's confidence that Scripture bears witness to Christ's word and will is a matter of faith. The Church takes account of the results of modern scholarly study of the Bible, but does so in the light of a long tradition of reading, pondering, proclaiming, celebrating and praying the Scriptures down through the ages by her countless saints and doctors, popes and councils. Above all else, the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit in the authentic interpretation of the meaning of Scripture in the matter of priestly ordination and in many other matters as well. There is, in fact, considerable biblical evidence that indicates that the pastoral leadership of the Church from the beginning was male. This evidence supports the Church's judgment about the proper recipient of priestly ordination.

6. Did Christ's decision to choose only men as Apostles depend on the cultural circumstances of the time?

Christ's election only of men for apostolic office and ministerial priesthood represented not an accommodation to the cultural circumstances of Palestine in antiquity but a deliberate choice bearing on the very nature of these orders. He often demonstrated freedom from the cultural and religious conventions of the day; and when he did observe them, it was by way of bringing them to fulfillment, not by way of accommodation. The greatly altered cultural circumstances of our own day have prompted the expansion of ministerial roles for women in the Church within the framework of God's plan for a sacramental order in which priestly ordination is reserved to men. Christ continues to be present to the Church, and through the sacrament of Holy Orders he exercises his headship over the Church.

7. What theological discussion and debate has led the Church to make a definitive statement on this issue?

It is misleading to suggest that this is an entirely new topic. The issue of the possibility of ordaining women was first raised in the second century, and has been raised and addressed by theologians down to the present day. The Church's recent statement of the definitive character of the teaching about ordination must be seen in the light of a long-standing tradition. Moreover, given the contemporary questioning of the Church's teaching and practice, it seemed pastorally opportune for the Holy Father to speak on the matter at this time. The Church now invites theologians to deepen their understanding of the gift of the priesthood. For example, one promising line for further theological study might be the theme of the fittingness of Christ's selection of men for apostolic and priestly office because they can represent him as bridegroom and head of the Church.

8. Since the Church teaches that men and women are equal in dignity, is it just to exclude women from priestly ordination?

The Catechism defines justice as "the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor" (1807). In society, giving the neighbor his or her due is often understood in terms of equality: equal rights, equal protection under the law, because every human person, as a person, has equal dignity, and certain rights flow from that (see CCC 1935). In the Church, which, by grace and the Holy Spirit, is a supernatural society, we may likewise speak of equality: the equal dignity of the baptized and the equal call to holiness that comes from that.

The question of justice as it concerns ordination is whether withholding ordination from women constitutes an obstacle to their response to the call to holiness. In response to this, it must be noted that ordination is essential for no one: "Holy Orders and Matrimony are directed towards the salvation of others; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so" (CCC 1534). No one has a right by baptism to ordination, for this sacrament is not essential for any person in his response to the call to holiness. The Church has clearly affirmed the equal dignity of women and men, and the equality of baptized women with baptized men. Ordination to the ministerial priesthood, however, is a distinct gift. It is not essential for salvation, and is given not for one's own salvation but for the service of God and of the Church. In accepting and handing on this gift, the Church is bound by fidelity to the example of Christ to reserve ordination to males who have experienced this call and who are in other respects suitable candidates.

9. What about women who feel called to ordination to priesthood?

The only calling that is universal—embracing all women and men—is the call to holiness. Every claim to the possession of an authentic call to priestly ordination must be tested and validated by the Church, chiefly by the successors of the Apostles who also consult the community as they determine the worthiness and suitability of a candidate for the ministerial priesthood. The Church cannot consider the claim of a woman that God has called her to ordained ministry because the very possibility of priestly ordination arises only within the framework of a divine plan and order in which participation in Christ's role as head of the Church is reserved to men. The Church must follow the example of Christ who called women to discipleship but not to membership in the Twelve. The holy women who form such an important part of the gospel story, beginning with the Blessed Virgin Mary, clearly had a different role to play, and in that they have been followed by other women down through the ages in ways appropriate to the time and place. Pastors have a duty to welcome and provide for women's active participation in the Church's life and mission as members of the common priesthood.

10. Does this teaching create a challenge in the Church's relationships with other Christians?

The Church's teaching that only men can be ordained to the ministerial priesthood arises from fidelity to the example of the Lord as witnessed by the New Testament and to the constant tradition of the Eastern and Western Churches. Differences between churches and ecclesial communities on this matter are derived from different understandings of the Church's authority with regard to the sacraments. We are painfully aware that these differences present obstacles along the way toward unity among us. "We should neither be surprised nor held back by the difficulties involved...Only a theological vision inspired by prayerful, contemplative faith will ensure openness to the Spirit's sure guidance as we continue our pilgrimage towards full communion. In the face of these and other difficulties where does our ecumenical hope lie? It is grounded in the very strength of the things which unite us in spite of our differences." (Pope John Paul II, November 7, 1994, Reception of a joint pilgrimage of Episcopal and Catholic Bishops from the United States.)

Suggested Readings

Catechism of the Catholic Church

. English Paperback. Office of Publishing and Promotion Services (OPPS), NCCB/USCC. Publication No. 511-9.

The Consecrated Life. Pope John Paul II. OPPS, NCCB/USCC Publication No. 5-122.

Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium). Document of Vatican II. OPPS, NCCB/USCC. Publication No. 000-1.

Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood. *Origins*. February 3, 1977, Vol. 6, #3.

From "Inter Insigniores" to "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis". Contains text of CDF [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith] declaration *Inter Insigniores* of 1976, Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* of 1994, and the CDF reply to a *dubium* concerning the teaching contained in the Apostolic Letter (1995). Also contains the commentaries on these documents which appeared in *L'Osservatore Romano* in 1977, 1993, and 1995. OPPS, NCCB/USCC Publication No. 5-163.

I Will Give You Shepherds (Pastores Dabo Vobis): On the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day. OPPS, NCCB/USCC Publication No. 519-4.

Letter to Women. Pope John Paul II. OPPS, NCCB/USCC Publication No. 5-052.

On the Dignity and Vocation of Women (Mulieris Dignitatem). OPPS, NCCB/USCC. Publication No. 244-6.

Pastoral Response to the Teaching on Women's Ordination. Reverend Avery Dulles, S.J at the U.S. Bishops' Meeting. *Origins*, September 29, 1996, Vol. 26, #11.

Response to a "Dubium" on Ordaining Women to the Ministerial Priesthood. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Origins*. November 30, 1995, Vol. 25, #24. [Also contains: Cover Letter to Presidents of Bishops' Conferences Regarding Doctrinal Congregation's Response on Women and Ministerial Priesthood, by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger; Vatican Reflections on the Teaching of "Ordination Sacerdotalis"; Statement on the Doctrinal Congregation's Response on Women and Ministerial Priesthood, by Bishop Anthony Pilla; Questions and Answers Regarding the Doctrinal Congregation's Response to a "Dubium" by Reverend J. A. Di Noia, O.P.]

Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone (Ordinatio Sacerdotalis). Pope John Paul II. Apostolic Letter. *Origins*, June 9, 1994. Vol. 24, No. 4. Pages, 49-58 [Also contains responses by bishops.] Also published by OPPS, NCCB/USCC. Publication No. 845-2.

Some Observations Concerning the CTSA [Catholic Theological Society of America] Report on Tradition and the Ordination of Women. Staff of the U. S. Bishops' Committee on Doctrine. *Origins*. October 2, 1997, Vol. 27, #16.

Strengthening the Bonds of Peace. A Pastoral Reflection on Women in the Church and in Society. November 1994. OPPS, NCCB/USCC. Publication No. 034-6

The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World (Christifidelis Laici). OPPS, NCCB/USCC. Publication No. 274-8.

Words to Deeds: Continuing Reflections on the Role of Women in the Church. U.S. Bishops' Committee on Women in Society and in the Church. OPPS, NCCB/USCC. Publication No. 05-266 (English), No. 05-802 (Spanish).