

APOSTOLIC LETTER
ORDINATIO SACERDOTALIS
OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS
OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
ON RESERVING PRIESTLY ORDINATION
TO MEN ALONE

Concerning the Reply of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the Teaching Contained in the Apostolic Letter "*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*"

The publication of the Reply of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a *dubium* regarding the reason for which the teaching contained in the Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* is to be considered *definitive tenenda* seems the appropriate moment to offer certain reflections.

The ecclesiological significance of this Apostolic Letter was underscored even by its date of publication, for it was on that day, 22 May 1994, that the Church celebrated the Solemnity of Pentecost. Its importance, however, could be discovered above all in the concluding words of the Letter: "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" (n. 4).

The Pope's intervention was necessary not simply to reiterate the validity of a discipline observed in the Church from the beginning, but to confirm a doctrine "preserved by the constant and universal Tradition of the Church and firmly taught by the Magisterium in its more recent documents", which "pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself (n. 4). In this way, the Holy Father intended to make clear that the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved solely to men could not be considered "open to debate" and neither could one attribute to the decision of the Church "a merely disciplinary force" (ibid.).

The fruits of this Letter have been evident since its publication. Many consciences, which in good faith had been disturbed, more by doubt than by uncertainty, found serenity once again thanks to the teaching of the Holy Father. However, some perplexity continued, not only among those who, distant from the Catholic faith, do not accept the existence of a doctrinal authority within the Church—that is, a Magisterium sacramentally invested with the authority of Christ (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 21)—but also among some of the faithful to whom it continued to seem that the exclusion of women from the priestly ministry represents a form of injustice or discrimination against them. Some objected that it is not evident from Revelation that such an exclusion was the will of Christ for his Church, and others had questions concerning the assent owed to the Letter.

Certainly, the understanding of the reasons for which the Church does not have the power to confer priestly ordination on women can be deepened further. Such reasons, for example, have been set out already in the Declaration *Inter insigniores* (15 October 1976), issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and approved by Pope

Paul VI, and in a number of the documents of John Paul II (for example, *Christifideles laici*, n. 51; *Mulieris dignitatem*, n. 26; as well as in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1577). But in any case it cannot be forgotten that the Church teaches, as an absolutely fundamental truth of Christian anthropology, the equal personal dignity of men and women, and the necessity of overcoming and doing away with "every type of discrimination regarding fundamental rights" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 29). It is in the light of this truth that one can seek to understand better the teaching that women cannot receive priestly ordination. A correct theology can prescind neither from one nor from the other of these doctrines, but must hold the two together; only thus will it be able to deepen our comprehension of God's plan regarding woman and regarding the priesthood-and hence, regarding the mission of woman in the Church. If however, perhaps by allowing oneself to be conditioned too much by the ways and spirit of the age, one should assert that a contradiction exists between these two truths, the way of progress in the intelligence of the faith would be lost.

In the Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* the Pope focuses attention on the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and Mother of the Church. The fact that she "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" (n. 3). Diversity of mission in no way compromises equality of personal dignity.

Furthermore, to understand that this teaching implies no injustice or discrimination against women, one has to consider the nature of the ministerial priesthood itself, which is a service and not a position of privilege or human power over others. Whoever, man or woman, conceives of the priesthood in terms of personal affirmation, as a goal or point of departure in a career of human success, is profoundly mistaken, for the true meaning of Christian priesthood, whether it be the common priesthood of the faithful or, in a most special way, the ministerial priesthood, can only be found in the sacrifice of one's own being in union with Christ, in service of the brethren. Priestly ministry constitutes neither the universal ideal nor even less, the goal of Christian life. In this connection, it is helpful to recall once again that "the only higher gift, which can and must be desired, is charity" (cf. 1 Cor 12-13; *Inter insigniores*, VI).

With respect to its foundation in Sacred Scripture and in Tradition, John Paul II directs his attention to the fact that the Lord Jesus, as is witnessed by the new Testament, called only men,, and not women, to the ordained ministry, and that the Apostles "did the same when they chose fellow workers who would succeed them in their ministry" (n. 2; cf. 1 Tm 3:1ff.; 2 Tm 1:6; Ti 1:5). There are sound arguments supporting the fact that Christ's way of acting was not determined by cultural motives (cf. n. 2), as there are also sufficient grounds to state that Tradition has interpreted the choice made by the Lord as binding for the Church of all times.

Here, however, we find ourselves before the essential interdependence of Holy Scripture and Tradition, an interdependence which makes of these two forms of the transmission of the Gospel an unbreakable unity with the Magisterium, which is an integral part of Tradition and is entrusted with the authentic interpretation of the Word of God, written and handed down (*Dei Verbum*, nn. 9 and 10). In the specific case of priestly ordination, the successors of the Apostles have always observed the norm of conferring it only on

men, and the Magisterium, assisted by the Holy Spirit, teaches us that this did not occur by change, habitual repetition, subjection to sociological conditioning, or even less because of some imaginary inferiority of women; but rather because "the Church has always acknowledged as a perennial norm her Lord's way of acting in choosing the twelve men whom he made the foundation of his Church" (n. 2).

As is well known, there are reasons *ex convenientia* by which theology has sought and seeks to understand the reasonableness of the will of the Lord. Such reasons, expounded for example in the Declaration *Inter insigniores*, have their undoubted values, and yet they are not conceived or employed as if they were strictly logical proofs derived from absolute principles. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind, as these reasons help us to comprehend, that the human will of Christ not only is not arbitrary, but that it is intimately united with the divine will of the eternal Son, on which the ontological and anthropological truth of the creation of the two sexes depends.

In response to this precise act of the Magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, explicitly addressed to the entire Catholic Church, all members of the faithful are required to give their assent to the teaching stated therein. To this end, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with the approval of the Holy Father, has given an official Reply on the nature of this assent: it is a matter of full definitive assent, that is to say, irrevocable, to a doctrine taught infallibly by the Church. In fact, as the Reply explains, the definitive nature of this assent derives from the truth of the doctrine itself, since, founded on the written Word of God, and constantly held and applied in the Tradition of the Church, it has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary universal Magisterium (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 25). Thus, the Reply specifies that this doctrine belongs to the deposit of the faith of the Church. It should be emphasized that the definitive and infallible nature of this teaching of the Church did not arise with the publication of the Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. In the Letter, as the Reply of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith also explains, the Roman Pontiff, having taken account of present circumstances, has confirmed the same teaching by a formal declaration, giving expression once again to *quod semper, quod ubique et quod ab omnibus tenendum est, utpote ad fidei depositum pertinens*. In this case, an act of the ordinary papal Magisterium, in itself not infallible, witnesses to the infallibility of the teaching of a doctrine already possessed by the Church.

Finally, there have been some commentaries on the Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* which have suggested that the document constitutes an additional and inopportune obstacle on the already difficult path of ecumenism. In this regard it should not be forgotten that according to both the letter and the spirit of the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 11), the authentic ecumenical task, to which the Catholic Church is unequivocally and permanently committed, requires complete sincerity and clarity in the presentation of one's own faith. Furthermore, it should be noted that the doctrine reaffirmed by the Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* cannot but further the pursuit of full communion with the Orthodox Churches which, in fidelity to Tradition, have maintained and continue to maintain the same teaching.

The singular originality of the Church and of the priestly ministry within the Church requires a precise clarity of criteria. Concretely, one must never lose sight of the fact that the Church does not find the source of her faith and her constitutive structure in the

principles of the social order of any historical period. While attentive to the world in which she lives and for whose salvation she labours, the Church is conscious of being the bearer of a higher fidelity to which she is bound. It is a question of a radical faithfulness to the Word of God which she has received from Christ who established her to last until the end of the ages. This Word of God, in proclaiming the essential value and eternal destiny of every person, reveals the ultimate foundation of the dignity of every being, of every woman and of every man.

+ Joseph Card. Ratzinger Prefect

From: "Premier Secrétaire, Nonciature Apostolique au Canada" <mfcrotty@cashette.com>
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Subject: RE: How can one get a copy of this document?
Date: Thu, 9 Jun 2005 16:02:48 -0400

Dear Fr Surprenant,

Please find below an unofficial English translation of the document that you are looking for. It is taken from www.catholicculture.org

With kind regards, Msgr Michael F. Crotty, First Secretary, Apostolic Nunciature in Canada (Embassy of the Holy See), 724 Manor Avenue, OTTAWA ON K1M 0E3

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