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Women's Ordination: Is It Still an Issue?

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When I joined the faculty of St. Joseph's Seminary, Dunwoodie, four years ago, I was asked to teach the course on "Orders and Ministry." We reached the unit on contemporary issues, and when I announced that we would examine the controversy over women's ordination, a hand shot up. "Is that still a question, Sister?" I was quite taken aback by my student's confidence that this had been settled! True, Pope John Paul II ruled in the 1994 apostolic letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* that the Church has no authority to change the tradition of reserving priestly ordination to men, and that this judgment must be "definitively held" by all the faithful.¹ True, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in reply to a question about the authoritative character of the Pope's letter, asserted that this doctrine had been infallibly taught by the ordinary universal magisterium.² But we must acknowledge that it is still a question.³

This is especially true, of course, in the context of ecumenical relations with the heirs of the Reformation. No one denies that differences over the ordination of women pose a major obstacle to progress towards restoring unity with Protestants and Anglicans. But many Catholics, too, think that the reservation of priestly ordination⁴ to men constitutes a serious injustice. Nothing they have read or heard since they drew this conclusion has prompted them to reconsider it. Some of them feel called upon to engage in a "prophetic" protest against the "institutional Church." Others remain silent, in obedience to the directive that Catholics should no longer openly advocate this change, but their confidence in the Church's teaching authority has been badly eroded. For these, at least, the work of explaining the tradition of reserving priestly ordination to men is clearly unfinished. Their lingering misgivings dampen enthusiasm for

¹ See his apostolic letter, *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* § 4 in *Origins* 24:4 (June 9, 1994): 49, 51-52.

² According to the Congregation's "Response to a *Dubium*," this teaching carries weight because it "pertains to" other doctrines that would be compromised if it were denied. See "Inadmissibility of Women to Ministerial Priesthood," *Origins* 25 (1995), p. 401.

³ In this lecture, I attempt to outline the argument presented more fully in *The Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Church's Teaching* (Chicago / Mundelein: Hillenbrand Books, 2007).

⁴ I do not intend to address here the related question of women's possible admission to the permanent diaconate.

evangelization and, along with many other factors, impede our ability to attract vocations to the priesthood and the religious life.

Many observers maintain that women's ordination is *the* defining issue for Catholic women. They assume that the exclusion of women from priestly Orders proves, despite all protests to the contrary, that the Catholic Church does not truly hold that women are the equals of men. Often these observers regard the priesthood as no more than a public leadership role, a social role. They see that women can be ordained in other Christian communities, and note that ordained women are just as capable of fulfilling ministerial functions—preaching, leading worship, giving pastoral care to a congregation—as their male counterparts. Seeing nothing in the role of minister or priest that requires physical maleness, they conclude that the Catholic Church is guilty of sexist bias in reserving priestly ordination to men. We are familiar with the way these complaints are voiced. For example, we hear that the Catholic Church has a “stained-glass ceiling” where women are concerned. Or, “If you won't ordain women, don't baptize them.” Many concerned Catholics lament the fact that talented women, willing and able to help meet the priest shortage, are rejected, while the faithful go without the sacraments. They are honestly stumped by the fact that Catholic women—though they may now earn the same degrees as men in theology and divinity—cannot gain access to the ministerial priesthood. People persist in asking “Why not”?

For some years, when the question was first seriously raised, I actively and publicly promoted the cause of women's ordination.⁵ After much study and prayer, however, I now give my firm assent to the Church's teaching; I am fully convinced that the matter has been authoritatively settled. It is not easy to explain what led to my change of mind, because those who ask are usually familiar with a whole series of arguments, for and against women's ordination, and they expect not only a persuasive explanation of what the Church teaches but also a convincing rebuttal of the objections that are commonly put to the teaching by its critics. Many find those objections familiar, easy to understand, and more congenial to a democratic mindset than the teaching found in Pope John Paul II's 1994 letter. It seems necessary both to review how the question is usually framed from the perspective of the feminist critique, and also to look again at how it is framed by the magisterium, the Church's teaching authority. I will also draw your attention to the fact that the Church takes as its premise the settled Catholic doctrine of the priesthood.

I will develop this presentation, then, in two steps. First, I will examine the question from the feminist starting point. I will show why the arguments of feminist theologians⁶ have led to a stalemate—a theological “standoff.” Second, I will consider the topic from the magisterium's starting point and indicate why its theological review led to the reaffirmation of the tradition and ultimately to a papal declaration that the Church has no authority to confer priestly ordination on women. So, I will ask you to keep in mind two different “starting points.”

⁵ See *Research Report: Women in Church and Society*, ed. Sara Butler (Bronx, NY: The Catholic Theological Society of America, 1978).

⁶ I restrict the definition of “feminist theologians” to theologians who take as a norm the full equality of women, and who appeal to women's “interpreted experience,” i.e., women's experience of being oppressed, as a source. For this understanding of feminism, see Sandra M. Schneiders, *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991; revised ed., 2004), pp. 16-17.

I will also ask you to keep in mind a key distinction. From the time this question began to be seriously re-examined in Catholic circles, the magisterium has distinguished the “fundamental reasons” for regarding the tradition as binding from the “theological arguments” proposed to show why it is “fitting” or meaningful. This distinction—between the “fundamental reasons” and the “theological arguments”—is crucial. Many Catholic advocates of women’s ordination to the priesthood challenge the value and credibility of the “theological arguments” proposed by the magisterium without acknowledging the force of the “fundamental reasons.” This leads to the stalemate I just mentioned. Others, however, focus on the “theological arguments” because they regard the “fundamental reasons” as fatally flawed. This objection is more serious, and we will ask whether those who pose it do not also call into question the Church’s settled doctrine of the priesthood as a sacrament. Is the nature of the ministerial priesthood the real issue? I will propose that it is.

The Christian Feminist Starting Point

Christian feminists ask, “Why not? Why shouldn’t women be ordained?” They expect the answer to be couched either in terms of women’s unsuitability for the office (e.g., their “feminine nature” destines them for other social roles), or in terms of certain biblical texts concerning women’s status vis-à-vis men. They are prepared to correct any flawed estimate of women’s “nature” and to show that the traditional objections from Scripture can be satisfactorily met. From the Christian feminist starting point, once women are acknowledged to be the equals of men as persons, and once this conviction is seen to be consonant with biblical teaching, there are really no further obstacles to ordination.

This, in fact, is the logic that led many Protestant denominations to admit women to the ordained ministry. It was their desire to make an institutional commitment to full gender equality, for example, that prompted the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and the Methodist Church to grant full clergy rights to women in 1956. They changed their policies on ordination as a means of going on record in favor of women’s rights, even when they had few women candidates for the ministry. The policy changes were intended more to signal the Churches’ commitment to equal rights for women than to respond to a demand for ordination on the part of Presbyterian and Methodist women. Similar changes were made at about the same time by the Lutheran state Churches in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. In their case, however, the state took the initiative. The Churches were obliged to admit women to the ordained ministry in order to comply with civil legislation requiring that women have equal access to all state positions.⁷

Not all Protestant denominations followed suit, but they all applied the same logic. Those that affirmed equal rights for women in the social order agreed to ordain them, while those that opposed equal rights in the social order refused to ordain them. The denominations that resisted “women’s liberation” did so on the grounds that it violated biblical teaching. They appealed in particular to St. Paul’s teaching regarding male headship and female subordination in the order of creation (1 Cor 11:3-9) and in Christian marriage (Eph 5:22-24), and to his admonitions that

⁷ Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 82 and 43. Chaves (p. 91) regards official resistance to women’s ordination as symbolic of a broader resistance to liberal modernity.

women should be silent in Church and not teach or exercise authority over men (1 Cor 14:33-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-14).⁸ In their view, feminist advocacy for equal rights with men was opposed to biblical teaching on both counts: the subordination of wives to their husbands in marriage and the proper roles of women in the Church.

The mainline Protestant denominations, on the other hand, maintained that biblical teaching supported the full equality of women with men in both the social order and the Church. They appealed to another Pauline text—Galatians 3:28, which states that in Christ Jesus there is “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female”—and to the Gospels, that is, to the example of Jesus which scholars increasingly came to see as favoring the equality of women with men. In light of this evidence, they concluded that there was no valid “biblical” reason to bar women from ordination.⁹ In the belief that the New Testament supports the full equality of women and men in Christ, then, these denominations began to admit women to the ordained ministry.

When Anglicans and Roman Catholics evaluated the question, they were quite naturally influenced by the frame of reference already established in the debate within Protestantism — conducted largely in terms of the biblical witness. They also felt obliged, however, to consult the Church’s Tradition and to assess the theological explanations offered in the past for an all-male priesthood. When advocates of women’s ordination reviewed the traditional arguments, they focused in particular on the objection posed by St. Thomas Aquinas, namely, that women, because of their natural condition of subordination,¹⁰ could not signify eminence, and therefore were not suitable candidates for an office representing Christ’s authority. Scholars began to wonder whether the Church’s traditional practice might itself be based on this faulty estimate of women’s status. One significant research study suggested that it was.¹¹ It supplied impressive evidence to support the hypothesis that the reservation of priestly ordination to men was not a genuine theological tradition but only an unexamined practice that reflected outdated socio-cultural views about women’s inferiority to men. On the basis of this and similar scholarly studies, Anglicans and Roman Catholics who favored women’s ordination grew confident that the development of doctrine which had already taken place with respect to women’s equal rights and dignity with men would lead to the acknowledgment of their equal access to ordination. Like their Protestant counterparts, Anglicans concluded that there were no “theological obstacles” to the priestly ordination of women. A report of the Anglican Communion’s 1968 Lambeth Conference put the matter this way: “If the ancient and medieval assumptions about the social role and inferior status of women are no longer accepted, the appeal to tradition is virtually reduced to the observation that there happens to be no precedent for ordaining women to be priests.”¹²

⁸ This collection of texts is often referred to as the “Pauline ban.”

⁹ Krister Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 41.

¹⁰ The *sed contra* of Q. 39 in the *Supplement to the Summa theologiae* adduces the Pauline text 1 Cor 14:34 conflated with 1 Tim 2:12.

¹¹ Haye van der Meer, *Women Priests in the Catholic Church?* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973).

¹² *The Lambeth Conference 1968: Resolutions and Report* (London/New York: S.P.C.K./ Seabury, 1968), p. 106.

Roman Catholic advocates likewise assumed that the traditional practice was open to change in light of the decisive affirmation of the rights and dignity of women made at the Second Vatican Council and in the post-conciliar teaching. They were correct, of course, about the development of Catholic doctrine on the equality of the sexes. The Council denounced discrimination on the basis of sex, as regards basic human rights in the social order, and affirmed that in Christ and in the Church, “there is no inequality arising from race or nationality, social condition or sex.”¹³ The Council Fathers cited the doctrine of creation in the divine image (Gen 1:27) in support of the first assertion and the Pauline text, Galatians 3:28, in support of the second. Later, Pope John Paul II would teach that this text from Galatians captures the “Gospel innovation” manifested in Jesus’ counter-cultural and liberating way of dealing with women. The Pope drew out the implications of the “Gospel innovation” for the relationship of husband and wife and for the relations between men and women more generally, saying that it calls for mutual and not unilateral “submission out of reverence of Christ.”¹⁴ With this in mind, and on the conviction that the only real obstacle to women’s ordination was an outdated view of women—a “faulty anthropology”—many Catholics thought it inevitable that the Church’s practice of reserving priestly ordination to men would change.

The magisterium, however, did nothing to encourage this expectation. In response to the growing Catholic advocacy for change, as well as to the consensus emerging in the Anglican Communion, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood, *Inter insigniores*, in January 1977.¹⁵ This Declaration had two parts. In the first part (§§ 1-4), the Declaration supplied the “fundamental reasons” for the Catholic position, namely, that the Church has no authority to change the reservation of the ministerial priesthood to men because it belongs to a universal, unbroken tradition that is based on the example of Christ and the practice of the apostles, a tradition that constitutes a perennial norm. In the second part (§§ 5-6), the Declaration proposed certain “theological arguments” to illuminate the Church’s tradition by showing its fittingness. These address the question of sacramental symbolism and the related topic of the theological relevance of Jesus’ maleness. From the Christian feminist starting point, the “theological arguments” from the second part appear to be, and are often reported as, the Church’s real or “fundamental reasons” for reserving priestly ordination to men.

The “theological arguments” are familiar: it is fitting that the priest be a man because he is a sacramental sign of Jesus Christ, who was and remains a man, in his Covenant relationship to the Church as her Head and Bridegroom. In those actions “which demand the character of ordination,” the natural symbolism of gender serves to reveal that the priest acts “*in persona Christi*.” This sacramental symbolism makes both the ministry of Christ and the Church’s dependence on Christ visible. This line of reasoning, set out rather tentatively in 1977, was later more firmly proposed by Pope John Paul II.¹⁶ I think it is fair to say that advocates of women’s

¹³ *Gaudium et spes* § 29 and *Lumen gentium* § 32.

¹⁴ See his apostolic letter of 1988, *Mulieris dignitatem* (*On the Vocation and Dignity of Women*) §§ 12-16 and 24.

¹⁵ The Declaration was dated October 15, 1976 but released on January 27, 1977. For the text and commentary, see “Vatican Declaration: Women in Ministerial Priesthood,” *Origins* 6:33 (February 3, 1977): 517.519-32.

¹⁶ See, in particular, *Mulieris Dignitatem* §§ 25-26, and *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (“I Will Give You Shepherds,” 1992) §§ 21-23.

ordination have focused most of their attention on arguments related to the equality of the sexes, the implications of sexual difference, the theological relevance of Jesus' male identity to his priestly office, and the nature, value, and implications of sexual complementarity. These same topics have, quite naturally, occupied those theologians who responded to them in support of the tradition.

For the record, we should note that the Declaration rejects the idea that priestly ordination is reserved to men because women are inherently inferior to them, and it explicitly sets aside patristic and scholastic arguments that betray the influence of such an opinion. It acknowledges these prejudices, in fact, precisely to exclude them from consideration.¹⁷ In addition, we should note that the Declaration does not rely on the Pauline texts that would ban women from certain functions in the Church, that is, on the evidence used by some Protestant denominations to justify reserving the ordained ministry to men. The “theological arguments” proposed in Part II of the Declaration clearly do not appeal to the *hierarchical* ordering of the sexes. They do appeal, however, to the *complementarity* of the sexes. In this, they represent a revised and rather new attempt to explain why it was fitting that Jesus chose men and not women for this office. Given the sacramental nature of the priesthood, they suggest, it is fitting that the one who acts not only by the power but also in the person of Christ (*in persona Christi*) be a man. The “natural resemblance” of gender has sacramental significance, especially in the Eucharist, the mystery of the New Covenant—in which Christ's relationship to the Church is that of a Bridegroom to his Bride. The Declaration denies that this symbolism does imply any “natural superiority of man over woman”; rather, it corresponds to the facts of salvation history, which themselves correspond to the natural symbolism of gender.

Now the appeal to sexual complementarity does not necessarily help! It runs counter to the Anglo-American feminist ideological commitment because, historically, this kind of argument has worked against women's interests, confining them unfairly to auxiliary and subordinate social roles. Feminists tend to view any appeal to sexual “complementarity” as a patriarchal ploy contrived to bar women from positions of authority. As a result, critics charge that the Declaration simply replaced one flawed argument, the one based on female inferiority, with another, that based on sexual difference or complementarity. Because of this judgment, and because of the very considerable attention that theologians have directed to the Declaration's “theological arguments,” many people assume that these arguments constitute the foundation of the Church's teaching¹⁸—as if women were excluded from the priesthood on the basis of a particular theory of sexual complementarity. They then subject to further examination the theological anthropology proposed by the Holy See.

Feminist theologians lament that the Vatican's “outmoded,” “dualistic” anthropology gives unwarranted importance to the difference between the sexes. They attribute Pope John Paul's judgment about the binding character of the tradition to his conviction that there are “essential differences between masculine and feminine versions of human nature.”¹⁹ Then, on the

¹⁷ As the Commentary that accompanied the Declaration says (p. 526), with reference to St. Thomas's explanation, “some arguments adduced on this subject in the past are scarcely defensible today.”

¹⁸ Peter Steinfels calls this the “linchpin” of the Church's case in *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), p. 294.

¹⁹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Imaging God, Embodying Christ: Women as a Sign of the Times,” in *The Church Women Want*, ed. Elizabeth A. Johnson (New York: Crossroad, 2002), p. 53. The Pope indeed teaches that there are

assumption that the Pope's "binary" anthropology is linked by theological necessity to male names and imagery for God, these theologians undertake a radical critique of the Christian tradition and even of biblical revelation in hopes of correcting an imbalance they deem "sexist" and injurious to women.²⁰

In sum, many Catholic advocates for women's ordination think that the "theological arguments" proposed in the Declaration and confirmed in subsequent teaching have been offered to explain, and even to prove, why priestly ordination is reserved to men. Puzzled, they protest: Granted that sexual complementarity has undeniable value and importance for marriage, why is it so important for the priesthood? What is it about the priesthood that requires maleness? Clearly, ordained women in other Christian communities are entirely able to perform priestly functions. Why is the Pauline metaphor that compares Christ and the Church to Bridegroom and Bride so decisive? Isn't this just one among many biblical metaphors for this relationship? Is not people's need for the sacraments more compelling than the obligation to maintain a particular symbolic coherence between the priest and Christ in his relationship with the Church? For these and similar reasons, they regard the "theological arguments" as arbitrary, even contrived. They credit them to a poorly-disguised "patriarchal" bias against women.

This is the line of reasoning that has led to the current stalemate. Polarized Catholics wrestle with two different assessments of the relevance of "maleness" to the priesthood. On the one side, advocates of women's ordination insist that since it is Jesus' identity as a human being, not his male sex, that is theologically significant, women should be able to represent him as priests. On the other side, supporters of the tradition find the Declaration's account of the theological significance of the Word's Incarnation as a male not only fitting, but also attractive and illuminating. If the priest represents Christ the Bridegroom in his relationship with his Church-Bride, it seems to them eminently reasonable that priestly ordination be reserved to men.²¹

As I have said, for some years I agreed with and publicly promoted the priestly ordination of women. Eventually, however, I became discouraged by the liberal feminist tendency to reduce sexual difference to a "reproductive role specialization." I thought feminist theologians were overlooking the potential that nuptial symbolism has for shedding light on the mystery of the Covenant, and thus of Christ's relationship to the Church.²² At the time, like most who took Christian feminism as a starting point, I took it for granted that the chief point of contention was the nature and sacramental significance of sexual difference. Once I attempted to defend my appreciation of the magisterium's "theological arguments" from nuptial symbolism, however, I saw more clearly their auxiliary nature—that they were set out in the second part of the Declaration only to elucidate the "fundamental reasons" proposed in the first part. The Declaration itself acknowledges that the "theological arguments" do not "prove" or establish the

"essential differences," but he does not propose these as "the reason" for his judgment about reserving priestly ordination to men.

²⁰ This logic is already apparent in Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Contemporary Roman Catholicism: Crises and Challenges* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed & Ward, 1987), pp. 37-38.

²¹ For a critical evaluation of this position, see my essay, "Ordination: Reviewing the 'Fundamental Reasons,'" *Voices* 19:3 (Michaelmas 2004): 19-26.

²² See my "Second Thoughts on Ordaining Women," *Worship* 63:2 (March 1989): 157-65 and "The Priest as Sacrament of Christ the Bridegroom," *Worship* 66:6 (November 1992): 498-517.

Church's teaching.²³ (This is why they are in Part II!) They are not actually the reasons the Church gives. In fact, the "fundamental reasons" are clearly identified, and they are set out in Part I of the Declaration. In order to grasp the force of these reasons, we need to approach the question of women's ordination from a different starting point, the magisterium's starting point.

2. The Magisterium's Starting Point

When Pope Paul VI publicly referred to the question of women's ordination in 1975, he gave this explanation: "women did not receive the call to the apostolate of the Twelve."²⁴ At the time, advocates of women's ordination found this reference to Jesus' call of the Apostles rather surprising. Many critics thought the Pope was avoiding the real issue, which they assumed had to do with the equal rights and dignity of women. But the Pope was approaching the question from a different starting point, namely, from the doctrine of the priesthood.²⁵ Sixteen years later, in 1994, Pope John Paul II again adopted this starting point in his apostolic letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*. It begins: "Priestly ordination, which hands on the office entrusted by Christ to his Apostles of teaching, sanctifying and governing the faithful, has in the Catholic Church from the beginning always been reserved to men alone" (§ 1). In this letter the Pope makes no reference to the sacramental significance of gender or to the male priest as a fitting representative of Jesus as Head and Bridegroom of the Church. Since he clearly did not intend to repudiate these "theological arguments," by omitting them he re-enforced the point that they are just that—*arguments from fittingness, illustrations, grounds of plausibility*—not the "fundamental reasons" for the practice which the Church proposes with authority.²⁶ Let me underscore this point: according to the "fundamental reasons," the Tradition is traced to the will of Christ, not to a decision made by the Church.

At this point, we need to review these "fundamental reasons." The Declaration *Inter insigniores* sets out them out in four steps. First, there is the constant tradition itself, universal in East and West, and quick to suppress innovations, of conferring priestly ordination only on men. Second, according to this tradition the reservation of priestly ordination to men represents fidelity to the will of Christ, made known by his choice of men (and not women) to belong to the Twelve. Third, the tradition is confirmed by the practice of the apostolic Church, which, following the Lord's example, continued to choose only men for the ministry by a laying on of hands. And fourth, this practice has always been recognized as normative in the Church.

These "fundamental reasons" have real priority over the "theological arguments." They testify to the conviction that the Church knows and faithfully follows Christ's will for the ministerial priesthood, and that his will can be known by consulting his example, the example of the apostolic community, and the constant practice of the Church. In other words, the Church's

²³ This is stated in *Inter insigniores* § 5 (at the beginning of the paragraph) and elaborated in the Commentary released along with it (*Origins* 6:33 [February 3, 1977], p. 529).

²⁴ "Women/Disciples & Co-workers," *Origins* 4:45 (May 1, 1975), p. 719. The Pope went on to say that women "are, nevertheless, invited to follow Christ as disciples and co-workers."

²⁵ I use this expression, rather than "the doctrine of Holy Orders," in order to exclude the diaconate.

²⁶ Notice also that the explanation given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 1557 makes no reference to the "theological arguments."

teaching rests not on a particular theory of theological anthropology, and not on the “theological arguments,” but on the will of Jesus Christ, the Author of the New Testament priesthood.

At this point it is important to notice that the Declaration does not spell out the Catholic doctrine of the priesthood; it simply presupposes it.²⁷ It presupposes, that is, that Christ founded the Church and instituted Holy Orders, the sacrament by which the priesthood is handed on, and that Holy Orders is a sacrament distinct from Baptism. It presupposes that by means of ordination Christ calls, authorizes, and equips certain of the baptized as priests to carry out his sanctifying, teaching, and shepherding ministry. Have commentators and critics of the Church’s teaching overlooked this unexpressed presupposition? We need to notice, further, that the points just mentioned distinguish the Catholic doctrine of the priesthood from the classical Reformation understanding of ordained ministry. This is important for our question. Despite the significant ecumenical agreements on ordained ministry in the Church,²⁸ differences remain, and they stand out quite sharply when we come to the topic of women’s ordination. It is well known that the 16th century Reformers denied that Holy Orders is a sacrament. This difference, then, touches the origins of the ministry (that is, its institution by Jesus Christ), its relationship to the office of the Twelve Apostles (and therefore to apostolic succession), and its relationship to the common priesthood (or priesthood of the baptized). To put it simply, it is not because we differ over the equality and complementarity of the sexes that some Protestants ordain women, and the Catholic Church does not; it is because we disagree over whether Holy Orders is a sacrament.

How does this disagreement impinge on our question? First, according to Catholic teaching, Holy Orders is a sacrament distinct from Baptism that confers on one of the baptized a sacred power not possessed by the rest. This is what is meant by saying that the ministerial priesthood differs in kind and not just in degree from the common priesthood of the baptized.²⁹ According to the Protestant Reformers, by contrast, ordination commits to the minister, for the sake of good order and on the basis of his or her spiritual gifts, the exercise of functions that in principle belong to all of the baptized. The Reformers held that the “general ministry” of Word

²⁷ Lack of acquaintance with this teaching has seriously affected the public debate on women's ordination.

²⁸ For example, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission’s agreed statement on “Ordination and Ministry” in *The Final Report* (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1982), and the U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic statement in *Eucharist and Ministry* (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1970), and *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper, No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

²⁹ See *Lumen gentium* § 10.

and Sacrament is given first to the whole Church, and then transmitted by ordination to those who will serve the rest in the “special ministry.” What follows from this? According to the classical Reformation doctrine, it is indeed unjust to bar baptized women from the ministry on the basis of their sex. The slogan, “If you won’t ordain women, don’t baptize them” makes sense in denominations that adhere to this doctrine. Once it is agreed that biblical teaching upholds the equality of women with men, there *is* no further obstacle to the admission of qualified women to the ordained ministry.

This Catholic-Protestant difference may not at first appear significant, but its implications become clear when we consider the practice, in some denominations, of “lay presidency.” This refers to the tradition of authorizing lay persons, by some means other than ordination, to preside at the Lord’s Supper.³⁰ Churches that allow for “lay presidency” clearly do not understand ordination to confer upon the minister a new power or capacity. They hold a view that the Council of Trent rejected. Trent condemned the proposition that “all Christians are without distinction priests of the New Testament, [and] that all are equally endowed with the same spiritual power.”³¹

The Catholic alternative is, in fact, recalled in *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* § 2. Pope John Paul teaches that the Twelve did not receive from the Lord “only a function which could thereafter be exercised by any member of the Church; rather they were specifically and intimately associated” with his own mission (cf. Mt 10:1, 7-8; 28:16-20; Mk 3:13-16; 16:14-15). By contrast with a theology of ordination based on the common priesthood of the faithful, then, the Catholic Church teaches that the Lord himself instituted a hierarchical ministry to carry out his prophetic, priestly, and pastoral tasks in the Church. Bishops and priests entrusted with this office by ordination exercise functions that the rest of the baptized could not in principle fulfill. Just as the Twelve (in the Pope’s words) “were drawn into a specific and intimate association with Christ” and “given the ‘mission of representing Christ the Lord and Redeemer,’” so today priests and bishops are called by Christ from among the baptized to offer his ministry to the rest, by his authority and in his person. Their ministry is offered not on the basis of the sacraments of initiation, but on the basis of the sacrament of Holy Orders.

Now the magisterium affirms that women and men enjoy the same status on the basis of Baptism, i.e., as members of the *common* priesthood, but it does not see this as having any implications for admission to the *ministerial* priesthood. In other words, in the structure of the Catholic Church the real distinction or “difference in kind” is between the non-ordained and the ordained faithful, not between women and men. Since there are no women among the ordained, many perceive this to be a difference based on sex, but it is not. It is based, rather, on the fact

³⁰ Surprisingly, evangelical Anglicans in the diocese of Sydney, Australia have been debating whether or not to authorize lay and diaconal “presidents” of the Eucharist since 1977. See Margaret Hebblethwaite, “Laity at the head of the Anglican Table?” *The Tablet* 248:8016 (26 March 1994): 382-84.

³¹ DS 1610/ ND 1320. Some will point out that certain contemporary Catholic theologians, like Edward Schillebeeckx, make a similar argument. They speculate that in an emergency situation the assembly could authorize one of its members to celebrate the Eucharist. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, however, has vigorously rejected this thesis. See “Vatican Congregation’s Letter to Bishops: The Minister of the Eucharist,” *Origins* 13:14 (September 15, 1983): 229.231-33. (ND 1756-5767). See also the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s Notification, “Doctrinal Congregation on New Work by Father Schillebeeckx,” *Origins* 16:19 (October 23, 1986): 344.

that “by Christ’s will some [granted, these are always men] are established as teachers, dispensers of the mysteries and pastors for the others.”³²

A second difference is that Catholic doctrine traces the origin of the ministerial priesthood to the Lord’s “apostolic charge” to the Twelve. The longstanding Catholic tradition holds the bishops to be the successors of the Apostles, and it was called to mind many times at the Second Vatican Council in support of the doctrine of episcopal collegiality.³³ The Council repeatedly asserts that the charge given to the Apostles was handed on to their successors, the bishops, who receive the fullness of the sacrament of Holy Orders.³⁴ For Catholics, this is a solid doctrinal claim. It is founded not on a scholarly reconstruction of the origins of the ordained ministry, but on the lived faith of the Church and a constant tradition of sacramental doctrine and practice.

We need to pay close attention to this matter of the apostolic charge the Lord gave to the Twelve. Many critics fail to take into account how it functions in the Church’s teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men. Some fail to do so because they mistakenly believe that the question turns, instead, on a particular theory of theological anthropology. Others, however, dispute whether the ordained ministry can be traced back to Jesus and to the Twelve. It is not uncommon for Protestant and even Anglican theologians to deny such a connection, on the grounds that it cannot be established by means of historical-critical scholarship. Many conclude that the Twelve had a unique office to which there are no successors,³⁵ and that what now corresponds to the ordained ministry emerged later in the life of the apostolic Church, in response to gifts of the Spirit.³⁶ Notice the consequences for our question. Once the link between the Twelve and the ministerial priesthood is broken, the force of the magisterium’s principal claim with respect to the reservation of priestly ordination to men is destroyed. In Catholic doctrine, however, the institution of the ministerial priesthood is grounded in the Lord’s call and commission of the Twelve Apostles.

If we approach the question of women’s ordination from the magisterium’s starting point, then, we begin from the perspective of the Church’s settled doctrine, that Christ founded the Church, that he gave the “apostolic charge” to the Twelve, and that he instituted the sacrament of Holy Orders. The question to be examined is limited to whether there is evidence that, in choosing only men to belong to the Twelve, the Lord expressed a perennial norm for the ministerial priesthood, i.e., with respect to the sex of those who are ordained. Recall that the Declaration was addressed to scholars who had suggested that the Church’s practice represents

³² *Lumen gentium* § 32.

³³ Interest in affirming episcopal collegiality motivated contemporary Catholic scholars to investigate further the role of the Twelve. For more on this, see my essay “Women’s Ordination and the Development of Doctrine,” *The Thomist* 61 (October 1997): 501-24, at pp. 517-23.

³⁴ *Lumen gentium* §§ 20-21. See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 1577 for the link between the constitution of the apostolic college and its successor, the college of bishops, and the reservation of priestly ordination to men.

³⁵ The Catholic Church distinguishes between the aspects of the apostolic office unique to the Twelve and those that belong to the “apostolic charge” that they handed on to their successors. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 860.

³⁶ See Faith and Order Paper No. 181, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (Switzerland: WCC/Faith and Order, 1998), § 85.

an unexamined way of acting, dictated by historical and cultural prejudices against women and sustained by appeal to certain Pauline texts. In response, the Declaration asserts that the tradition was not unexamined, and that those who came to its defense appealed not only to certain texts from St. Paul but also to the Lord's will for the priesthood, known by way of his choice of men to belong to the Twelve.

In many instances, of course, the tradition *was* defended by appeals to “the Pauline ban” and the inferior social status of women. Today, however, the magisterium regards those appeals as “theological arguments,” and explicitly rejects the view that women are in a “state of submission” to men. “Theological arguments,” remember, address the question of *fittingness*, that is, *why* Christ might have restricted ordination to men. But the first question is one of *fact*—*whether* he did so and in some way communicated his intention.³⁷ The Declaration calls attention to a second tradition of explanation, one that addresses this question of fact. According to this tradition, the Church knows that women are not called to priestly functions because Jesus chose men, and not women, to belong to the Twelve. This is the tradition the magisterium retrieves and sets out among the “fundamental reasons” for its conviction that the Church has no authority to ordain women.

Time permits mention of only the most important witness to this second tradition from the patristic era, St. Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis (in Crete) in the late fourth century.³⁸ Epiphanius made a collection of heresies, explaining what was at stake and giving the Church's verdict on each. In the course of denouncing a heretical sect, the Collyridians, in which women priests offered worship to Mary under the title Ever-Virgin, he asserts that God has never called women to be priests, either in the Old or the New Covenants. He speculates, “If women were to be charged by God with entering the priesthood [*hierateuein*] or with assuming ecclesiastical office [*kanonikón ti érgázestai én Ékklesía*], then in the New Covenant it would have devolved upon no one more than Mary to fulfill a priestly function.”³⁹ His judgment has passed into the tradition in this “Mariological” form.⁴⁰ This argument may strike us as naïve, but we need to attend closely to its implications.

First, it reverses the supposition that women are excluded from the priesthood because they are unworthy. Just the opposite: it is because they are evidently worthy that it is necessary to justify their exclusion! To do this, Epiphanius appeals to the example of Christ, who called no woman—not even his Mother—to be one of the Twelve.⁴¹ The second implication is that

³⁷ See Guy Mansini, “On Affirming a Dominical Intention of a Male Priesthood,” *The Thomist* 61:2 (April, 1997): 301-316, for a very impressive development of this precise point.

³⁸ St. Epiphanius (d. 407) is not regarded as a reliable historian, and he is not free of bias against women, especially women heretics, but his testimony is important because he grew up in Palestine, and therefore knew the Syriac as well as the Latin and Greek traditions. Sts. Augustine and John Damascene endorsed his judgment against groups that allowed women access to priestly functions. See Manfred Hauke, *Women in the Priesthood? A Systematic Analysis in the Light of the Order of Creation and Redemption* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 418.

³⁹ The translation from Epiphanius' *Panarion* (79,3) is from Hauke, p. 416.

⁴⁰ *Inter insigniores* § 2 recalls that in 1210 Pope Innocent III appealed to this: “Although the Blessed Virgin Mary surpassed in dignity and in excellence all the Apostles, nevertheless, it was not to her but to them that the Lord entrusted the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.”

⁴¹ He also appeals to the example of the Apostles: never was a woman ever appointed to succeed the Apostles as bishop or presbyter.

Christ's will with regard to women in the priesthood can be discovered by considering the position of Mary vis-à-vis the Twelve Apostles. In the context of the current debate it is significant, I believe, that Bishop Epiphanius does not stop with Mary. He points out that in addition to his Mother, Jesus had many holy women in his company, e.g., Salome, Martha and Mary, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, the Canaanite woman, and the woman with the hemorrhage. Although the Lord might have invited any of these holy women to belong to the Twelve,⁴² he did not do so. There is a third implication: for Epiphanius, the call to the priesthood is equated with the call to belong to the Twelve.⁴³ We can know Christ's will for the priesthood, he claims, from the fact that he only chose men to belong to the Twelve. Notice: women are not excluded because of their "subject" status or some unworthiness deriving from their sex (these are holy women, saints!); rather, it is a dispensation of the Lord's will.

It is interesting to note that this reasoning is not original with Epiphanius; there are third century sources, cited in the Declaration, that also report this judgment. If I report his witness at some length it is because his work, the *Panarion*, ultimately provides the pattern for the "fundamental reasons" set out in the Declaration *Inter insigniores*.⁴⁴ Epiphanius is the first to point to the unbroken tradition itself as an argument,⁴⁵ but he is surely not the first to link the vocation to priesthood to the call of the Twelve, or to imply that bishops and presbyters are the successors to the Apostles. These connections were already well-established in the patristic tradition.

After its report of the patristic reasoning, the Declaration briefly assesses the medieval testimonies. Recall that it sets aside "theological arguments" that depend upon a "faulty anthropology." It cites St. Bonaventure's explanation, although the content of his teaching—that a man is required to represent Christ who is male—is employed only in the "theological arguments" and reported only in the Commentary that accompanied the Declaration. It is the Commentary, too, that makes mention of the fact that from the second half of the 12th century forward, some Scholastic Doctors taught that the prohibition on women in the priesthood is due to an historic determination by Christ himself. They reasoned that if this determination originated only with the Church it would constitute an injustice to women.⁴⁶

The Declaration then takes up the Gospel testimony. It was once argued that Jesus did not include women among the Twelve because his contemporaries would not have accepted women as witnesses to the Resurrection. Scholars today, however, agree that Jesus was remarkably free in associating with women, breaking with the customs of his day in his dealings with them. According to the Declaration, it cannot be proved, therefore, that he was constrained by the culture in choosing only men for the Twelve. As I have noted, Pope John Paul II also called attention to Jesus' way of dealing with women, identifying it as a "Gospel innovation." He asserts that since the Lord did not conform to the religious and cultural expectations of first

⁴² *Panarion* 79, 3-4.

⁴³ Epiphanius does not need to defend this assumption; it was "in possession."

⁴⁴ See Jean Galot, *Mission et ministère de la femme* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1973), pp. 71-84.

⁴⁵ According to Hauke (p. 418), Epiphanius describes female priesthood not only as a breach of Church discipline but also as heresy.

⁴⁶ See p. 526 in the *Origins* edition.

century Judaism, we can be sure that he acted with “sovereign freedom” when he chose men and not women to belong to the Twelve.⁴⁷

The Declaration points out that “a purely historical exegesis of the texts cannot suffice” (§ 2) to settle the question of the Lord’s intention, and it acknowledges that we have no “sayings” of Jesus that explain his choice. Although the facts recorded in the Gospels “do not make the matter immediately obvious,” the evidence of the tradition allows the Church to know his will. The example of the apostolic Church, in a particular way, confirms this conviction. Although many women are mentioned as sharing in the apostolic ministry in responsible positions, only men are entrusted with the ministry by the “laying on of hands.”⁴⁸

The final reason is that this pattern has always been regarded as a norm from which the Church is not free to depart. From the magisterium’s starting point, then, the question of women’s possible access to the priesthood must be addressed within the context of the Church’s settled doctrine that the Lord’s institution of the sacrament of Holy Orders is linked to the apostolic charge he gave to the Twelve.⁴⁹ The answer is discovered in a tradition of practice that is traced back to Christ’s own determination. The Lord’s will with respect to the priesthood can be known by way of his choice of men, and not women, to belong to the Twelve.

Looking at the magisterium’s case as a whole, we see that it *begins* with the doctrine of the priesthood, sets aside the tradition that justified the Church’s practice by appeal to the inferiority of women and the “Pauline ban,” and then lifts up an alternative tradition, one that looks instead to the Gospels and defends the reservation of priestly ordination to men as something required by fidelity to the will of Christ. This is a case in which the testimony of Tradition weighs heavily, though the scriptural witness provides the fundamental data.⁵⁰ Only on the basis of this premise does the magisterium propose the “theological arguments” from fittingness.

A Second Look at the “Theological Arguments”

We are now in a position to look again at the “theological arguments” found in Part II of *Inter insigniores*, not in order to prove something, but because we are searching for the meaning of the Lord’s dispensation. Why only men? What value does this have? The Declaration recalls that the sacraments are signs, natural signs but also signs related to the events of salvation. In setting forth arguments from fittingness, it suggests that the person who is ordained enters into

⁴⁷ *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* § 2.

⁴⁸ See Albert Vanhoye, “Church’s practice in continuity with New Testament Teaching,” *L’Osservatore Romano* 10:10 (March 1993), p. 10. This brief article addresses several of the critical objections raised with regard to the New Testament origins of the priesthood.

⁴⁹ The Council of Trent locates the institution of the priesthood at the Last Supper (DS 1749, 1752/ND 1546, 1556).

⁵⁰ This judgment is found in *Inter insigniores* (§ 2) and in the accompanying Commentary (p. 528). It concurs with the conclusion reached by a study undertaken by the Pontifical Biblical Commission: “It does not seem that the New Testament by itself alone will permit us to settle in a clear way and once and for all the problem of the possible accession of women to the presbyterate.” (See “Can Women Be Priests?” *Origins* 6 [July 1, 1976], p. 96.) The Commentary compares this to the difficulty of establishing the dominical institution of some of the sacraments and of the structure of Holy Orders.

the constitution of the sacramental sign. Since he is a sign of Christ-in-relation-to-the-Church, it is fitting that he possess a “natural resemblance” to Christ who is signified. By a process of theological reasoning the requirement of natural resemblance is linked to the maleness of Christ; the priest is an icon of Christ, Head and Bridegroom, in his service to the Church, his Body and Bride. This is particularly evident in those actions in which the priest represents Christ, Mediator of a New Covenant, that is, actions that require the character of Holy Orders.

Priestly ordination, as we have noted, is conferred by Holy Orders, a sacrament distinct from Baptism. The ministerial priesthood is not simply a position of public leadership. It “is conferred not for the honor or benefit of the recipient, but for the service of God and the Church.”⁵¹ It is Christ’s gift to the Church—the means by which he continues to make his teaching, ruling, and sanctifying ministry available to the rest of the baptized. The priest is sacramentally configured to Christ in order to provide the rest of the faithful with the Lord’s Word and sacraments, the means of holiness, and to lay down his life for them. Along with the rest, he is called to holiness. In fact, as the Declaration (§ 6) points out, the goal of the Christian life is not to be a priest but to be a saint! Perhaps this addresses the complaint that the Church has a “stained-glass ceiling.” A Catholic who aspires to be in “stained-glass” will not break through a ceiling but may end up in a window, and the way to get there is open to all! The hierarchical priesthood is at the service of the “hierarchy of holiness.”⁵² The ordained ministry exists to promote the exercise of the common priesthood in the apostolic structure of the Church. The non-ordained faithful—women and men—are placed at no disadvantage with respect to the universal call to holiness.

The Church is the People of God, Body of Christ, and Temple of the Holy Spirit. It is a gift of God, not simply a voluntary society of believers who come together on their own initiative and create an institutional order that serves their purposes. The ministries necessary to the Church’s functioning are also gifts, or charisms distributed by the Holy Spirit, and the institution of the apostolic office is traced back to the Lord himself. While demonstrated competence should certainly be a condition for access to the office of priest in the Christian community, it is not the only condition. In fact, believers do not determine these conditions on their own, but faithfully maintain the pattern—a hierarchically-ordered community—given by Jesus Christ. It is the Lord who calls and chooses those who will represent him as his ministers.

Can we not appreciate the “fittingness” of asking only men—in fact, only some men—to take his role as Head and Bridegroom insofar as he “faces” the Church, his Body and Bride, and offers her his ministry? The symbolism is, indeed, nuptial or spousal. It beautifully displays God’s covenant love for his people and reminds us of Jesus’ sacrificial love for the Church. Once we embrace Christ’s will for the ministerial priesthood as maintained unbroken in the sacramental practice and doctrine of the Church, it is possible, I believe, to discover that the reservation of priestly ordination to men in no way detracts from the role of women—or, for that matter, of non-ordained men—in the Church, since all share the dignity of the baptized and the same call to holiness. The priesthood is Christ’s gift, by which he entrusts his ministry to some in order that they may serve the rest as God’s holy people. In fact, the reservation of priestly ordination to men serves to make visible this gift—the Lord’s ongoing presence in the midst of the Church.

⁵¹ *Inter insigniores* § 6.

⁵² *Mulieris dignitatem* § 26.