

## WOMEN'S ORDINATION

# Letter to the Apostolic Delegate

*The conclusion of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that the church does not consider herself authorized to admit women to the priesthood is "not sustained by the evidence and the arguments alleged in its support," according to 23 theologians on the faculty of the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif. In an open letter to the apostolic delegate in the U.S., Archbishop Jean Jadot, the theologians said that the Doctrinal Congregation's Jan. 27 declaration on the ordination of women erred in arguing the case against women priests on the basis of dogmatic impossibility. "To say that we have never ordained women in the past and therefore, cannot do so now, is to ignore the fact that the issue has never arisen in precisely these contemporary terms and within the new realization of women's place in the world," they said. The text of their letter — which was delivered to Archbishop Jadot in Washington, D.C. on March 16 by Rev. James Connor, S.J., president of the American Jesuit Conference — follows.*

Your Excellency: Christ's Peace!

We, the undersigned theologians of the pontifical faculty of

the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, address this letter to you as the representative of the Holy Father to the American church.

We wish to discuss the recent declaration of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith regarding the ordination of women to priesthood which asserts: "The church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination."

We are not attempting here an extended investigation of the entire question of women's ordination, nor is it our purpose here to present a comprehensive argument that women should be admitted to the ministerial priesthood. Rather it is our judgment that the conclusion of the declaration is not sustained by the evidence and the arguments alleged in its support, and that it could sanction within the church a practice of serious injustice. It is for this reason that we send to you an expression of dissent and of appeal.

### An Important Pre-Note:

The whole purpose of our writing will be vitiated beyond repair  
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if the nature of our dissent is misunderstood. Public disagreement and frankness of response often be taken in other cultures or read by unfriendly eyes as schism or as insult or as disobedience to lawful authority.

Precisely the opposite is the case. We dissent not because we disassociate ourselves in any way from the Catholic Church or from the Roman pontiff, but because we feel ourselves very much united with both. Dissent in our culture is the protest of those who belong. It is the loyal opposition of those who feel that their very identification is leading them into a situation in which they seem to acquiesce in what is evil.

For theologians, dissent is neither a luxury nor a rhetoric. There are times when those whose lives are consecrated to the assimilation and explanation of the word of God, cannot remain silent when that word is attenuated seriously by indifference or by error or by insensitivity or by ignorance. The question then becomes one of conscience. Dissent becomes a moral imperative, and at this moment of morality there are no spectators. Not to act is its own modality of entrance into the deed — as emphatically as is approval or prosecution.

### The Dissent:

It is with this understanding that we ask Your Excellency to convey to the Holy Father and to the Doctrinal Congregation our disappointment and disagreement with the determination of this congregation regarding the ordination of women. It is simply not evident to us that fidelity to the example of Jesus, who incorporated the human race into a unity within himself, would demand that women be excluded because of their sex from the sacramental and governing functions within the church forever and on principle.

If the Doctrinal Congregation had confined its discussion to the present opportuneness of the ordination of women to the priesthood, alleging the practice of the Oriental church, the position of women in different cultures, the contemporary attacks on the Holy See from the far right, it would have issued a declaration whose reasonableness would not have been legitimately questioned, although its conclusions might well have been. There is a sanity about allowing for cultural growth, and the church must both lead and proceed in terms of the development of consciousness throughout the entire world.

But the thrust of the declaration is not in terms of organic and historical developments, but in terms of dogmatic impossibility. The foundations of its arguments are laid in sacred scripture, the fathers of the church, the unaltered tradition of the past 2,000 years, and the nature of the sacramental sign. It is our judgment that none of these, either individually or collectively, can bear the weight

assigned. The limits of a letter do not allow us to present our extended investigations of the use of each of these *loci theologici*. Here we simply summarize the conclusions of our work.

1. The scriptural evidence does not allow for any settlement of the question once and for all on the possible accession of women to the presbyterate. This was the judgment of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and one with which we agree. The declaration fails to acknowledge that it is disagreeing with the Pontifical Biblical Commission and to provide adequate grounds for so doing. What is more, the declaration sometimes uses biblical data with a questionable exegetical methodology and with presuppositions that allow the contextual meaning of certain passages to be compromised.

2. Of the initial five patristic authorities cited, only one (Epiphanius) clearly and directly supports the prohibition of women's ordination, while one other (Tertullian) offers a basis for argument that this should be the case; but no one would admit the truth of the basis for his argument today. The other three citations are basically irrelevant. Of the second series of patristic authorities alleged, only one (*Constitutiones Apostolicae*) offers some support for the statement for which it is cited. The others do not.

If the most important and persuasive patristic passages have been referred to by the declaration, then the patristic argument is too weak to be of any importance. We are certainly not confronted with the "unanimous consent of the fathers" which is generally required for the establishment of a theological position.

3. The notion of tradition used in the declaration is that of the inflexible transmission of past practices, regardless of the cultures out of which they came and the needs to which they responded. Both the development of doctrine and the vitality of any tradition indicate that what is handed on must be translated into the contemporary idiom and respond to the discerned presence of the Spirit of Christ, bringing the evolving church into a closer fidelity to the gospel. To say that we have never ordained women in the past and therefore, cannot do so now, is to ignore the fact that the issue has never arisen in precisely these contemporary terms and within the new realization of women's place in the world.

4. The sacramental sign necessary to act *in persona Christi* is to be located within the human person rather than within masculine or feminine sexuality. There is a legitimate concern of the declaration that "the image of Christ" be perceived by the faithful in the priest. We do not see how women's ordination would derogate from this.

On the contrary, the presence of women as priests, as well as men, could be an abiding sign to the faithful that all Christians "have put on Christ Jesus" and in this identification lies their hope for salvation. It is simply a matter of

*The text of the Doctrinal Congregation's Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood appeared in Vol. 6 of Origins on p. 517, accompanied by a commentary on the declaration commissioned and released by the congregation*

*The report of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on the question of women's ordination—which the Berkeley theologians say the Doctrinal Congregation ignored—appeared on p. 92 of Vol. 6 of Origins*

*For other reaction to the declaration of the Doctrinal Congregation see the In Context section which begins on p. 545 of Vol. 6. Presented there are statements issued by the Women's Ordination Conference, Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Archbishop John Quinn, Bishop Francis Reh, Cardinal William Baum and Archbishop William Borders.*



*The Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif., is one of six pontifical faculties in the U.S. As a pontifical institution, its charter is granted by the Pope and its faculty and curriculum are approved by the Vatican. It is empowered by the Holy See to grant church degrees and its members are often consulted by the Vatican on theological questions.*

*The letter to the apostolic delegate which appears on this page was signed by all but three of 26 full-time faculty members and administrators of the school. The list of those who signed the letter appears at the conclusion of the text*

fact that the exclusion of women from priestly ordination in our day does not reinforce "the image of Christ" for a growing number of people, but rather symbolizes sexual discrimination within the church.

The declaration correctly maintains that no single person can lay claim to ordination as a personal right. The profound issue of justice does not arise because one woman has been denied presbyteral orders. The issue of justice is engaged when an entire class of Catholics is antecedently excluded on principle even from the possibility that Christ might call them to this ministry, so that simply because they are women it is impossible to admit them to this service of word and of sacrament.

The exclusion of any group of Christians from a life or from a function to which they feel a call is so serious an action by the church, it should be supported as an obvious demand of the gospel. Any evidence should be overwhelming which makes discrimination an imperative. This declaration does not contain such evidence.

The declaration offers neither encouragement nor leadership to the growing movement for the rightful evolution of women within the church. The emerging consciousness of women's rights is a major moral development of our times, and one which the declaration positively acknowledged.

Despite this recognition, however, the declaration retards that movement and commits the people of God to abiding and exclusive government by men. In its decision, the Roman congregation may well be repeating in its own form and through its insufficient sensitivity to the issues involved, such condemnations as those of the Chinese rites, of the Copernican understanding of the solar system, and of the early emerging biblical movement at the turn of the century.

This is the reason that we write to you, Your Excellency. Roman congregations have made serious mistakes in the past whose harm to the church we continue to experience centuries afterwards. We believe that we may well be on a similar path again, and the effect of aligning priesthood with masculinity may identify the church as regressive for millions of human beings in the future. It is our conviction that this declaration, because of the faulty nature of its argumentation and conclusions, could impose a grave injustice on Catholic women and undermine the position of the successor of Peter within the United States, continuing what has become a serious dissipation of his authority.

The appeal which we make to Your Excellency is really threefold:

—That the concerns and judgments of the members of this pontifical faculty of theology be communicated to the Holy Father and to the Doctrinal Congregation.

—That in the future, any document which is to bear so directly upon the lives and

self-understanding of so many members of the church be submitted as a matter of policy to the bishops, theological faculties throughout the world, and to appropriate representative bodies of those seriously affected. Only after this widespread consultation should something so serious be given authoritative sanction by one of the Roman congregations.

—The declaration left open the ordination of women to the diaconate and we ask that it be instituted now as soon as possible, giving sacramental and public sanction for ministries which many women have been authorized to perform already within the church and which they are performing so successfully. We believe that expanding the church's experience here would illuminate

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successfully the evolving discernment about the church's decisions and actions in the future.

We recognize that these three measures will not end the discussion of women's ordination to the priesthood, but they will allow it to continue organically and gracefully within the developing self-understanding of the church. The growing discernment and incorporation of the Spirit of Christ into our structures, is all that we finally hope for through this letter.

In sending this as an open letter, Your Excellency, we follow a practice of general discussion which is as old as our nation. The declaration itself is a public document. The letters of praise which it has elicited from many bishops and Catholic groups have been printed in *Osservatore Romano*, in diocesan newspapers, and in the secular press. These letters with their comments indicate two things: that evaluation is not out of order; and that this evaluation is public. Once such a scene has been set, it would denigrate the church to pretend in public that there is no serious contrary opinion or to deny this dissent the public voice granted to the alternative evaluation.

Second, we make our reflections public to support in their pain those who have read in this declaration a decision that women will always occupy a secondary role within the church. There is no question that some have taken serious scandal from this declaration, that



so decisive a document could be issued whose consultation was so minimal and whose argumentation appears so weak. Perhaps this letter can give hope to some who feel here a deep injustice, indicating that one can disagree without either leaving the church or without a destructive bitterness and mutual recrimination.

Finally, then, please understand the profound love for the church and for the vicar of Christ that has led to this dissent and to its open expression. It was a woman — Beatrice, Dante's symbol for theology — who put so well the spirit in which we write: "*Amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare.*" (Inf. ii. 72) It is love which has brought us to speak. ■

Signers: Joseph A. Tellow, S.J., president; Andrew J. Dufner, S.J., dean; Edward M. O'Flaherty, S.J., rector.

Michael J. Buckley, S.J., assoc. professor of systematic theology and spirituality; John Coleman, S.J., asst. professor of religion and society; Donald F. Gelpi, S.J., asst. professor historical/systematic theology; Philipp Schmitz, S.J., visiting professor of pastoral theology; Ernest R. Martinez, S.J., adj. asst. professor of sacred scripture; Harry T. Corcoran, S.J., asst. for academic relations; William J. Fuleo, S.J., asst. professor of sacred scripture; Thomas N. Hart, S.J., adj. asst. professor of systematic theology; Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM, asst. professor New Testament studies and spirituality; Joseph M. Powers, S.J., assoc. professor of systematic theology; Robert H. Dailey, S.J., professor of moral theology; Lewis M. Cox, S.J., adj. assoc. professor of spirituality; David Stagaman, S.J., asst. professor of systematic theology;

Michael L. Cook, S.J., asst. professor of systematic theology; Thomas L. Schubeck, S.J., asst. professor of religion and society; John H. Wright, S.J., professor of systematic theology; Frank A. Molony, S.J., director of field education; Chris Bennett, S.S.S., instructor in field education; Roderick A. F. MacKenzie, S.J., visiting professor of Old Testament; James E. Empereur, S.J., asst. professor of systematic theology.

# Archbishop Jadot Responds

Archbishop Jean Jadot, apostolic delegate in the U.S., has forwarded to the Vatican the letter he received from 23 theologians at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif., according to a statement he issued March 24. While the church is "enlightened" by the work of theologians, he said, "it is the church through her official teachers...who can and must discern what is changeable and what is not." His statement follows.

As requested by the signers of the open letter, I have transmitted the document to the Holy See.

I wish to note the following: as the declaration states, the Catholic Church does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination. Her teaching is normative for Catholics.

As new questions are raised, the church is enlightened by the studies of theologians. But, it is the church through her official teachers, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who can and must discern what is changeable and what is not.

In discussing the role of women in the church — a role that everyone agrees should be expanded — it is important not to lose sight of the unique contributions which women can make. There is, I believe, a danger that this

equality of men and women were to be reduced to a practical uniformity of roles and functions. Were this to come about, the church and the whole human family would be poorer, not richer. ■

Father David Stanley, S.J., who resigned from the Pontifical Biblical Commission after the Doctrinal Congregation issued its declaration on the ordination of women, will not be teaching this year at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

Stanley, a well-known Canadian scripture scholar, resigned from the biblical commission because he said the Doctrinal Congregation in writing its declaration had ignored a report prepared for it by the commission. He has taught at the Gregorian since 1968.

According to a university spokesman, Father Stanley will not be teaching at the Gregorian this year because no funding has been provided for his travel expenses. Transportation costs for North American Jesuits who teach at the university, he said, are usually born by the priests' Jesuit provinces. In Father Stanley's case, he added, the expenses were paid by the biblical commission.