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Statement by Archbishop Joseph Bernardin, President, NCCB,
Concerning the Ordination of Women (October 7, 1975)

The proclamation by the United Nations of 1975 as International Women's Year was welcomed by all. It has served as a catalyst for serious discussion and action on behalf of women within both the Church and society. When the Holy Father received Mrs. Helvi Sipila, General Secretary of the International Women's Year, in November of last year, he stated that the designation of International Women's Year "does not find the Church inattentive to the problem or lacking in a clear desire to solve it. On the contrary: in the contemporary effort to promote the advancement of women in society, the Church has already recognized 'a sign of the times,' and has seen in it a call of the spirit."

The Church owes women, both religious and lay, its own great debt of gratitude for their commitment and loving service. In a special way we must also be grateful to those who today manifest their loyalty and love by pressing the question of their role in the Church.

Both candor and a sense of responsibility impel me at this time to address a question which is in the minds of many people. Discussion of the possibility of ordaining women to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church is now a lively issue in the United States.

Such discussion can contribute to a better understanding of ministry, priesthood and the role of women in the Church. But honesty and concern for the Catholic community, including those of its members who advocate the ordination of women, also require that Church leaders not seem to encourage unreasonable hopes and expectations, even by their silence. Therefore I am obliged to restate the Church's teaching that women are not to be ordained to the priesthood.

It is not correct to say that no serious theological obstacle stands in the way of ordaining women to the priesthood, and that the fact that women have not been ordained up to now can be explained simply by culturally conditioned notions of male superiority. There is a serious theological issue. Throughout its history the Catholic Church has not called women to the priesthood. Although many of the arguments presented in times gone by on this subject may not be defensible today, there are compelling reasons

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for this practice. In 1972 the NCCB Committee on Pastoral Research and Practices issued a report, entitled "Theological Reflection on the Ordination of Women."

This report admitted that the question was complex and that there were many aspects to it which needed further study. The report, however, gave a very powerful reason for not ordaining women:

"Revelation is made known to us from Tradition as well as from Sacred Scripture (cf. Constitution on Divine Revelation, #8-10). It is then necessary for theology in this question to look to the life and practice of the Spirit-guided Church. The constant practice and tradition of the Catholic Church has excluded women from the episcopal and priestly office. Theologians and canonists have been unanimous until modern times in considering this exclusion as absolute and of divine origin. Until recent times no theologian or canonist seemingly has judged this to be only of ecclesiastical law. It would be pointless to list the many authorities and the theological note that each assigns to this teaching. However, the constant tradition and practice of the Catholic Church against the ordination of women, interpreted (whenever interpreted) as of divine law, is of such a nature as to constitute a clear teaching of the Ordinary Magisterium of the Church. Though not formally defined, this is Catholic doctrine."

In commenting on this assertion, the Bishops' Committee went on to say:

"(This reason) is of ponderous theological import. Its force will not be appreciated by those who look for Revelation and theology in Scripture alone, and who do not appreciate Tradition as a source of theology. Because of (this reason) a negative answer to the possible ordination of

women is indicated. The well-founded present discipline will continue to have and to hold the entire field unless and until a contrary theological development takes place, leading ultimately to a clarifying statement from the Magisterium."

It would be a mistake, I believe, to reduce the question of the ordination of women to one of injustice, as is done at times. It would be correct to do this only if ordination were a God-given right of every individual; only if somehow one's human potential could not be fulfilled without it. In fact, however, no one, male or female, can claim a "right" to ordination. And, since the episcopal and priestly office is basically a ministry of service, ordination in no way "completes" one's humanity.

It is true that the equality of women is an ideal which has yet to be fully realized in many fields, such as education, politics and employment. And it is not enough to show interest only in these areas of concern. To be faithful to the Spirit, who is at work among us, we must also address ourselves seriously to the question of women in the Church. As Pope Paul has said, "although women do not receive the call to the apostolate of the Twelve and therefore to the ordained ministries, they are none the less invited to follow Christ as disciples and co-workers." (Statement to Committee for International Women's Year, April 18, 1975; L'Osservatore Romano, English edition, May 1, 1975)

Through educational efforts of the Church, we must make sure that people are truly convinced of woman's dignity and equality, an equality whose essential foundation, as the Holy Father has reminded us, is found in the "dignity of the human person, man and woman, in their filial relationship with God, of whom they are the visible image."

Women are called today to a greater leadership role in the Church; their contributions are needed in the decision-making process at the parochial, diocesan, national and universal levels. The Church has grown more aware of the variety of ministries open to women; in a very special way they are called to collaborate with all other segments of the Church in the essential work of evangelization. The Church will suffer, indeed it will be betrayed, if women are given only a secondary place in its life and mission.

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Fortunately progress is being made in all these fields and many others. More, however, needs to be done. While this is a task of the whole Church, bishops have a special pastoral responsibility in this regard. It is not enough to make statements; our statements must be matched by actions which will bring more women into the mainstream of the life of the local Church.

I know that many will welcome this statement. But many others will disagree with and be disturbed by what I have said with respect to the question of ordination. The important thing now is that we not engage in recriminations; that instead we approach one another with charity and mutual respect, constantly examining our own motives--not the motives of others--in order to be as certain as is humanly possible that we are indeed at all times seeking to know and do the will of Jesus Christ.

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