

John Paul II/"Ordinatio Sacerdotalis"

# Apostolic Letter on Ordination and Women

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*"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," Pope John Paul II says in an apostolic letter titled "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis," released by the Vatican May 30. "In granting admission to the ministerial priesthood, the church has always acknowledged as a perennial norm her Lord's way of acting in choosing the 12 men whom he made the foundation of his church," the pope writes. The pope indicates that his apostolic letter is a response to the view "in some places" that women's ordination is still open to debate or that the "church's judgment that women are not to be admitted to ordination" has merely a "disciplinary force." Pope John Paul II says that "the fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary... received neither the mission proper to the apostles nor the ministerial priesthood clearly shows that the nonadmission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them." In this regard the pope reiterates the teaching of "Inter Insigniores," the doctrinal congregation's 1976 declaration on women's ordination, that "the greatest in heaven are not the ministers but the saints." The Vatican's English-language text of "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis" follows.*

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. This tradition has also been faithfully maintained by the Oriental churches.

When the question of the ordination of women arose in the Anglican Communion, Pope Paul VI, out of fidelity to his office of safeguarding the apostolic tradition, and also with a view to removing a new obstacle placed in the way of Christian unity, reminded Anglicans of the position of the Catholic Church:

"She holds that it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood, for very fundamental reasons. These reasons include: the example recorded in the sacred Scriptures of Christ choosing his apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his church."<sup>1</sup>

But since the question had also become the subject of debate among theologians and in certain Catholic circles, Paul VI directed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to set forth and expound the teaching of the church on this matter. This was done through the declaration *Inter Insigniores*, which the supreme pontiff ap-

Venerable brothers in the episcopate:

1. Priestly ordination, which hands on

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# origins

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**JOHN PAUL II**— *continued from front page* proved and ordered to be published.<sup>2</sup>

2. The declaration recalls and explains the fundamental reasons for this teaching, reasons expounded by Paul VI, and concludes that the church "does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination."<sup>3</sup> To these fundamental reasons the document adds other theological reasons which illustrate the appropriateness of the divine provision, and it also shows clearly that Christ's way of acting did not proceed from sociological or cultural motives peculiar to his time. As Paul VI later explained: "The real reason is that, in giving the church her fundamental constitution, her theological anthropology — thereafter always followed by the church's tradition — Christ established things in this way."<sup>4</sup>

In the apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, I myself wrote in this regard:

"In calling only men as his apostles, Christ acted in a completely free and sovereign manner. In doing so, he exercised the same freedom with which, in all his behavior, he emphasized the dignity and the vocation of women, without conforming to the prevailing customs and to the traditions sanctioned by the legislation of the time."<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles attest that this call was made in accordance with God's eternal plan: Christ chose those whom he willed (cf. Mk. 3:13-14; Jn. 6:70), and he did so in union with the Father, "through the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:2), after having spent the night in prayer (cf. Lk. 6:12). Therefore, in granting admission to the ministerial priesthood,<sup>6</sup> the church has always acknowledged as a perennial norm her Lord's way of acting in choosing the 12 men whom he made the foundation of his church (cf. Rv. 21:14). These men did not in fact receive only a function which could thereafter be exercised by any member of the church; rather they were specifically and intimately associated in the mission of the incarnate Word himself (cf. Mt. 10:1, 7-8; 28:16-20; Mk. 3:13-16; 16:14-15). The apostles did the same when they chose fellow workers<sup>7</sup> who would succeed them in their ministry.<sup>8</sup> Also included in this choice were those who, throughout the time of the church, would carry on the apostles' mission of representing Christ the Lord and Redeemer.<sup>9</sup>

3. Furthermore, the fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary, mother of God and mother of the church, received neither the mission proper to the apostles nor the ministerial priesthood clearly shows that the nonadmission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity nor can it be construed as discrimination against them. Rather, it is to be seen as the faithful observance of a plan to be ascribed to the wisdom of the Lord of the universe.

The presence and the role of women in the life and mission of the church, although not linked to the ministerial priesthood, remain absolutely necessary and irreplaceable. As the declaration *Inter Insigniores* points out, "the

church desires that Christian women should become fully aware of the greatness of their mission: Today their role is of capital importance both for the renewal and humanization of society and for the rediscovery by believers of the true face of the church."<sup>10</sup> The New Testament and the whole history of the church give ample evidence of the presence in the church of women, true disciples, witnesses to Christ in the family and in society, as well as in total consecration to the service of God and of the Gospel. "By defending the dignity of women and their vocation, the church has shown honor and gratitude for those women who — faithful to the Gospel — have shared in every age in the apostolic mission of the whole people of God. They are the holy martyrs, virgins and the mothers of families, who bravely bore witness to their faith and passed on the church's faith and tradition by bringing up their children in the spirit of the Gospel."<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, it is to the holiness of the faithful that the hierarchical structure of the church is totally ordered. For this reason, the declaration *Inter Insigniores* recalls: "The only better gift, which can and must be desired, is love (cf. 1 Cor. 12 and 13). The greatest in the kingdom of heaven are not the ministers but the saints."<sup>12</sup>

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"Although the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and universal tradition of the church and firmly taught by the magisterium in its more recent documents, at the present time in some places it is nonetheless considered still open to debate, or the church's judgment that women are not to be admitted to ordination is considered to have a merely disciplinary force."

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4. Although the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and universal tradition of the church and firmly taught by the magisterium in its more recent documents, at the present time in some places it is nonetheless considered still open to debate, or the church's judgment that women are not to be admitted to ordination is considered to have a merely disciplinary force.

Wherefore, 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.

Two key documents in the discussion of the Catholic Church and women's ordination are:

—The Nov. 30, 1975, letter from Pope Paul VI to the primate of the Anglican Communion at that time, Archbishop Donald Coggan of Canterbury, answering the archbishop's letter on the growing consensus among Anglicans in favor of women's ordination. It was released the following July. The letter appeared in *Origins*, Vol. 6, p. 131, in the edition dated Aug. 12, 1976. That edition also included a second exchange of letters, in March 1976, between the pope and the archbishop.

—The Oct. 22, 1976, declaration on women's ordination, "Inter Insigniores," by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It was released the following January. It appeared in *Origins*, Vol. 6, pp. 517ff, in the edition dated Feb. 3, 1977.

A key passage in Pope Paul's 1975 letter to the archbishop of Canterbury said: "Your Grace is of course well aware of the Catholic Church's position on this question. She holds that it is not admissible to ordain women to the priesthood."

The 1976 declaration by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said the congregation, with the pope's approval, "judges it necessary to recall that the church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination."

Pope Paul did not say anything in his 1975 letter about women as deacons, nor did the 1976 declaration. A Vatican commentary on the 1976 declaration said the doctrinal congregation had decided that the question of women as deacons "should be kept for the future and not touched upon in the present document." Pope John Paul II's new letter does not mention the diaconate.

See also *Origins'* coverage of the June 1992 meeting at the Vatican of Pope John Paul II and Anglican Archbishop George Carey of Canterbury, in Vol. 22, No. 4 (June 4, 1992).

And see in *Origins* the

◀ exchange of letters between Pope John Paul II and then-Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie in Vol. 19, pp. 63f, in the edition dated June 8, 1989. The letters in particular concerned the issue of women's ordination.

"*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*," Pope John Paul II's new apostolic letter on women's ordination, "calls us to join in the obedience to the faith, and whoever does not do so obviously separates himself from the faith of the church," Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, told Vatican Radio.

Msgr. Inos Biffi, a Milan theologian, said that in treating the issue of women and ordination, the pope removes the question from free theological discussion and cuts off speculation about a future change in policy. A Vatican official agreed, saying theologians would be free to examine arguments on the issue but not to endorse "anything contrary to that affirmed by the pope" or undermine the church's position.

John Thavis, of the Catholic News Service Rome bureau, wrote that the pope's letter had been described as a personal initiative of Pope John Paul, who spent a long time considering the text. Thavis said that some observers saw the letter as an answer to the Church of England's decision last year to allow women priests, but the pope had already responded to that decision in a more direct way. The letter is aimed more at the Catholic faithful, who may have known the church's position on women's ordination but thought it might change.

Invoking an abundance of divine assistance upon you, venerable brothers, and upon all the faithful, I impart my apostolic blessing.

From the Vatican, on May 22, the solemnity of Pentecost, in the year 1994, the 16th of my pontificate.

John Paul II

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Paul VI, response to the letter of Rev. Dr. F.D. Coggan, archbishop of Canterbury, concerning the ordination of women to the priesthood (Nov. 30, 1975): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 68 (1976), 599.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, declaration *Inter Insigniores* on the question of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood (Oct. 15, 1976): AAS 69 (1977), 98-

116.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> Paul VI, address on the role of women in the plan of salvation (Jan. 30, 1977): *Insegnamenti*, XV (1977), 111. Cf. also John Paul II, apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (Dec. 30, 1988), 51: AAS 81 (1989), 393-521; Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1577.

<sup>5</sup> Apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, (Aug. 15, 1988), 26: AAS 80 (1988), 1715.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 28; decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2b.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. 1 Tm. 3:1-13; 2 Tm. 1:6; Ti. 1:5-9.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Catechism, 1577.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 20, 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Inter Insigniores*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> *Inter Insigniores*, 6.

## Women's Ordination/Vatican Text

# An Overview of the Apostolic Letter

"The apostolic letter '*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*' ... confirms a certainty which has been constantly held and lived by the church," says a Vatican text offering an overview of the pope's new apostolic letter on women's ordination. Called a presentation of the apostolic letter, it examines the letter's main points and discusses its authority. It is not "a question of a new dogmatic formulation, but of a doctrine taught by the ordinary papal magisterium in a definitive way, that is, proposed not as a prudential teaching nor as a more probable opinion, nor as a mere matter of discipline but as certainly true." The Vatican's presentation of the apostolic letter says the pope was "mindful of the need ... to avoid in the church all discrimination between men and women." And it says that "far from constituting an obstacle" to ecumenical dialogue, the pope's letter "can provide an opportunity for all Christians to deepen their understanding of the origin and theological nature of the episcopal and priestly ministry conferred by the sacrament of orders." The text, which appeared in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper, follows.

With the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, dated May 22, the solemnity of Pentecost, the supreme pontiff Pope John Paul II expressly intends to fulfill his office as successor of Peter, confirming by virtue of his apostolic ministry the teaching according to which the church does not have the authority to confer priestly ordination on women, and declaring that this teaching is to be definitively held by all the faithful.

In particular, the Holy Father recalls that this teaching, based on the church's constant and universal tradition, which from the beginning has reserved priestly ordination to men, had been authoritatively presented and explained by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its declaration *Inter Insigniores* on the question of the

admission of women to the ministerial priesthood, published on Oct. 15, 1976, by order of Pope Paul VI and with his approval.

Referring to that declaration, the supreme pontiff calls attention to the fundamental reasons why the church is aware that she does not have the authority to admit women to priestly ordination: They are to be found in the example of Christ who chose the Twelve Apostles from among men, in the apostolic tradition, and in the constant magisterium of the church. The present letter also mentions the other recent documents of the magisterium which repeat the same teaching: the apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (No. 26), the postsynodal apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (No. 51) and the Catechism of the Catholic Church (No. 1577). No one therefore, not even the supreme authority in the church, can fail to accept this teaching without contradicting the will and example of Christ himself, and the economy of revelation which, as the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* of the Second Vatican Council teaches, "is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity" (No. 2), in such a way that not only words but also deeds are sources of revelation and become words in the living memory of the church.

*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* notes however that, despite the constant and universal tradition of the church and the teaching of the magisterium proposed anew in the above-mentioned recent documents, in some places the question continues to be considered as still open to debate or this teaching is held to be merely a matter of discipline. This widespread uncertainty explains and justifies the intervention of the magisterium of the supreme pontiff, explicitly in order "that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance" (No. 4) involving the correct understanding of Catholic teaching on the ministerial priesthood.

Certainly, the fact that the church acknowl-