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PAPAL MAGISTERIUM AND *SENSUS FIDELIUM*: EXAMING THE CASE FOR THE PRIESTLY ORDINATION OF WOMEN

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Abstract

Using the teaching of Vatican II regarding *sensus fidei* as his starting point, the author uses discussion in the Catholic Church regarding the ordination of women as an example of the fact that papal magisterium in the Catholic Church still often overlooks that *sensus fidei*. Firstly, the author describes the often repeated claim by the teaching authority of the Catholic Church that women cannot be ordained priests and participate in the leadership of the Church. He then puts forward the argument promulgated by the papal magisterium, followed by difficulties related to it, and criticism of it. Finally, he presents four basic dogmatic principles which support the opinion that women have the spiritual qualifications to be ordained to the priesthood, and in doing so be signs of the presence in the assembly of Christ as head of the Church.

Keywords: Dignity of Women, Presbyterate, Priestly Ordination, Papal Magisterium

Introduction

Vatican II moved away from the position that had been held within the Catholic Church for centuries that the laity had no voice in the

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Church, and that they just had to listen to and obey the magisterium of the Church. The Constitution *Lumen Gentium* (LG) presents a very different picture. Article LG 12 states:

The holy people of God has a place in the prophetic role of Christ, by giving witness to Him, especially by their lives of faith and love... The entire body of the faithful has been anointed by the Holy One (Cf 1 John 2:20,27) and is infallible in faith. Their special nature is revealed in the supernatural sense of the entire people, when 'from the bishops to the smallest layperson,' as a whole they express agreement in matters of faith and morals.

This means that the laity have a *sensus fidei* which participates in directing the Church and maintaining the faithful in the truth of faith. According to this teaching, the magisterium cannot see itself as the one-and-only voice regarding matters of faith and morals. Church authorities don't just teach, but they also need to listen to the voice of the faithful.

After Vatican II, up to present times, some of the teachings of that Council have been hushed-up, while others have been quite openly rejected or not practised.¹ Affirmation of the *sensus fidei* is an aspect of Vatican II regarding the Church which has been quietly ignored in the Catholic Church, particularly by the Church's magisterium. Often the laity is involved in proceedings, but their voices are just listened to when what they say is in accord with the hopes of the Church leadership. An example of this is what happened during the deliberations of the commission on birth control and the morality of contraception. The voices of the competent lay majority were disregarded by Pope Paul VI. In his encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, he followed the minority view of that commission.²

In this article, I will focus my attention on a different case, where the papal magisterium has taken a tough stand, without listening to, or taking account of, the voice of many of the faithful and many competent theologians. It is a fact that when John XXIII opened Vatican II, he was convinced that the renewal of the Church would only take place via a process of considering together, in debating and in open discussion. Ideally as many people as possible would contribute ideas, their knowledge and experience. He believed that

¹John Allen, "The Counter-Revolution," *The Tablet*, 7 December 2002, 8-9, cf. Georg Kirchberger, "Dezentralisierung und Rezentralisierung, Die Communio-Ekklesiologie des II. Vatikanischen Konzils und ihre Rezeption in den 40 Jahren danach," *Verbum SVD* 46 (2005) 57-74.

²On this topic, see John Marshall, "My Voyage of Discovery," *The Tablet*, 23 November 2002, 8-9.

resolving an issue by making a decree from on high, would not be effective, and had no place in these times.³

In 2010, the Catholic Church in Germany began a process of dialogue within the Church there. Archbishop Robert Zollitsch, Chairperson of the German Bishops' Conference, said at the beginning of the dialogue, "We will place close attention to how we as Church must address the accusation that within the Church there is insufficient transparency, and too many prohibitions regarding thinking and discussing."⁴

In a later address, it could be seen that this hope of the German Bishops' Conference was not realised. On the contrary, it was clear that within the Catholic Church there were very many prohibitions regarding thinking and discussing, for example in regard to the problem of women's ordination. I discovered an article in *Stimmen der Zeit* which summarises well the arguments regarding this issue.⁵ I will use this summary in my discourse here. To begin with, I will state the prohibition to think and discuss this problem.

1. Prohibition to Think and to Discuss

In 1994, in his apostolic exhortation regarding priestly ordination being restricted to males, Pope John Paul II, issued a strong command, forbidding further discussion regarding the possibility of women receiving the sacrament of priestly ordination. He stated that, based on the authority of his apostolic position, "The Church does not have any authority whatsoever to ordain women. All the faithful must definitively adhere to this decision."⁶ Already in 1976, The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, had stated with the approval of Pope Paul VI: "In faithfulness to the example of Our Lord Himself, the Church is conscious that it does not have the right to confer priestly ordination on women."⁷

³Alberto Melloni, "A Speech That Lit the Flame," *The Tablet*, 2 November 2002, 7-8.

⁴Der Vorsitzende der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, "Zukunft der Kirche - Kirche für die Zukunft. Plädoyer für eine pilgernde, hörende u. dienende Kirche," Impulsreferat von Erzbischof Dr. Robert Zollitsch bei der Herbstvollversammlung der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz in Fulda, 20. 9. 2010, Bonn 2010, 16-17.

⁵Georg Kraus, "Frauenordination, Ein drängendes Desiderat in der katholischen Kirche," *Stimmen der Zeit* 229, 2011, 795-803.

⁶John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, On Reserving Priestly Ordination To Men Alone, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html, no. 4.

⁷Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Inter Insigniores*, On The Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html, Introduction.

However, in theological circles, discussions regarding this matter continued after 1976, and after 1994. An example of this can be seen in the person of Siegfried Wiedenhofer, a moderate theologian. In his book about the Catholic understanding of the Church he suggested that the Church open itself to the possibility of ordaining women to the priesthood. He saw deep reflection on this as being something of great importance: "Consider just how far the tradition of only ordaining men is bound to an androcentric world view and to a patriarchal society, and to what extent that tradition is actually a concretization of divine revelation in the person of Jesus Christ."⁸

He draws this conclusion:

So, if the social-cultural conditions of the present day have led to a new understanding of gender equality and the injustice of a religion, culture and an androcentric and patriarchal society, and if that equality has an integral place in Christian faith re creation, the Christian understanding of salvation, and the Christian understanding of the process of growing in perfection, then in accord with the modern historical renewal, and in accord with the deep structure of Christian faith, the history of that faith must be reconsidered. We must look for a new way and a new direction from that history.⁹

He is convinced that an understanding of a position of authority that is more attuned to the influence of the Holy Spirit could open the possibility of legitimately ordaining women.

In April 2011, Bishop Markus Buchel of St Gallen, Switzerland, publically supported the ordination of women. He discussed the ordination of women in a St Gallen newspaper, and he said that he regarded a prohibition such as this was destructive for the Church. He said that the Church must find a way and take steps towards ordaining women to the priesthood. He was of the opinion that ordaining women as deacons could be a step in the right direction. Regarding women being ordained priests, he said: "Let's pray that the Holy Spirit empowers us to read the signs of the times."¹⁰

According to a broad consensus in current dogmatic theology, it is very urgent to carry-on the discussion about women's priestly ordination, with theological arguments.¹¹ In line with this, in this

⁸S. Wiedenhofer, *Das katholische Kirchenverständnis. Ein Lehrbuch der Ekklesiologie*, Graz: Styria, 1992, 227.

⁹Wiedenhofer, *Das katholische Kirchenverständnis*, 227-228.

¹⁰See *Mittelland-Zeitung*, 24. 4. 2011.

¹¹For example: K. Rahner, "Priestertum der Frau?," *Stimmen der Zeit* 195 (1977) 291-301; W. Beinert, "Dogmatische Überlegungen zum Priestertum der Frau," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 173 (1993) 186-204; P. Neuner, "Ekklesiologie," *Glaubenszugänge*, Bd. 2, ed. W. Beinert, Paderborn 1995, 553-554; M. Kehl, *Die Kirche*,

article I wish to present a summary of the pro and contra arguments regarding the issue. It will be evident that in our theology we can find strong arguments in favour of opening the possibility of ordaining women to the priesthood, even in the Catholic Church.

2. The Current Social Situation

During the 20th century, a strong women's emancipation movement succeeded in putting down the dominant patriarchalism in society, and fought for gender equality in many social sectors. In the Church, too, sharp criticism was made of the patriarchal system, and there was growing support for women's ordination. Following long, often painful and emotional, discussions all major Christian denominations except the Catholic and Orthodox Churches accepted women's ordination. As a result of this, we can now find women priests and bishops in the Lutheran, Calvin, Baptist, Anglican and Old Catholic Churches.

3. Several Statements of the Catholic Magisterium

When the Anglican Church accepted women's ordination, Pope Paul VI strongly rejected the possibility of this happening in the Catholic Church. This was stated in *Inter insigniores* in 1976.

In the Catholic Church, many theologians and groups did not agree with this statement. Very lively discussions took place, by groups such as the National Religious Women's Federation of the USA, and many other women's rights and emancipation groups. As a reaction to this heated discussion, in 1994 Pope John Paul II reiterated the position of the magisterium in the Apostolic Decree, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, stating that only males can receive priestly ordination.¹²

Because criticism within the Catholic Church didn't subside, in 1995 the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, with the approval of the Pope, published a response on behalf of the Congregation to the questions that had arisen regarding the teaching in the Apostolic Decree, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*.¹³ In this document, the rejection by the Catholic Church

Würzburg 12001, 450-459; P. Hünemann, "Die Stellung der Frau in der Römisch-katholischen Kirche und der Streit um die Frauenordination," *Orthodoxes Forum* 16, (2002) 203-212. – Seturut Hukum Gereja: S. Demel, "Ungeliebte Kinder Gottes?," *Stimmen der Zeit* 222 (2004) 157-170.

¹² http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_22051994_ordinatio-sacerdotalis_en.html.

¹³ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19951028_commento-dubium-ordinatio-sac_en.html

of the ordination of women was stated to a *depositum* of faith which is taught infallibly by the *magisterium ordinarium*. However, opposition at the grass-roots level continued. In some places, for example in Austria, women were ordained, even though this was strictly forbidden by the leadership of the Catholic Church in Rome. Because of this, in 2008 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith decreed that any woman who was ordained was automatically excommunicated, as were those responsible for her ordination.

4. Main Points of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994)

The second point is a rejection of the opinion that Christ was motivated solely by the social-cultural situation of His time when he only chose men.

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 behaviour, 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 (a.2).

Because of this, “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 twelve men whom he made the foundation of his Church” (a.2)

The third point made by the Pope expounds a mariological argument, as a way of rejecting the accusation that the Catholic Church discriminates against women.

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 non-admission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them (a.3).

The Pope speaks positively about the role of women in the Church, saying that it “remains absolutely necessary and irreplaceable” (a.3). He hopes, “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” (a.3).

The fourth point made by the Pope states that the decision of the Catholic magisterium to not accept the ordination of women is definitive and cannot be challenged. Speaking with the authority of his office, he says, “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” (a.4).

5. Reactions to the Decree¹⁴

This document was intended to present the official teaching of the Church regarding only ordaining men, and to state the position of the magisterium that women cannot and may not be ordained priests. It was intended that the entire Catholic Church would accept this and that the matter would no longer be contentious. However, in the Church, two ways of discerning the truth are acknowledged: *sensus fidelium* and theological reflection, which is ongoing. On one hand the *sensus fidelium*, especially among many women's groups, did not agree with this position. On the other hand, theological reflection found a variety of arguments which disagreed with the position presented by the papal teaching.

The primary argument from the point of view of theological epistemology objects to the way the papal teaching makes use of the Biblical argument and the one based on the tradition. It was pointed out that the papal document gives insufficient attention to the historicity of the development of faith in the Bible and tradition. An understanding of the exercise of authority and its structure developed via a process until the middle of the second century AD. Because of this, the statement, "Mary wasn't a priest," is completely anachronistic, because the historical Jesus only chose the 12 apostles, but He didn't institute the position of priesthood. Concerning tradition regarding the exercise of authority, the historical context of the development of this always needs to be taken into consideration. Clearly the early Church took root in a patriarchal environment, and the exercise of authority continued to change and took-on new faces as history unfolded. Historicity should be given attention by the papal magisterium, and in doing so the magisterium should be open to the possibility of ordaining women in the present historical situation where men and women have equal rights.

Another theological argument draws attention to the un-historicity of the way the papal magisterium interprets the choosing of the Twelve. The papal teaching makes a syllogism: Jesus chose men to be the foundation of His Church. Because of this, only men can exercise authority in the Church. But according to the commonly-held understanding of New Testament exegesis, this argument doesn't ring true, because it doesn't reflect the historical context.

The historical Jesus gave a symbolic meaning to the Twelve. By choosing 12 men, Jesus intended to show that his message was intended for all of Israel, for the 12 tribes of Israel. The Twelve

¹⁴Kraus, "Frauenordination," 799-800.

represented all of Israel as a union of the 12 tribes who sprung from the 12 sons of Jacob. So that His claim could be understood by the Jewish people of His time and place, Jesus had to choose men who represented the sons of Jacob. Because of this, the symbolic choosing of the Twelve says nothing about the role of women in the Church. If Jesus had included women in the Twelve the meaning of the symbol which He wanted to show would have not been understood by the people at that time. Jesus did accept women as members of his followers. This supports the view that He wanted women to have special functionary roles in the Church, as concretely happened in the early Christian assemblies.

The concept of “apostle” should be considered, too. In the early Church, apostles were the first missionaries. They were the ones who had seen the Risen Lord and who had been missioned by Him to preach the Good News that He had risen from the dead. Among them were women, including Mary Magdalene (Cf John 20:17) and a woman, Yunia (Cf Romans 16:7) who in tradition was referred to as male, Yunias. The evangelist Luke synchronised the two important roles of authority in the early Church, that of the apostles and the Twelve, speaking of the Twelve Apostles as we now refer to them. Actually though, this doesn’t account for the fact that we also refer to Paul as an apostle, and even say that Peter and Paul are the primary apostles.¹⁵

Theologians also are of the opinion that the historical context is ignored when the papal magisterium states: “When Jesus only chose men to be apostles, He acted completely freely and independently.” Because the task of an apostle was to give public witness to Jesus and His teaching, Jesus couldn’t freely and independently give that task to people who would not be allowed to give public witness. Women could not speak in public, so Jesus was not free to choose them for this role. On the contrary, in accord with the social-cultural mores of His time, He could only choose those who were able to give public witness.

6. Dogmatic Reasons for Receiving Women into the Presbyterate¹⁶

Rather than be caught-up in details, it is appropriate for us to consider the principal reasons supporting the ordination of women. The basic arguments are as follows:

- The equality and complementarity of women and men in the plan of creation and salvation.

¹⁵Georg Kirchberger, *Allah Menggugat*, Maumere: Penerbit Ledalero, 2007, 562-569.

¹⁶Kraus, “Frauenordination,” 801-802.

- The participation of all the Christian faithful in the priesthood of Christ.
- The representation of Christ by all the baptized.
- A revised understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit regarding historical tradition in the role of women in society.

6.1. The Equality and Complementarity of Women and Men in the Plan of Creation and Salvation

The starting-point and basis for accepting women into the presbyterate is the status of women, as is made clear in the Scriptures regarding creation and salvation. The most basic reason is the equal status of women and men, as together they are made in the image of God. This is clearly stated in Genesis 1:27: "God created humanity according to His image, as an image of God He created them, male and female he created them."

Clearly, together men and women are made in God's image. Women do not have a lower status than men. As equals, women and men have a divine spark in them. They complement each other. Humanity is expressed fully by the complementarity of women and men.

This truth can be applied to the life of the Church: In Church activities women and men ideally work together in a complementary way. Ideally, too, this should happen in the ways that Church authority is exercised. Full participation by women in the exercise of authority in the Church would demonstrate that men do not have power over women, but rather that together they lead the Church.

The equality of women and men sharing God's image is rooted in the New Testament also. In His preaching and by His actions, Jesus stood-up for the equality of the sexes. He involved women and men in His saving ministry. After His resurrection, He revealed Himself first to women, and called them to be the messengers of the focal point of His teaching, namely His resurrection. In the early assemblies could be found the belief that was formulated by St Paul: "There are no more... men and women, because you are all one in Christ." (Gal 3:28)

If women are ordained priests, this would mean: Women and men have equal roles in participating in the mission of Christ, spreading the Good News from one generation to the next. The task of being at the service of salvation is best carried-out by women and men complementing each other. Equality demands that women be accepted into the presbyterate, as leaders of the Christian assembly.

6.2. The Participation of all the Faithful in the Priesthood of Christ

Christ is the true and unique priest in the New Testament. Every baptized person is a member of the Church and share in His priesthood. All the baptised make up the one-and-only “holy priesthood” (1 Pet 2:5). In this general priesthood, all the Christian faithful are called to participate in the priestly service of the Church.

If all baptized people possess priestly status, then this is valid for both women and men. The priesthood of the faithful is not an empty title, but an empowerment, enabling people to participate in the service of salvation. Based on this general priesthood, women possess the basis for ordination. On this basis, a woman who believes she is called and has the gifts and necessary skills, can be ordained by the Church to carry-out the special priesthood of the presbyterate.

6.3. The Representation of Christ by all the Baptized

Because everyone who is baptised “puts on Christ” (Gal 3:27), and “becomes a new creation in Christ” (2 Cor 5:17), then all the baptised are empowered to witness to Christ, because they live in Him. In light of representing Christ because of our baptism, we must interpret the traditional Catholic formulation, that a priest acts *in persona Christi*. Acting *in persona Christi* is traditionally put forward as a reason why only men can be ordained priests. According to this argument, since Christ was a man, only men can represent Him.

But when we speak about the personal existence, we speak about the special status of humanity that is possessed equally by women and men. Referring to Jesus, what impresses is the fact that he was a person, not that he was male. The Bible does not define the Son of God as a male, but as a human (Cf The Creed: *homo factus est*). Both women and men have the same personal status, so they both can represent Christ. There is a basic truth in the Bible that women have the fundamental ability to represent Christ as priests. In this perspective, there must be given to women the possibility of being ordained priests of Christ.

6.4. A Revised Understanding of the Role of the Holy Spirit Regarding Historical Tradition in the Role of Women in Society

The Church was formed by the Spirit of the Lord, and she lives and grows through history due to the movement of that Spirit. At Pentecost, the Church was born by a movement of the Spirit of God. When the apostles, “with the women and together with Mary, Mother of Jesus” (Acts 1:14) were gathered together in a home to pray, the Holy Spirit came down upon them individually in what appeared like tongues of fire, and they were all filled with the Spirit

(Acts 2:3-4). Peter gave witness, interpreting what was happening as a sign of the last days as proclaimed by the prophet Joel (3:1): "I will pour down my Spirit on everyone. Your sons and daughters will prophesy" (Acts 2:17).

So from the very beginning of the Church women were active and were filled with the Holy Spirit. According to what was said by Peter, women, as well as men, received the gift of prophecy.

At that time, women were not permitted to speak in public. They could not give public witness, which could only be performed by men. Peter performed this role on this occasion, as the spokesperson for the apostles.

Nowadays, we have a different social situation. Women have the same rights as men, and are able to fully participate in all aspects of social life. Because of this, because of the equality of sexes, the role of women in the Church must be revised. On principle, the equal status of women is based on the plan of creation and salvation. Concretely, the sacrament of baptism is the common basis for the service of salvation. At baptism, both females and males receive the Holy Spirit. Females receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit as do the males, and all the charisms.

The reception of the Spirit at baptism is the strong Holy Spirit-focused reason for equal participation of the sexes in all ministries, and in all positions of authority in the Church. This said, the possibility of ordination to the priesthood must be open to women.

For ordination of women to be a reality we need a new Pentecost in the Catholic Church, a Holy Spirit-focused renewal. The leadership of the Catholic Church ideally will allow itself to be moved by God's creative Spirit, to open-up the possibility of the ordination of women. This would be a creative step in line with the present day cultural-social reality.

Conclusion

From what is written above, we can see that there are solid reasons for supporting a new attitude within the Catholic Church, towards the possibility of ordaining women to the priesthood.

In summary, it can be said that the dogmatic principle which says that according to Christian faith, women cannot be ordained, cannot be justified. On the contrary, basic dogma supports the acceptability of spiritually qualified women to all levels of leadership in the Church. It is now time for the Catholic Church to read the signs of the

times regarding the ordination of women and to creatively take steps to making this a reality.

What determines this is not a long-standing tradition, but rather an enquiry into whether that tradition promotes the salvation of humanity in the present era. According to Jesus, humanity is not at the service of tradition, but rather tradition should serve humanity. Jesus is lord of tradition. If a tradition is no longer appropriate for a given social situation, it must give way and change. If the leadership of the Catholic Church is oriented towards the will of the Lord, then the Church has the authority to ordain women.

Human salvation must be the highest principle in the Church. As the ordination of women opens up a special field of service for salvation, in the present-day situation many people would be served by this. The service of salvation is the central task given by Christ to His Church. Can the leadership of the Catholic Church ignore the will of the Lord in this matter? Considering this topic in light of the magisterium of the Church and the *sensus fidei* of the people of God as a whole, it can be seen that the Catholic Church still has much to do in order to fulfil the expectations of Vatican II. Therefore, even though Pope John Paul II did not encourage discussion and critical thinking, we as the people of God need to keep on talking, expressing our conviction in faith. In faith every person is enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

Tempus urget – Time is running out: Even though in the context of the Catholic Church, people need to be patient regarding the ordination of women, with Karl Rahner we can say, “Don’t demand too much patience, because time urges us on, and we cannot afford to wait 100 years without damaging the Church.”¹⁷

In this paper there is no attempt to present the Papal magisterium in opposition to *sensus fidei*. Both the hierarchy and the laity have *sensus fidei*, each in its own way searching for the truth. Obviously, the faithful have always to be open to listen to the hierarchy. However, it should also be underscored that the hierarchy must listen to the *sensus fidelium*, something that is not so developed in the Catholic Church. This paper has presented an example where Church leadership has not been open to faith testimonies of the people. Hopefully, this paper will encourage some to express their faith as it relates to actual themes in society today, in various places throughout the world.

¹⁷Rahner, “Priestertum der Frau?,” 301.