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## Pastoral Response to the Teaching on Women's Ordination

Father Avery Dulles

*Church teaching against ordaining women to the ministerial priesthood "rests on solid theological grounds that are scarcely understood by many of the faithful. What is needed above all else is education," Jesuit Father Avery Dulles told the U.S. bishops June 22 during their meeting in Portland, Ore. Dulles, professor of religion and society at Fordham University in New York, spoke during an executive session closed to the media. He focused on the teaching in the response last Nov. 18 by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a dubium or question regarding women's ordination (Origins, Vol. 25, pp. 401f in the edition dated Nov. 30, 1995), and the teaching in Pope John Paul II's 1994 apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (Origins, Vol. 24, pp. 49ff in the edition dated June 9, 1994). Dulles said, "The tradition against women in the priesthood is ancient, universal and constant." He asked whether church teaching on this matter is taught "as requiring the assent of faith," and he responded that "neither the pope nor the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has used this precise language, but I suspect they could do so." But, said Dulles, "it is not the kind of truth that belongs to the basic profession of Christian faith." He added: "I do not think it necessary to treat those who doubt or deny the doctrine as heretics. But if they show obstinacy, such dissenters are subject to just canonical penalties." Dulles made five recommendations to the bishops. For example, he said that if the bishops have a strong consensus "in favor of the present teaching of the Holy See, it would be well to say so unambiguously." Again: "You could appropriately acknowledge that Catholics in good faith will in some cases find it difficult to proffer the kind of interior assent for which the pope is asking. Time and education may be required for them." (An earlier 1996 text by Dulles on church teaching regarding women's ordination appeared in *Origins*, Vol. 25, pp. 778ff, in the edition dated May 2, 1996.) Dulles' address to the bishops follows.*

The recent pronouncements of the Holy See concerning the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood have led to a crisis that in many ways parallels that unleashed by *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. While the issues are different, the parties and some of the major actors are much the same. On the one hand you have a pope, backed by the hierarchical leadership of the church, issuing prohibitions with a claim to divine authority and on the other hand a progressivist wing that seeks to correct what it regards as an obsolete, distorted, culture-bound tradition.

The classical theological method strongly supports the Holy See in the present instance. In several articles that I shall not attempt to reproduce in this brief presentation, I have argued that the standard theological loci of Scripture, tradition, theological reason and magisterial authority are manifestly opposed to women's ordination.

Although the Bible cannot be expected to give a definitive answer to the doctrinal question, the New Testament makes it clear that women were not among the Twelve, the *episkopoi*, or the *presbyteroi*. The women prominent in the New Testament are not described as holding apostolic or priestly offices.

The tradition against women in the priesthood is ancient, universal and constant. From the second century onward, sects that ordained women to the priesthood were branded as heretical. No instance

can be found of women functioning as priests or bishops in the Catholic Church or of any teaching to the effect that they could be so ordained.

The question of women in the priesthood was treated by the major theologians of medieval and baroque scholasticism. They were unanimously opposed to the possibility, principally because of the authority of Christ and the apostles. A number of theologians have argued that women could not suitably represent Christ in his spousal relationship to the church as bride, which the priest must represent.

The magisterium has made occasional pronouncements, beginning with popes and bishops of the patristic period and continuing through Innocent III in the 13th century. Since 1975 Pope Paul VI made a series of weighty pronouncements, followed by the still weightier statements of John Paul II, culminating in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, issued on Pentecost Sunday 1994.

In that apostolic letter to the bishops of the world, John Paul II, appealing to his ministry of confirming the brethren, declared that the church has no authority whatsoever to ordain women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Catholic faithful. On Oct. 28, 1995, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, responding to a *dubium* put to it, declared that the teaching of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* pertains to the deposit of the faith and has been infallibly taught by the universal and ordinary magisterium.

A number of theologians, working within the parameters of classical theology, have continued to raise critical questions, which must be considered.

1. Did the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith correctly interpret *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*? Some have tried to drive a wedge between the pope and Cardinal Ratzinger, but I think their efforts are unavailing. The cardinal could hardly have issued, with the pope's approval, an interpretation of the pope's own teaching with which the pope did not agree. And if the pope did not agree, what would be the meaning of his own statement in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* that his teaching called for definitive assent? In the documents of Vatican II, in the Code of Canon Law, and in the profession of faith the phrase "to be definitively held" is used only in connection with infallible teaching.

2. Is the doctrine taught as requiring the assent of faith, i.e., as *de fide divina*? Neither the pope nor the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has used this precise language, but I suspect they could do so. In saying that the doctrine "pertains" to the deposit of faith, they do not necessarily mean that it is divinely revealed. And in saying that the faithful must "hold" rather than "believe" the doctrine, they may wish to leave some latitude for the opinion that the doctrine is a deduction or inference from the word of God and is not itself a revealed truth. In any case it is not the kind of truth that belongs to the basic profession of Christian faith, as found, for example, in the creeds. If it is a revealed truth, it stands relatively low in the hierarchy of truths. Because of these considerations, I do not think it necessary to treat those who doubt or deny the doctrine as heretics. But if they show obstinacy, such dissenters are subject to just canonical penalties (Canon 1371.1).

3. On what grounds, precisely, is the doctrine infallible? Not by reason of the papal statement alone, still less by reason of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's explanation. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith cannot by itself make any doctrine infallible, and the pope has not wished to exercise his power to define the doctrine by an *ex cathedra* pronouncement. Both the pope and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith appeal to the word of God in Scripture, the constant

tradition of the church, and the ordinary and universal magisterium. We may correctly say, therefore, that the doctrine was already infallible before the publication of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. But in confirming the brethren as he did, the pope acted to dispel any doubts that might have arisen.

4. Was it necessary for the pope to intervene? Some have suggested that it would have been better to let the theological discussion run its course until consensus was achieved. But the debate was not leading to consensus; it was becoming strident, divisive and heavily politicized. If the magisterium had remained silent, the previous consensus within the magisterium would have been imperilled. There was a real danger that, inspired by the example of the Anglican bishops who illicitly ordained women in this country some 25 years ago, some Catholic bishop might attempt to ordain a woman and claim that the ordination was valid by divine law. By speaking decisively when he did, the pope forestalled the confusion that may have been imminent.

5. Several theologians object that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had no warrant for appealing to the consensus of the bishops since their unanimity cannot be shown to exist according to the norms set forth in *Lumen Gentium*, No. 25. In reply I would say that it is evident that there is a very large agreement, as has been the case down through the centuries. The relative unanimity compares favorably with that which obtained at various ecumenical councils which issued statements that passed by majority votes and were approved by the pope. The minorities at Ephesus in the fifth century and at Vatican I in the 19th did not prevail; they eventually had to submit or else leave the church. The definitions of those councils are considered infallible because they emanate from the universal episcopate represented by that portion of the bishops who actually approved them.

In confirming the consensus of the episcopate, the pope is not acting outside the college. He is exercising the leadership that properly belongs to his office. The papal teaching office was instituted precisely so that the episcopate might teach as an undivided body and not fall into discord with itself. Just as Peter gave visible unity to the faith of the apostles at Caesarea Philippi and again on the first Pentecost, so the pope today manifests and confirms the unity of the college of bishops in its teaching. Without the pope, the college would not be adequately equipped to teach in unity.

In countering these and other objections, it is important to bear in mind that no one of the classical fonts—Scripture, tradition, magisterium and theological reason—is to be taken in isolation. They are, in the words of *Dei Verbum*, “so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together, each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit, contribute effectively to the salvation of souls” (No. 10, with reference to Scripture, tradition and magisterium). Few, if any, of the dogmas of the church could be established from Scripture alone without the support of tradition, or from tradition alone without a grounding in Scripture. The magisterium and theological reason always rest on biblical and traditional foundations. Thus the true argument is based on all these sources taken cumulatively. In the present case the convergence is sufficient to warrant and require a firm assent.

In view of this powerful convergent argument, backed by the insistent declarations of the highest doctrinal authorities in the church, how is it possible for Catholics to continue to oppose the present teaching, as many do, especially in the United States?

The opposition is not surprising in view of the general ethos of secular society, which treats the exclusion of women from public positions as unjust discrimination. During the decade of confusion that followed Vatican II the question was allowed to be treated as dogmatically open, so that many

Catholics in good faith became convinced that the church was free to overturn its earlier practice. A whole series of conferences on women's ordination was held in the United States since the mid-1970s without official condemnation. Theological societies issued statements seeking to explain why the ordination of women to the priesthood was possible and desirable. The general climate in secular society was favorable to that view.

After having taken positions in favor of women's ordination and in some cases set their hopes upon being ordained as woman priests, people were understandably reluctant to reverse themselves. They naturally tried to find some escape from having to admit that they had been mistaken. At first they defended themselves on classical theological grounds, constructing arguments that presupposed the authority of the Scriptures, that of St. Thomas and other doctors of the church and that of popes and councils. But as it becomes more evident that the accepted theological method cannot effectively support their position, advocates of women's ordination are faced with only two alternatives: to admit that they were wrong or to call into question the sources and methods of classical theology.

A division is therefore occurring within the party that has favored women's ordination. Some, recognizing the weight of the contrary position, are willing to settle, at least provisionally, for a greater recognition of women's talents and for the conferral on them of administrative power without ordination. Others, insisting on nothing less than ordination, are radicalizing their stance.

At the moment the radical position is gaining ground at an alarming rate. Radical theology adopts a sharply critical attitude toward all the supposedly sacred sources. It criticizes popes and bishops in the light of tradition, but then criticizes tradition in the light of Scripture, and Scripture in the light of the historical Jesus. If the historical reconstruction of Jesus does not yield the desired result, Jesus himself is criticized in the light of whatever seems good and proper to the contemporary critic. Many advocates of the progressivist cause assume that the Holy Spirit is with them and their party, not with Scripture, tradition and the ecclesiastical magisterium.

The radical theology that is surfacing in American Catholicism today begins with the premise that the church must on all accounts be a society of equals in which all voices are heard. The Gospel is seen as calling for this egalitarianism and as having been distorted by its reception into patriarchal cultures in which women were systematically subordinated to men. Protestant and Anglican churches are praised for moving away from the moribund patriarchal culture and pointing the way in which Catholicism must follow if it is to be a vital force in the world of our day.

In this radicalized climate a new coalition has been formed under the slogan "We are the church." It includes the Women's Ordination Conference, the Call to Action, Corpus (an organization of suspended married priests), and some gay and lesbian groups. The member groups of this coalition share the conviction that the church can reconstruct or reinvent itself to conform to the needs of the times. They reject the idea that any teaching of Scripture, tradition or the hierarchical magisterium can stand in the way of sweeping democratic reforms.

The pope and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith are proceeding on altogether different premises. They maintain, as I think Catholics must, that the church with its essential sacramental structures came into being through the redemptive action of Jesus Christ, the sole savior of the world. He instituted baptism to be administered with water, not with rose petals or some other element. He instituted the Lord's Supper to be celebrated with bread and wine, not with honey and fish or some

other elements. So too he instituted the ministerial priesthood by empowering 12 men and their successors to speak and act in his person, offering his very self in the eucharistic sacrifice.

In the face of current challenges, the doctrine of priestly ministry seems to be undergoing further development. It is becoming increasingly evident that the sexual symbolism in Scripture is not a literary device that can be discarded in modern restatements. The relationship between God and Israel in the Old Testament was already that of husband and wife. That nuptial relationship is required by the covenantal structure of Judaism and Christianity alike. For Christ to carry out his saving mission, he had to be the second Adam. In that capacity he was the source and head of the church, the beloved bride for which he sanctified himself. Because Christ could not have been a woman, it would not be appropriate for those who act in his person as ministerial priests to be women.

Not wishing to leave you with a merely theoretical presentation, I conclude with a few recommendations that I offer with great hesitation, knowing that you are much better judges than I about what is to be done pastorally.

First, provided that there is a strong consensus among you in favor of the present teaching of the Holy See, it would be well to say so unambiguously, so that no impression is given that the American episcopate is significantly divided.

Second, you might wish to make it clearer to the American public that the pope's teaching is not based on any personal antipathy to the leadership of women, but on fidelity to immemorial tradition and deep insight into the meaning of revelation.

Third, you could appropriately acknowledge that Catholics in good faith will in some cases find it difficult to proffer the kind of interior assent for which the pope is asking. Time and education may be required for them to resolve the tension they feel between loyalty to the tradition and desirable modernization.

Fourth, you would be well advised to warn the faithful, by whatever means you judge expedient, against being misled by coalitions that would subvert the authority of Scripture and the nature of the church as a divinely established hierarchical society.

Fifth and last, it would be useful to sponsor symposia and publications that support the present teaching and clarify the intrinsic connections between gender and priestly ordination. Such positive efforts are needed to offset studies being sponsored by other agencies with a view to undermining the present teaching of the church.

In this case, as in others, the church's teaching rests on solid theological grounds that are scarcely understood by many of the faithful. What is needed above all else is education. You yourselves have resolved upon this dialogue to strengthen your own unity. It is my hope that a similar dialogue can be extended so that priests and religious educators may be better equipped to answer the objections and to appreciate the guidance of those whom the Holy Spirit has appointed as guardians of the faith.