

WOMEN AND THE MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD: THE CHALLENGE OF SYNODALITY

JEFREY B. CERCADO

INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
UNIVERSITY OF SANTO TOMAS
jbcercado@ust.edu.ph

Pope Francis defined synodality as an essential dimension of the Church and a path that God expects of the Church in the third millennium. This paper touches upon the salient points of the magisterial teaching on the prohibition of women to the Holy Orders and the theological objections raised against it. The primary objective of the paper is to provide a balanced groundwork for the issue regarding the prohibition of women's ordination. It attempts to synthesize the arguments for and against the non-ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood. The Magisterium and those who reject women's ordination to the ministerial priesthood employ descending theology (deductive argumentation), arguing from Scripture, the living Tradition, doctrines and sacramental theology, and authority. The documents *Inter Insigniores*, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, and the CDF *Responsum ad Propositum Dubium*, among others, are official church documents that provide grounds for the non-admission of women to the ministerial priesthood. The dissenters, on the other hand, object to and question some aspects of the theological foundation and its method of interpretation. Employing ascending theology (inductive argumentation), they demonstrate their arguments from Scripture, history, relevant church documents, and contemporary human experience. Thus, the paper seeks to lay out these objections, ranging from biblical and hermeneutical critiques to methodological questions and moral and pastoral implications. The paper does not propose any moral or theological position but rather offers an analysis and synthesis of the matter in the spirit of synodality, allowing anyone to engage in deeper theological reflection in search of a synodal and pastoral response amid the growing call from some sectors within the Church to reconsider her magisterial teaching on the ministerial priesthood.

Keywords: Inter Insigniores, Magisterium, Ministerial Priesthood, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, Pope Francis, Synodality, Women

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The election of Pope Francis has brought hope to the proponents of women's ordination, but he quickly ruled out the issue.¹ By saying that he is not touching or opening the ministerial priesthood to women, he has certainly caused another round of disappointment to the proponents and organizers of some movements.² However, in his address on the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, he spoke of the "path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium," defining synodality as an essential dimension of the Church.³ The Synod on Synodality, which was concluded in October 2024, has drummed up the aspirations of the proponents of women's ordination to be heard once again. In this synod, Pope Francis invites the Church to reflect and to journey together in the spirit of dialogue and in the process of listening. To demonstrate his resolve to include all in this synodal process, Pope Francis appointed 82 women to participate in the synod, 54 of whom were eligible to vote. Let us see the theology behind that which leads Pope Francis to say "no" to women's ordination while at the same time seeking a "greater role" and participation for women in the Church within the framework of synodality.

One particular issue concerning the role of women in the Church is why women cannot become priests. While some of our "separated brethren" have opened their doors to women's ordination, and some, in fact, have ordained women to the episcopate as well, how come

the Roman Catholic Church remains firm in its resolve not to ordain women? To illuminate the question, this entails a reading of existing Church documents such as the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith's declaration *Inter Insigniores* (On the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood), *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone) of John Paul II in 1994 and the *Responsum ad Propositum Dubium* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1996.⁴ It is important to first understand the objections to women's ordination and the hermeneutical methodologies employed. Then, we will critique the points in these documents using the scriptural and historical grounds for the non-ordination of women, as well as existing theological perspectives. Note, however, that we talk here of two types of priesthood: (1) by royal priesthood, we are all priests since we share in Christ's kingly, priestly, and prophetic office; and (2) by ministerial priesthood, we speak of responsibility and duty performed to the whole community of God as a continuity of the office of Christ entrusted to his disciples. The subject matter of this study revolves around the ministerial priesthood.

Thus, the main objective of this paper is to synthesize the arguments for and against the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood. To articulate the main question, the study employs qualitative analysis of church documents, biblical and theological reflections on the subject, and critical arguments from theologians and relevant scholarship. Doing this will require (1) a scriptural and historical evaluation of ministerial ordination, (2) a look into the magisterial teaching on the non-ordination of women using the documents identified above,

¹ Pope Francis, in July 2013, speaking of women's ordination during an airborne press conference returning from Rio de Janeiro: "With regard to the ordination of women, the church has spoken and says no ... That door is closed." See John Allen, "Why Pope Francis Won't Let Women Become Priest," <https://time.com/3729904/francis-women/>.

² Notable Catholic scholars favoring women ordination include Damien Casey, Robert W. Hovda, Robert J. Karris and John Wijngaards, and organizations such as the Women's Ordination Conference, National Coalition of American Nuns, National Assembly of Women Religious, etc. See also, <http://www.womenpriests.org>.

³ Pope Francis, *Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, October 17, 2015: *AAS* 107 (2015); also, International Theological Commission (ITC), *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html, no. 1.

⁴ Other relevant documents on the Priesthood: *Christifideles Laici* (On the Priesthood of the Laity) and *Pastorem Dabo Vobis* (On Priestly Formation).



(3) identifying some objections to the arguments laid down by the magisterium, and (4) a critique and synthesis of the official teaching on the non-ordination of women. While this paper is devoted to grounding the reasons why women cannot be ordained priests in the Roman Catholic Church, it will also address dissenting views that favor women's ordination. It aims to provide religious educators with a framework to begin with as they seek a more profound understanding of the magisterium, a hermeneutical key for any Christian who desires a comparative study of ministerial priesthood across different Christian churches, and guidance for young and curious minds on the matter, directing their curiosity through the fundamental principles of faith and reason.

SCRIPTURE AND PATRISTIC AND SCHOLASTIC DEVELOPMENTS

Scripture is the "soul of sacred theology."⁵ All forms of theologizing must be founded in the scriptures. To put the issue of women's ordination in proper theological discussions, we must ground it in scriptures, among other canons, for evaluation. A verbatim study of the biblical texts, especially the New Testament, would reveal that few texts can be highlighted in relation to women's ordination, notwithstanding New Testament texts dealing with women deaconesses and community leaders.

The following passages are used for the denial of women's ordination: *"Women should keep silent in the churches, for they are not allowed to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says...For it is improper for a woman to speak in the church"* (1 Corinthians 14:34); *"A woman must receive instruction silently and under complete control. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority*

over a man." (1 Timothy 2:11-12).⁶ Understood in their literal sense, these passages have become standard texts used as proofs against the admission of women to the sacred orders, since, by implication, they are not permitted to the ministry of preaching the Word of God in liturgical rites. Non-Catholics cite the same passages to justify the non-admission of women to the preaching ministry.

A survey of opinions of the Patristic Fathers and Conciliar texts will reveal that many of them have opined against women's ordination.⁷ Irenaeus criticized a certain Marcus for pretending to make the blood of the divine present in the cup by means of women, which he called a blasphemous hoax.⁸ Tertullian also criticized some heretical groups and their women for "teaching, disputing, enacting exorcisms, offering cures ... [t]heir ordination is thoughtless, capricious, unstable."⁹ Also, Tertullian commented that "it is not allowed to a woman to speak in the church nor to teach, to baptize, *offer, or claim for herself any function proper to a man, and least of all the office of priest.*"¹⁰ Another Church Father who has written against women's ordination is Origen. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:35 and 1 Timothy 2:12, Origen argues that *"even though a woman be granted to be prophetess by a prophetic sign, nevertheless she is not permitted to*

⁶ Passages quoted are taken from the New American Bible (NAB). Some evangelical and conservative Protestants also argue for the inferiority or subordination of women according to the order of creation (1Cor 11:3-9) and Christian marriage (Eph. 5:22-25).

⁷ See John Wright, "Patristic Testimony on Women's Ordination in Inter Insigniores," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 516-526. See also William Most, *Texts on Ordination of Women* (<https://www.cwtn.com/catholicism/library/texts-on-ordination-of-women-11218>). The following are textual selections in the writings of early scholars and Fathers of the Church that demonstrate a negative perception or teaching against women in any liturgical and sacramental functions. But due diligence and careful analysis must be observed against oversimplification and absolutistic reading of these passages, for the early scholars and Patristic Fathers wrote their views having in mind their specific context and particular audience, which do not necessarily reflect a general picture of the universal Church.

⁸ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.13.2 cited in Wright, "Patristic Testimony," 517-518.

⁹ Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum* 41.5 cited in Wright, "Patristic Testimony," 518.

¹⁰ Tertullian, *On Veiling Virgins* 9.1. c. 206 AD.

⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 1998), §24.



speaking in the church."¹¹ Speaking against Quintilla and the heretics, Epiphanius perhaps has the sharpest criticism of the ordination of women to the priesthood.¹² John Chrysostom commented that by "*divine law has excluded women from the sanctuary, but they try to thrust themselves into it.*"¹³

Pope Gelasius wrote: "*Yet we have heard with irritation that divine things have come to such lack of respect that women are encouraged to minister at the sacred altars and to perform all the things that do not belong to them, which are only assigned to the service of men.*"¹⁴ The Council of Nicaea addressed women in the diaconate: "*But since they have not received any imposition of hands, they are surely numbered among the laity.*"¹⁵ The Council of Nîmes has reported that women who have been admitted to apostolic ministry "*must be annulled, and care must be taken that no one in the future be so bold.*"¹⁶ The Apostolic Constitutions¹⁷ and the Councils of Orange,¹⁸ Laodicea,¹⁹ and Chalcedon²⁰ have rejected the ordination of deaconesses and forbade deaconesses from doing what is proper for priests alone. Moreover, some of the reasons invoked are related to cleanliness and women's purity during the menstrual period, echoing Leviticus 15:19-24.²¹ That women "*can neither teach nor*

testify" (Augustine of Hippo), are in a state of subjection and thus "*cannot receive the sacrament of Order*" (Thomas Aquinas) and "*should be married in veils that they might always be submissive and humble to their husbands*" (Isidor of Seville)²² were the prevailing teachings among Patristic Fathers regarding women and their participation in the Church's liturgical life. Nevertheless, these negative texts and unfavorable opinions against women's participation in liturgical and sacramental functions do not necessarily suggest that they are forbidden in other aspects of the Church's life and ministry or that these views or opinions are a direct attack or scourge against women's character or existence. Some pastors and early scholars have opined and appreciated the services and the sacrifices of women in various ministries. To some extent, some were placed in important positions, overshadowing the roles and functions of male deacons.²³

In the medieval period²⁴, the exclusion of women was further defined. Four arguments were used to maintain the tradition of the Patristic Fathers: (1) the symbolic argument—the Church is the bride, the feminine, and Christ is the bridegroom, the masculine; (2) women's emotional instability, greater timidity, and process to sin; (3) Christ's positive determination for male apostleship in the New Testament; and (4) the Church could not be wronged in the exclusion of women, otherwise it would have committed a monstrous injustice by depriving an entire sex of receiving something of salvific value—the Church cannot

¹¹ Ronald E. Heine, ed, *The Montanist Oracles and Testimonia* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University; Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 99 cited in Wright, "Patristic Testimony," 520.

¹² Epiphanius, *Panarion* 49.2-3, 78.23 cited in Wright, "Patristic Testimony," 521.

¹³ John Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood* 2.2 cited in Wright, "Patristic Testimony," 524.

¹⁴ Pope Gelasius, "Epistle" 14.26 March 11, 494 AD (translated from critical text "*Epistulae Romanorum Pontificum Genuinae*," Recensuit Andreas Thiel," Brunsbergae 1867) cited in Most, *Texts on Ordination of Women*.

¹⁵ Council of Nicaea, Canon 19 (Mansi II.557-58) cited in Most, *Texts on Ordination of Women*.

¹⁶ Council of Nîmes, Canon 2 CCL 148. P. 50 lines 14-19 cited in Most, *Texts on Ordination of Women*.

¹⁷ Apostolic Constitutions 3.16: 1-2 cited in Most, *Texts on Ordination of Women*.

¹⁸ First Council of Orange c. 441 (Harduin I. 1786), Canon 15 cited in Most, *Texts on Ordination of Women*.

¹⁹ Council of Laodicea c. 372 (Harduin, "*Acta Conciliorum*" 1715 AD, I. 783-4 cited in Most, *Texts on Ordination of Women*.

²⁰ Council of Chalcedon 531 AD (Harduin II 1714 cols. 607-08), Canon 15 cited in Most, *Texts on Ordination of Women*.

²¹ Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria ca. 247-264. See Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from the New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 111.

²² Catherine Gyarmathy-Amherd, "The Ordination of Women in the Roman Catholic Church," in *Women and Ordination in the Christian Churches: International Perspectives*, eds. Ian Jones, Janet Wootton, and Kirsty Thorpe (New York: T&T Clark, 2008).

²³ For an in-depth historical-critical analysis and survey of "women" in Christianity, see Tucker and Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from the New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987).

²⁴ For a brief presentation of the historical and theological definition and change of meaning of "ordination" in early Middle Ages to the twelfth century, see Gary Macy, "The Ordination of Women in the Early Middle Ages," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 481-508. Likewise, it investigates the circumstances of women ordination, the roles of the ordained women, and the debates that surround it.



be wrong!²⁵ The Scholastics stress the tradition they have received. The development of the Sacred Orders as one of the seven sacraments has established a concept of male ordination up to the Second Vatican Council.

Careful evaluation of opinions and conciliar texts reveals that noted Patristic Fathers and early Conciliar documents have reiterated a teaching on the exclusion of women in the apostolic ministry. The standard basis for such exclusion is primarily based on the two biblical texts quoted from the New Testament. The hermeneutical key applied is the literal reading of the sacred scriptures. However, the persistent reiteration of the non-ordination of women to the apostolic ministry magnifies certain practices of some churches, where women have indeed been enrolled in the ministry of the ordained, at least in the diaconate.²⁶ The enrollment of women in the ministry of *diaconoi* has become an established practice in some Christian communities, mostly Greek churches, prompting Emperor Justinian I of Constantinople to legislate equal legal provisions for men and women deacons.²⁷ There has been, however, a growing consensus among bishops, church historians, and even conciliar teachings, especially in the West, that women, by divine revelation as revealed in the scriptures, are not included in the altar services and are not

allowed to perform some sacramental rites that are proper only to *presbyteroi* and *episcopoi*.²⁸

VATICAN II AND POST-CONCILIAR DEVELOPMENTS

Canon Law 1024 and Catechism of the Catholic Church §1577 state that “Only a baptized man (*vir*) validly receives sacred ordination.” It is further justified that:

The Lord Jesus chose men (*viri*) to form the college of the twelve apostles, and the apostles did the same when they chose collaborators to succeed them in their ministry. The college of bishops, with whom the priests are united in the priesthood, makes the college of the twelve an ever-present and ever-active reality until Christ’s return. The Church recognizes that she is bound by the choice the Lord himself made. *For this reason, the ordination of women is not possible.*²⁹

The Magisterium has always consistently maintained that women cannot become priests because Jesus was male; he did not choose a woman as an “apostle” to be part of the twelve, and only male priests can act in persona Christi capitis. The document *Inter Insigniores (On the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood)*³⁰ is a significant text that provides the reasons why the Roman Catholic Church and its Magisterium cannot allow women to be admitted to the ministerial priesthood, as they

²⁵ Aidan Nichols, *Holy Order: Apostolic Priesthood from the New Testament to the Second Vatican Council* (Dublin: Veritas Publication, 1990), 83-84.

²⁶ Recent scholarship, however, confirms that there were women ordained to the diaconate. See Aime Mortimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1986) and John Wijngaards, *No Women in Holy Orders?: The Women Deacons of the Early Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2002). The findings of these two important historical studies on women ordination to the diaconate suggest that women were admitted to the Holy Orders in some Greek churches. While this case may not be prevalent in the Latin church, as reflected in the sermons of the Latin Fathers and early conciliar documents, these two studies were able to establish that women deaconesses have played important liturgical roles and have assisted Bishops in pastoral care. Whether or not they acquire sacramental character, as in the case of male deacons, or whether their election and ordination are valid or not, is another issue to be settled with great caution.

²⁷ See Nichols, *Holy Order*, 19.

²⁸ See Aidan Nichols, *Holy Order: Apostolic Priesthood from the New Testament to the Second Vatican Council* (Dublin: Veritas Publication, 1990). For a thorough discussion and presentation of data regarding the non-ordination of women, Nichols argued that the Patristic Fathers have questioned and forbade the inclusion of women in the diaconate involving “laying down of hands” with “sacramental character.” Though there are reports of “laying down of hands” in those cases involving “women deacons,” this does not equate to enrolling the women deacon in the sacred ministry but only to the service, that is, to assist the Bishop in the exercise of his office in liturgical matters and managerial functions, just like any other minor orders. As regards the “laying down of hands” and “invocation of the Holy Spirit,” the same practice was done by the Ordinary in the case of installing someone to a particular ministry, or minor order, in the church.

²⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church §1577 (http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P4X.HTM, accessed, January 15, 2020). Emphasis mine.

³⁰ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Inter Insigniores (On the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood)* (http://w2.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html).



are not permitted to do so or to change this aspect of divine revelation. It is worth noting that the document follows deductive hermeneutical reasoning throughout its justifications. The document closes out the rules for women's participation in the priesthood based on the following points laid down in the document: (1) God's incarnate Son, Christ, is a male, and he chooses male apostles despite having women associates, making it part of divine revelation (§§29,31), (2) the early Christians and the Church Fathers have continued this "tradition" and defended it in all integrity (§6), (3) the Church, in the exercise of sacramental duties, cannot change the substance of the sacraments because it simply dispenses duties and the ministry of Jesus, (4) the priest acts *in persona Christi*, the Church is his bridegroom; thus, priests should be male (analogy of marriage); (5) royal priesthood is for all baptized, the ministerial priesthood is reserved for men called by God to His service, and (6) the document absolves Paul by claiming that he has an affirmative attitude towards women, but he is bound by tradition not to extend to women this "apostolic mission" (§18).

While, in general tone, the document is appreciative of the role of women, albeit limited only to pastoral undertakings at the parish and diocesan levels, the main argument on which it bases its objection to the call for women's admission to the ministerial priesthood is the "fact" that Jesus was incarnated as a male (§29, 31) and that this forms part of divine revelation. It also entails that only males can continue the ministry of Jesus forever; thus, he entrusts it to his all-male apostles (§23). Moreover, it claims that no amount of reasoning can change the "essential elements" or "substance" of the priesthood, for the Church has no power or authority to do so since it springs directly from Jesus Christ, quoting Trent (§22), and that the basis or norm

of priesthood is not "demonstrative argument" but "analogy of faith" (§26). Historical elements and adaptations to civilizations and times cannot and should not replace the "essential points" that constitute Christ and Christianity (§23).

In *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*,³¹ Pope John Paul II opens the Apostolic Letter by saying "[P]riestly ordination ... 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" (§1). The Holy Father reiterated the reasons why women cannot be admitted to ministerial priesthood:

"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." (§2).

The Apostolic Letter adheres to the reasons presented in the *Inter Insigniores*. It also adds that the non-admission of women to the ministerial priesthood does not mean that "women are of lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them" (§3); but "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be held by all the Church's faithful" (§4).

Likewise, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in 1995 reiterated in *Responsum ad Propositum Dubium*³² concerning the teaching contained in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*:

³¹ Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis_en.html).

³² Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF), "*Responsum ad Propositum Dubium*," *Origins* 25 (November 30, 1995), 401. Also, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19951028_dubium-ordinatio-sac_en.html.



This teaching requires *definitive assent*, since, founded on the written Word of God and from the beginning constantly preserved and applied in the Tradition of the Church, it has been set forth *infallibly by the ordinary and universal Magisterium* (cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* 25, 2). Thus, in the present circumstances, the Roman Pontiff, exercising his proper office of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32), has handed on this same teaching by a formal declaration, explicitly stating what is to be held always, everywhere, and by all, *as belonging to the deposit of the faith*.³³

[A]ll members of the faithful are required to give their assent to the teaching stated therein.... It is *a matter of full definitive assent*, that is to say, irrevocable, to *a doctrine taught infallibly by the Church*. In fact ... the definitive nature of this assent derives from the truth of the doctrine itself, since, founded on the written Word of God, and constantly held and applied in the Tradition of the Church, it has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary universal Magisterium (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 25).³⁴

A careful reading of the documents presented reveals that the teaching on the non-admission and non-ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood is a matter of definitive magisterial teaching requiring the full assent of the faithful. The *Responsum* specifically points out that *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* did not make it definitive; rather, it is the Scriptures, the Apostolic Tradition, and the role of the Magisterium in defining doctrines in matters of faith and morals that make it infallible. “Whether the teaching that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women ... is to be understood as belonging to the deposit of faith.”³⁵

The magisterium teaches the theology of the priesthood by employing two kinds of arguments against women’s ordination. The

primary argument is the *argument from tradition* (fundamental reasons). The church is bound to continue upholding the tradition handed down from Christ. Jesus chose the 12 apostles, and the apostles chose their apostolic successors, as well as their episcopal and presbyteral successors; no woman was admitted to the apostolic office.³⁶ The argument calls forth fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition. The second argument is complemented by adhering to *the argument from the iconic character of the ministerial priesthood* (theological arguments). It stresses that, in the economy of salvation, God wills that the incarnation of His word take the form of a man (male). While the truth remains that God is the savior of all humanity—males and females—he chooses to be incarnated as a man. He cannot be both, and he chose to be incarnated as a man, not as a woman. Such is not simply an accident but God’s intent, which forms part of divine revelation. Moreover, the common maleness is constant in the Scripture: God is the Father to Christ the Son and Christ the Son to the male minister-priests.³⁷ The *nuptial analogy* best describes the relationship between Christ and his church. Christ is the bridegroom; the church is the bride. This iconic character of Jesus maleness can only be represented symbolically by male priests; they alone can act *in persona Christi capitis*.

In summary, the magisterium has maintained that, in the case of women’s ordination to the ministerial priesthood, it is not by demonstrative argumentation but by analogy of faith that we can better appreciate the richness of the symbolism of Christ’s union with his church. It is worth noting that the documents do not argue for women’s subordination and inferiority on the basis of the order of creation, as some

³³ Pope John Paul II, at the Audience granted to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect, approved this Reply (*Responsum*), adopted in the ordinary session of this Congregation, and ordered it to be published. Emphasis mine.

³⁴ CDF, *Responsum*. Emphasis mine.

³⁵ CDF, *Responsum*. Emphasis mine.

³⁶ See Sara Butler, *Women’s Ordination: Is it still an Issue?* (www.archny.org/seminary/st-josephs-seminary-dunwoodie/administration/sister-sar-butler/): 1–15.

³⁷ Nichols, *Holy Order*, 148.



medieval thinkers did. The magisterium and its defenders argue that the teaching against women's ordination is ancient, universal, and constant, and it "rests on solid theological grounds that are scarcely understood by many of the faithful. What is needed above all else is education."³⁸ The documents issued against women's ordination are a reiteration of an ancient tradition and teaching supported by the classical theological method in accordance with the standard theological *loci* of the magisterium, living tradition, scripture, and theological reason (*Dei Verbum* §10). As such, it belongs to the deposit of faith that requires an assent of faith, as it can be understood as infallible even before the release of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*.³⁹ The document was not an infallible statement.⁴⁰ What made the ban on women priests infallible was the constant prohibitions and pronouncements by councils, popes, and bishops, as evidenced by conciliar teachings and the opinions of theologians over time.

SOME OBJECTIONS FOR FURTHER THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The convocation of the Second Vatican Council, with its "aggiornamento" character, has heightened the aspirations of the proponents of women's ordination. Several theologians and academics have criticized the documents *Inter Insigniores* and *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* for being

contrary to the spirit of the ecumenical council. Instead of dispelling doubts on the theological grounds presented, more questions have been raised, ranging from scriptural hermeneutics to theological arguments, and even its "infallible" doctrinal weight has been questioned. After laying down the foundations and reasons for the non-ordination of women to the ministerial ordination, this section will highlight the issues being raised against the aforementioned documents.

First, in April 1976, the Pontifical Biblical Commission deliberated on the scriptural grounds for admitting women to the priesthood. The commission has unanimously concluded that "it does not seem that the New Testament by itself alone will permit us to settle the problem of the possible accession of women to the presbyterate in a clear and definitive way."⁴¹ It is worth noting, however, that this celebrated finding of the Biblical Commission never appeared in the official documents of the Curia, as the study is simply consultative. In further deliberations, the majority of the commission favored the view that Scripture does not prohibit women's ordination and that the Church can ordain women without going against Christ's original intent for his Church. In the following year, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with the approval of Pope Paul IV, released *Inter Insigniores*, claiming: "The Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination."⁴² The earlier analysis also echoes this view, namely that Scripture alone does not constitute the sole basis in Catholic theologizing. Tradition is equally an important component.

³⁸ Avery Dulles, "Pastoral Response to the Teaching on Women's Ordination," *Origins*, Vol. 26, No. 11 (August 29, 1996).

³⁹ Dulles argues that this teaching does not belong to "the basic profession of the Christian faith" and if it is a revealed truth, "it stands relatively low in the hierarchy of truths." He contends that it is not necessary to declare those who deny or doubt the teaching as heretics but dissenters showing obstinacy may be subjected to canonical penalties in reference to Canon 1371.1. See Dulles, *Pastoral Response*.

⁴⁰ Dulles maintains that the CDF does not have the power to define doctrines, nor did Pope John Paul II pronounce it *ex cathedra*. He opines, nevertheless, that the intervention of the pope is necessary to avoid imperiling "the previous consensus within the magisterium" - that is, the constant teaching against women ordination from the second century down to the Medieval and Scholastics up to the Second Vatican Council - by progressivists and proponents of radical theology. See Dulles, *Pastoral Response*.

⁴¹ Portion of the findings of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1976 which was leaked before an official document can be published. See <https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/editorial-ordination-women-would-correct-injustice>.

⁴² See <https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/editorial-ordination-women-would-correct-injustice>.



Second, regarding the claim that the Church has not ordained women, *does the unchanged custom of the church since apostolic times until the present constitute "Tradition" in the strong sense of the word and, therefore, the revelation of the will of God for the church?*⁴³ Some scholars contend that this constitutes only an historical fact, not necessarily Tradition in the strong sense of the term. To say that there are no women

[F]rom the Twelve is not conclusive; the restriction of women from ministry during the apostolic period is clearly explained by other motives than trying to be faithful to the will of Christ. Neither the symbolism of Christ as head and bridegroom of the church nor the nature of women nor the nature of the pastoral office permits, under certain circumstances, the exclusion of women from the ability to exercise, through ordination, the ministry of church communion and, therefore, the sacraments.⁴⁴

Third, the documents highlighted that only males can become *in persona Christi*. The following have been raised: (a) "that Christ's maleness has not been one of the Church's doctrinal or theological preoccupations"; (b) "it seems that far too much is being made of the fact that the Word became a male," but the point, however, is that the Word of God became human and dwelt among us; (c) "that Jesus was born a male is a fact, but it tells us nothing either way about the question of who is a suitable minister of the eucharist"; (d) priesthood is truly "a service, a ministry in the Church ... the religious, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional gifts and qualities, which are indispensable for the competent and fruitful exercise of the priestly ministry in the person and name of Christ."⁴⁵

Fourth, there are some questions about the scriptural argument and the hermeneutical

principle employed in *Ordination Sacerdotalis*. The phrase "which has been reserved exclusively to men," according to Bieringer, which is one of the bases why women cannot be ordained, is (a) untenable because "the apostolic letter reconstructs facts, which cannot be substantiated with historical-critical proof"; (b) "it is impossible on the basis of the texts quoted in the letter to prove that the male sex of those chosen (the twelve disciples) was essential for their mission"; (c) "it is impossible at the hands of the New Testament to prove that it is historically certain that Jesus chose his apostles only from among men."⁴⁶

Fifth, those who argue against women's ordination use the Pauline letters to challenge women's assertive roles in the community and, subsequently, the ordination of women. They argued that there are sufficient bases in the New Testament to sideline women for reasons that are not fully explained. In all the "Pauline letters," Paul mentions a considerable number of women and deaconesses for their leadership roles and preaching activities.⁴⁷ Careful reading and evaluation of the letters of Paul reveal that most texts derogatory toward women come from the Deutero- and Trito-Pauline letters.⁴⁸ Thus, some scholars argue that those "non-authentic" Pauline letters that have spoken against women were written by Paul's disciples or followers put under Paul's name, so they may have some "authority."⁴⁹ In this light, feminist liberation hermeneutics has uncovered the androcentric,

⁴⁶ See Reimund Bieringer, "The Scriptural Argument in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*" (trans. John Wijngaards), *Bijdragen* 62 (2001): 129-142. Insertion mine.

⁴⁷ For a concise list of women leaders in the Christian movement during Paul's time, see Agnes M. Brazal, "Can the Real Paul Stand Up? Paul and Women's Leadership in the Church," *MST Review* 10, No. 1 (2008): 38-60. Likewise, for an excellent analysis of socio-political status of women in the Acts and Letters of Paul, see Tucker and Liefeld, *Daughter of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 53-87.

⁴⁸ See Brazal, "Can the Real Paul Stand Up?," 38-40.

⁴⁹ See Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 53 quoted in Brazal, 11.



patriarchal overlay in the Pauline letters. It argues that the Bible is written by men, and for men, and thus, interpretations favor men over women since their voices are not often heard. In a patriarchal society, women are ignored and sidelined, and if they hold a certain degree of role in the community, they are mentioned but not elaborated, as we can see in Paul's letters. In this setup, a re-reading and re-interpretation are required to recover what was hidden in the Scriptures, based on the presumptions that both men and women are created in the image of God, that both are equal in dignity, and that Jesus, though male, has come to save men and women alike. Thus, the understanding that faith in Jesus requires no division or discrimination is grounded in the principles of equality, justice, and charity. This is Paul's faith principle in Galatians 3:27-28: "*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*"

Sixth, the document's literalist reading of selective passages in the New Testament to justify the exclusion of women from the ministerial priesthood has failed to take into account the broader picture of the Church's theology. Elizabeth Johnson argues that the New Testament provides us with a number of Christologies, like the *sophia* and *logos*, that can be used to elaborate the Christian faith in relation to the priestly order. The Sophia/Wisdom Christology can be utilized today in order to provide a powerful reinterpretation of Jesus, which is based on the scriptures and tones down the too "sexual" overload of Jesus-maleness in the New Testament. In the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, we can say that "[s]ophia's creative and saving actions are divine ones [...] (and) require that she be interpreted

as a powerful female symbol of this one God."⁵⁰ In the New Testament, Jesus was depicted as a personification of wisdom—a wisdom teacher, an earthly embodiment of Wisdom, the incarnation of Sophia herself.⁵¹ But over time, early Christians conveniently favored *logos* (masculine in form) over *sophia* (feminine in form). Following the feminist liberation hermeneutics, can we say then that the androcentric, patriarchal context of the early Christian movement has preferred the *Logos* (word) over the *Sophia* (wisdom)? Can we consequently conclude that the "maleness" of Jesus is a product of the linguistic use of the word *logos*, since it is masculine, Jesus became a man? While the latter question is debatable, the former one has gained momentum today, even among male biblical exegetes. Likewise, since our scriptures tell us of this composite feminine-masculine christologies, we must ground our theological discourse not in "sex" but on the merit of the message proclaimed by Jesus.

It has been asked if the documents *Inter Insigniores* and *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* were spoken *ex cathedra*? Were the popes in collegiality and in consultation with other bishops? Not all documents from popes and the Curia are always "infallible"; most of them are pastoral exhortations and guidelines. A teaching can be in the form of dogma and/or doctrine. A dogma is a specific formulation of a revealed truth, while a doctrine is an articulation of faith drawing from divine revelation, even if it is not directly revealed. If so, is the non-ordination of women a dogmatic or doctrinal issue? It appears that "there has been no *ex cathedra* infallible pronouncement by the pope on the issue of women's ordination. Nor has there ever been

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Johnson, "Wisdom was Made Flesh and Pitched Her Tent Among Us," in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christologies*, ed. Maryanne Stevons (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1993), 99.

⁵¹ Johnson, "Wisdom was Made Flesh," 103.





a conciliar dogmatic definition ruling out the possibility of women's ordination."⁵²

In summary, we must keep in mind the various theological loci in Catholic theologizing. In Catholic theologizing, the following areas must be put in mind: the Scriptures, the apostolic Tradition, the magisterium, sound theological reasons, and the contemporary human realities experienced by the whole People of God—together, they constitute the norm of the Christian faith.⁵³ In this particular issue of the non-ordination of women, we have to return to the “basics” of our theological reflections: Scripture is a testimony of revelation which “constitutes the supreme rule of faith” (§8)—it is the “very soul of theology”; and the “proper place for theology is within the Church” (§20). Thus, (1) the canonical witness of Scripture and Tradition should promote the anchoring of all Church doctrine and practice in witnessing; (2) fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition; (3) theologians must adhere to the magisterium, which gives an authentic interpretation of the Word of God as handed down through Scripture and Tradition (§44) and must be constantly taken into consideration in all theological endeavors. However, the sense of the faithful must not be disregarded, for in itself it constitutes an aspect of divine revelation—the Spirit being at work among the faithful. Scripture is the “very soul of theology”; it has a primacy in theological reflections. Should we not allow contemporary theological reflections to blend with what constitutes “tradition,” which may provide another meaningful reflection of God’s Word in our present context?

⁵² Peter Burns, “Women’s Ordination and Infallible Teaching, An Inquiry: Was the Teaching Infallible?,” *Basic Newsletter* (Supplement, February 1997): 2.

⁵³ International Theological Commission, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria* (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_theologia-oggi_en.html).

SYNODALITY IN PASTORAL, MORAL, AND ECUMENICAL ISSUES

The contemporary world is marked, on the one hand, by the rise of secularism and the emergence of new philosophical systems, and, on the other hand, by scientific and technological advancements and challenges from modern political and economic orders. In an era of heightened social awareness and growing demands for equal rights, individual emancipation, and collective participation, society questions traditional roles and their relevance. The same framework is operative among young Catholics who see male priests leading the church’s liturgy and sacraments. Most know that women cannot be priests but cannot articulate why this is the case. The church cannot ignore the call to engage and dialogue with these realities. Pope Francis invites all to consider the path of synodality, as it offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself while adequately acknowledging the value of the doctrine of the faithful’s *sense of faith*.⁵⁴

The church recognizes and upholds the role of women in society as it continuously discerns the signs of the times. Several documents attest to the dignity and vocation of women. *Gaudium et Spes* acknowledges that women now work in almost all spheres of societal life. Likewise, it added that “any kind of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the ground of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God’s design.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Pope Francis, *Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, October 17, 2015: *AAS* 107 (2015).

⁵⁵ Second Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, accessed, March 10, 2020), §29.





[T]he vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect, and a power never hitherto achieved... it is evident that women are meant to form part of the living and working structure of Christianity in so prominent a manner that perhaps not all their potentialities have yet been made clear... which makes it possible to understand the greatness of the dignity and vocation of women, that one is able to speak of their active presence in the Church and in society.⁵⁶

The apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* stresses the importance of women's role in the Church and in society. But women's dignity and vocation have been equated with motherhood and service. Women are not being discriminated against or sidelined, but their role is toward "perfection of charity." While the magisterial teaching appreciates the role of women in proclamation and evangelization, it does not include entry to the Holy Orders. Thus, we must consider the following issues:

First, the Church's theological grounding has faced a tremendous challenge in the wake of the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood in some Christian churches, especially the Anglican Communion. While the Roman Catholic Church has elevated the inadmissibility of women to Holy Orders to doctrinal status, making it a theological issue, the Anglican Communion considers it primarily an ecclesiological issue, with a prevailing view that it is also a social justice concern in contemporary discussions.⁵⁷ However, it has been noted that the case of ordination of women in other Christian Churches has caused unimaginable division and great harm in harmony and unity and has been viewed as the beginning of the

collapse of orthodoxy; thus requiring theological compromise and "benevolent pragmatism" or "a necessary and strictly extraordinary anomaly in preference to schism."⁵⁸ But such a radical shift in ecclesiological understanding brings the church closer to being characterized by discipleship of equals. Ministerial priesthood has been too focused on the principle of *in persona Christi capitis* (1 Cor. 4:1) to mean priests are servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God; consequently, putting aside the idea that priests also act *in persona Ecclesiae* (Heb. 5:1) to mean priests are taken from the community to represent and offer sacrifices before God.

Second, the Church is accused of committing cultural sexism and discrimination. Nobody can claim a right to ordination, but it is wrong to refuse it to a person simply because she belongs to a particular class or sex. To claim that Christ selected only men for the sacred orders contradicts Christ's message, which promotes the dignity and equality of all human individuals.⁵⁹ The call for justice and equality is at the heart of Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God. Though there is a growing demand within the Catholic Church for the ordination of women, surprisingly enough, most Catholics in the whole world do not see the exclusion as an issue of discrimination and sexism.⁶⁰ Note that the magisterium does not argue for the inferiority or subordination of women according to the order of creation (1 Cor 11:3-9) and Christian marriage (Eph. 5:22-25) in their exclusion from the ministerial priesthood. Moreover, unlike the theological opinions of the Apostolic Fathers

⁵⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html), §1.

⁵⁷ Noel Cox, *The Ordination of Women and the Unity of the Church* (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297624822_The_Ordination_of_Women_and_the_Unity_of_the_Church/link/59e5c0cdaca272390edff91f/download, accessed March 7, 2020).

⁵⁸ As in the case of the Episcopal Church, see Eames Commission of the Episcopal Church in reference to the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod 1993 quoted in Paul Avis, "The Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod 1993: A 'Bearable Anomaly'?", in *Seeking the Truth of Change in the Church: Reception, Communion and the Ordination of Women*, ed. Paul Avis (London/New York: T&T Clark Ltd, 2004), 170.

⁵⁹ Ruth Henderson, "Tradition and the Status of Women", *Australian eJournal of Theology* 2 (February 2004): 5-7.

⁶⁰ See Michael J. Mayer, et al., "Is the Roman Catholic Prohibition of Female Priests Sexist?", *Journal of Religion and Society*, Vol. 9 (2007): 1-24.



and the Scholastics, the Church has a better appreciation of women and their inherent role in evangelization and proclamation today.

Third, hierarchy causes fragmentation and discontent within the church. The sacramental character of Holy Orders has caused some division. While it has been said that ministerial priesthood is at the service of the royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), the sacrament of Holy Orders is distinct from the sacrament of baptism, which is a common ontological foundation of the priesthood. However, this hierarchy is not primarily based on the division of sexes but rather on the distinction between the ordained and the non-ordained (laity). It is anachronistic to presume that our understanding of ordination and priesthood today is the same as in the past. Clearly, we have to recognize the historical development of the theological understanding of ordination. It is ahistorical to claim that doctrines are without context and that their expressions do not evolve.

Fourth, faulty anthropology leads to the subordination of women. The poor anthropological understanding and lack of exegetical tools of the Patristic Fathers until the medieval period led to misogyny. Tertullian considered women the “devil’s gateway”; Origen spoke of God looking not at the feminine, but the masculine; and Epiphanius wrote that the “devil seeks to vomit disorder through women.”⁶¹ The 16th-century treatise on witchcraft, *Malleus Maleficarum*, by inquisitor Heinrich Kramer, is perhaps the best embodiment of misogyny. The egalitarian-feminist perspective holds that human beings are embodied individuals, not in a dualistic sense; that our relationship must be based on mutuality and equality, not on hierarchy and subordination; that justice is understood in

terms of charity; and that chastity is understood in terms of sexual integrity.

Fifth, since Vatican II, women have been allowed greater and wider participation in the church’s life, especially at the parish level, except in the ministerial priesthood. Pope Francis has appointed four (4) women in key Vatican positions and increased the number of female employees in the Roman Curia, believing that women are “highly capable of participating in an administrative way.”⁶² But the magisterium prefers the natural semblance in the liturgy’s conduct. Critical reading of the magisterial teachings reveals that the theological arguments presented did not refer to any sexual reference but to the sacramental symbolism or the natural symbolism of gender. Such, too, is a recognition that nothing masculine is required in the role of the priest. The proponents of women’s ordination have argued that the principle *ex facto sequitur posse*⁶³ must be applied in this case, since contemporary historical research has affirmed that women deaconesses existed in the past, and the Roman Catholic Church can therefore revive the ministry of women deaconesses. The same principle is employed to revive women deaconesses in some Greek Orthodox Churches. The Church will not violate or invent anything doctrinal, for it will simply revive an ancient practice, as it has done in the past. But this proposition will pose a serious theological dilemma because the Roman Catholic Church, from the Scholastic period through the Second Vatican Council, has consistently taught that Holy Orders is a single sacrament with three degrees or orders: diaconate, priesthood, and episcopate. Entry into the diaconate may lead to entry into the other two degrees of Holy

⁶¹ Henderson, “Tradition and the Status of Women,” 4.

⁶² EWTN, “Pope Francis’ historic appointments: 4 women helping to lead the Vatican (<https://ewtnvatican.com/articles/pope-francis-historic-appointments-4-women-helping-to-lead-the-vatican-5127>).

⁶³ See John Wijngaards, *No Women in Holy Orders?: The Women Deacons of the Early Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2002).



Orders. Considering the degrees of Holy Orders theology on the sacrament of the Holy Orders, it will require mental gymnastics to accommodate the proposition; otherwise, it is irrational and *un*-theological to allow a person entry to diaconate yet refuse access to two other degrees, as in the case of the Anglican Communion.⁶⁴

Sixth, while it can be argued that Jesus is male according to Scripture and that, in the Gospel accounts, he chooses male apostles, it cannot be concluded decisively that Jesus wants only male apostles, priests, or leaders in the proclamation of the good news. In reading the Scriptures, *Dei Verbum* urges the faithful “to search out the intention of the sacred writers [...] For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts that are variously historical, prophetic, and poetic, as are other forms of discourse” (§7). The Bible

does not present itself as a direct revelation of timeless truths but as the written testimony to a series of interventions in which God reveals himself in human history. In a way that differs from tenets of other religions, the message of the Bible is solidly grounded in history. It follows that one cannot correctly understand the biblical writings without examining the historical circumstances that shaped them.⁶⁵

In the spirit of synodality, the above pastoral, moral, and ecumenical issues merit a re-reading of the signs of the times. It is worth noting that the International Theological Commission has taken into account that some ecclesial communities foster a form of synodality shaped by their distinct views on Church structure, sacraments, and ministry that differ from traditional Catholic teaching. Specifically mentioned are the Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican Communion.⁶⁶ With creative fidelity

⁶⁴ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Article VI: The Sacrament of Holy Orders: §§1554 - 1571.

⁶⁵ Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 23, 29 (January 1994): 524.

⁶⁶ International Theological Commission (ITC), *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html, §36.

to the deposit of faith and the criterion of the hierarchy of truths, Pope Francis encourages putting synodality into practice and deeper comprehension of its theology, thereby providing an opportunity in our ecumenical journey to share spiritual gifts that mutually enrich one another toward unity.⁶⁷

Any form of exclusion or marginalization runs contrary to Jesus’ message of the Kingdom of God and is unreasonable in our theological discourse as we continue to discern God’s message of liberation and love for all humankind in our times. Our theological position on the admission of women to the priestly order must be that of liberality. Our Judeo-Christian reflection must always take into account the historical and temporal context of doctrines. Likewise, our Scriptures must be continuously reinterpreted in light of our contemporary human experiences. In the Church, Scripture alone does not constitute the norm of Christian life; alongside it are the Apostolic tradition and the Magisterium. In employing arguments for or against women’s ordination, we cannot employ the “Protestant arguments” in Catholic theologizing because they do not draw authority from Tradition or councils. Revealed truths are universal and at the core of the Christian faith; however, they must be interpreted historically and contextually, requiring reformulation to address contemporary pastoral needs, for one thing is the truth, and another is its manner of presentation.⁶⁸ While obedience to the magisterial teaching is a value for all Catholic faithful that requires full assent of faith, conscientious objection to non-

⁶⁷ ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, §117.

⁶⁸ See John XXIII, *Alloc. in Concilii Vaticani inauguratione*, *AAS* 84 (1962), p. 792. Cf. Vatican Council II: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, 62; *Const. Decr. Decl.*, p. 780. Pope John XXIII, in his opening speech for the council, in reference to the primary doctrines of the Church, has exhorted that “*certain and unchangeable doctrine, to which faithful obedience is due, has to be explored and presented in a way that is demanded by our times. One thing is the deposit of faith, which consists of the truths contained in sacred doctrine; another thing is the manner of presentation, always however with the same meaning and signification.*”



dogmatic teachings has always found its place in our theological reflections across time.⁶⁹ Assuming modern exegetical methods and hermeneutics can sufficiently demonstrate that the interpretations employed by the Patristic Fathers and councils over time have become irrelevant today, is this argument a sufficient basis to abolish centuries-old traditions that have enriched the church's self-understanding and contributed significantly to its spiritual growth and intellectual depth?

On the other hand, the collective wisdom of the Church Fathers and the councils forms part of our tradition. We must be equally critical of the emerging theological and philosophical novelties that relativize every aspect of the Church's life, for God's self-disclosure in our time does not occur instantaneously but rather continuously. In the case of the non-ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood, does the priesthood for women necessarily equate to resolving the issues of sexism and discrimination in the ministries? We hope that, in this regard, the magisterium is employing the "law of gradualness" in its hermeneutical processes. The question of whether to admit women to the ministerial priesthood must not only be discussed in the context of pastoral necessity due to declining numbers of clergy or justice-related issues brought about by postmodern demands. For if it is, our response will then fall into benevolent pragmatism or simply a utilitarian remedy to the growing demand for greater participation of women in the apostolic ministry, laden with ambivalence but little clarity within the established theological framework of the Church. The challenge is how to adopt new typologies and approaches or recover

liberative elements while remaining faithful to our tradition and self-understanding. Let us remember that anything that is contrary to God's intent, to the liberating message of the Gospel, is sinful. We pray that the arguments presented can hold their ground, for if not, then we might have acted contrary to the promptings of the Spirit and might have committed a grievous sin against an entire sex of God's people.

Synodality is a process of spiritual and ecclesial discernment. We hope that the Church hears the call for women's ordination to the ministerial priesthood in a fraternal and collegial atmosphere. In the spirit of synodality and in response to Pope Francis' call "to journey together," we must encounter, listen, and discern as members of the Church, for the Spirit calls us to open our hearts and listen deeply to people and nations, as well as the evolving challenges of our world, so we can stay open and actively listen to one another rather than retreating into rigid assumptions or isolating ourselves behind fixed beliefs.⁷⁰ As we reflect on the Spirit's promptings today, may the Church hear the voices from the margins and seek those who have gone astray from the truth.

⁶⁹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, in the commentary section of the *Doctrines of Vatican II*, Volume V, page 134, stated: "Over the Pope as the expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority, there still stands one's own conscience, which must be obeyed before all else, if necessary, even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority."

⁷⁰ Pope Francis, *Homily on the Opening of the Synodal Path*, October 10, 2021 (<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html>).



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