News



Janice Sevre-Duszynska is engaged by Italian police as she approaches the Vatican during a demonstration for women's ordination in 2011. (CNS/Paul Haring)

by Dennis Coday

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Advocates for the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church said they are "deeply dismayed" by a newspaper article penned by the Vatican's doctrinal chief that reaffirmed the church's ban on women priests as "definitive" and "a truth belonging to the deposit of faith."

"Archbishop [Luis] Ladaria's arguments are unconvincing and simply nothing new," said a statement from the Women's Ordination Conference, following the release of Ladaria's article. "How long can the Vatican hide behind its sexist arguments that because Jesus was a man, he intended only men to become priests?" the statement read.

Writing for the May 30 issue of the Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano, Ladaria, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said that Jesus decided to reserve the sacrament of priestly ordination "to the twelve apostles, all men, who, in turn, communicated it to other men."

"The church has always recognized herself bound by this decision of the Lord, which excludes that the ministerial priesthood can be validly conferred on women," Ladaria writes.

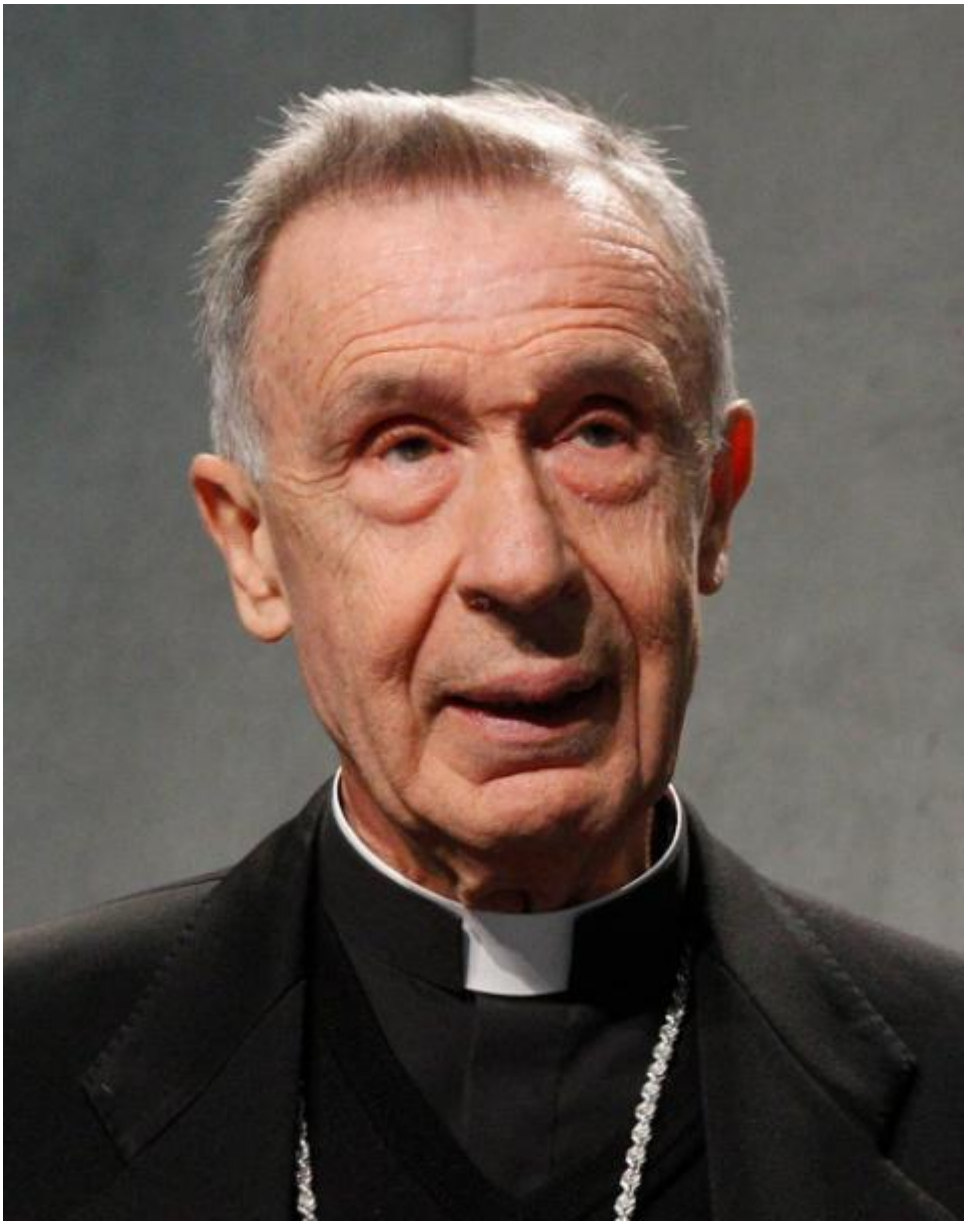
Ladaria's article, "The definitive character of the doctrine of 'Ordinatio sacerdotalis,' " re-examines Pope John Paul II's 1994 apostolic letter that outlined the reasoning behind the ban on the priestly ordination of women.

The archbishop said he decided to write "in response to doubt" about John Paul's teaching, adding that expressing doubt about the barring of women from the priesthood "creates serious confusion among the faithful."

"The only 'serious confusion' among the faithful is just how long the Vatican will continue to parade indefensible arguments that attempt to limit the reaches of God's call," Kate McElwee, executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference, told NCR.

According to British theologian John Wijngaards, "Yes, there is confusion among the faithful, but not because they doubt the validity of their inner sense of what is genuinely Christian and Catholic, but because the persons who are supposed to guide them keep ignoring their just concerns."

"Confusion is healthy if it leads to a process of honest reassessment," added Wijngaards, professor emeritus of Missionary Institute London and founder of the Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research.



Archbishop Luis Ladaria (CNS/Paul Haring)

Statistics have shown that a majority of educated Catholics believe women should be ordained, he said. "Their belief stems not from theological studies but from their 'Catholic sense,' their considered judgment that Jesus, who always treated women like the men, would not ban women from ordination in our present world."

"This *sensus fidei* is at the foundation of the teaching authority of the whole church, a foundation hierarchical leaders should take note of in any magisterial decision," he said.

In his essay, Ladaria, who is to be made a cardinal by Pope Francis June 28, addresses the debate over the character of John Paul's *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, especially the question of whether it is to be considered an infallible papal teaching.

Ladaria argues that although John Paul did not formally proclaim the teaching *ex cathedra* — as outlined by the First Vatican Council document *Pastor Aeternus* as part of the process of a pope declaring something infallibly — the pope "formally confirmed ... what the ordinary and universal magisterium considered throughout the history of the Church as belonging to the deposit of faith."

"To hold that it is not definitive, it is argued that it was not defined *ex cathedra* and that, then, a later decision by a future Pope or council could overturn it," he stated. "Sowing these doubts creates serious confusion among the faithful, not only about the Sacrament of Orders as part of the divine constitution of the Church, but also about the ability of the ordinary magisterium to teach Catholic doctrine in an infallible way."

Wijngaards told NCR: "As history shows, many popes have made statements they believed to be 'definite,' which have turned out to be flawed. The 'definitive' character of a papal statement does not only derive from the intention of the pope in question. It is intimately linked to its context."

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According to Wijngaards, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* does not fulfill the five criteria of an infallible decision by the "ordinary and universal magisterium," as outlined by the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner.

"*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*," he said, "first, was not a collegial exercise of the teaching authority. Second, the bishops of the world had not acted as judges. Third, they had not listened to the ordinary faithful. Fourth, the issue in question does not involve revealed faith or morals. Moreover, fifth, the bishops of the world had not wanted to impose a final judgment on the matter."

He continued, "The belief that only men can be priests because all the 12 apostles were men is scripturally unsound. The appeal to an 'unbroken tradition' of excluding women is as faulty as asserting that the world was created in six days because the fathers of the church, medieval theologians and all bishops thought so."

The statement from the Women's Ordination Conference also notes that even in his 1994 document John Paul acknowledged the question of women's ordination was "at the present time in some places … considered still open to debate."

"The continued presence of a strong movement clamoring for the ordination of women shows that *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* is far from definitively held as doctrine by the faithful of the Church," the statement said.

McElwee told NCR, "While the institutional church continues to reject and dismiss the priestly vocations of women, communities of Catholics recognize women's gifts and walk with them on a path of radical inclusion." Kate McElwee is married to NCR Vatican correspondent, Joshua McElwee.

Among those walking "a path of radical inclusion," is Bridget Mary Meehan, one of four bishops in the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests and pastor of the Mary Mother of Jesus Inclusive Catholic Community in Sarasota, Florida. The international Roman Catholic women priests movement, of which the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests is one member, claims about 250 priests worldwide.*

"The Vatican's affirmation of its ban on women priests as 'definitive' teaching rests solely on patriarchal church authority," Meehan said. "In doing so, it denies the workings of the Spirit within the people of God."

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Janice Sevre-Duszynska, ordained a Roman Catholic Woman Priest in 2008, said, "Our movement is growing with enthusiasm among Catholics in grassroots

communities, especially with marginalized LGBTI and divorced [Catholics], and all who seek a bigger table where God's beloved family gathers to celebrate sacraments and to serve their sisters and brothers in mutual love in a community of equals."

Both women priests noted that Ladaria's newspaper article coincides with the 10th anniversary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issuing a general decree excommunicating the members of their movement and its supporters. The decree stated, "Both the person who attempts to confer holy orders upon a woman, and the woman who attempts to receive holy orders, incur the excommunication *latae sententiae* [automatically]."

The decree doesn't mention the group or its members by name, but it followed a number of high-profile ordinations of women that year and the year before.

"Why [bring this up] now, 10 years later?" Meehan asked NCR. "What's up with that? Maybe they want us to issue a progress report."

Tell them, she said, "Yes, we keep growing and flourishing."

[Dennis Coday is NCR editor. His email address is dcoday@ncronline.org. Vatican correspondent Joshua J. McElwee contributed to this report.]

***Editor's Note:** This sentence has been changed to clarify that the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests is just one organizational member of the larger women priests movement. Other member organizations in the movement include, for example, Roman Catholic Womenpriests-USA and Roman Catholic Womenpriests Europe East. The full movement claims to have ordained 250 priests.

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