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Editor's note: This story originally appeared in the Oct. 23, 1992, issue of NCR.

In a 2,000-word article, Bishop Kenneth E. Untener of Saginaw has asked whether the church can ordain women as priests.

The question "clearly has arguments on both sides which cannot be taken lightly," he wrote in the fall issue of Seasons, a quarterly publication of the Saginaw diocese. The "fundamental question," Untener said, is whether the ban on women priests involves unchangeable "church doctrine," as has been argued in official church documents, or only changeable "church rules," as is argued by "some theologians and scripture scholars."

The fall issue of Seasons, which appeared in October, was devoted completely to the topic of "Women and the Church" and included several articles on women in church ministries, among them women who feel called to ordained ministry. Untener was at least the third U.S. Catholic bishop to raise the question of women priests in recent weeks.

In early September, Bishop Michael H. Kenny of Juneau, Alaska, published an article in America, a Jesuit national weekly, in which he said he found Rome's arguments against ordaining women unsatisfactory. Later that month, Auxiliary Bishop P.

Francis Murphy of Baltimore wrote in Commonweal, a lay-edited national Catholic magazine, that he believes women should be ordained because "justice demands it."

Untener did not say in his article whether he accepts or rejects the possibility of ordaining women priests. Instead, he laid out first the four main arguments from the 1976 Vatican declaration on the subject as to why the prohibition against women priests is a matter of doctrine, then the main counterarguments by scholars in response to the Vatican's position.

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The four arguments center on what Jesus intended, whether the church's tradition in this area is normative, whether only males can act "in the person of Christ" as priests, and whether the bride-bridegroom symbolism of Christ and his church is such that a priest must be male.

Last year in a more scholarly article in Worship, a national magazine on liturgy and theology, Untener argued against the current interpretation of "in the person of Christ" as requiring male priests (see accompanying story).

In his new article, Untener suggested that if the church were to move away from the position that the ban on women priests is a binding doctrine to a different position, it would not be the first time the church has made such a shift. As an example, he cited the teaching, once held firmly as doctrine but now repudiated, "that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible."

Sorting out which teachings are really "an essential part of our apostolic tradition" and unchangeable, and which are views subject to change, "is not always self-evident," Untener wrote. He urged people to discuss the issue in an atmosphere of faith and charity "rather than simply dismiss the other side as Neanderthal or heretical."

Like Murphy, Untener suggested that the question of women's ordination today is of major importance, "not unlike the early church when it grappled with the question of whether gentiles could be members of the church without submitting to Jewish law regarding circumcision and unclean foods."

"Jesus followed the Jewish law but did not speak explicitly on the question, so the early Christians did not know what he intended by his actions," he wrote. "They had

to struggle with the issue, and Peter and Paul had differing opinions during the struggle. We must face it with the same honesty as the early church and trust that the Spirit will guide us down right paths."

This story appears in the **NCR Archives** feature series. View the full series.
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