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Linking sexual abuse and the ordination of women

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

In mid-July the Vatican issued revisions to its internal laws making it easier to discipline predatory priests, but stating at the same time that ordaining women to the priesthood was as grave an offense as sexual abuse of minors by priests.

According to a front-page report in *The New York Times* (7/16/10), the decision to link the two issues appeared to reflect the determination of Vatican officials to oppose any suggestion that sexual abuse within the priesthood had anything at all to do with obligatory celibacy or with allowing women to become priests, as if having women in the priesthood would have prevented the sexual abuse problem from ever happening.

The linkage of the two matters left many observers stupefied. They simply could not believe that the Vatican would make such an incredible public relations blunder. And it certainly was that.

But the Vatican's linkage between sexual abuse by priests and the ordination of women also had a more substantive side. It reflected yet again the Catholic Church's scandalously negative attitude toward women.

Even those who viewed this latest Vatican initiative through the prism of the sexual abuse scandal alone were acutely unhappy that the Vatican still did not hold bishops accountable for sexual abuse by their own priests, nor did the Vatican require bishops to report such abuse to civil authorities.

But many more Catholics, especially (but certainly not only) Catholic women, were both astonished and outraged that the Vatican had included the attempt to ordain women to the priesthood on a list of the "more grave delicts," or ecclesiastical crimes, to which there is attached a canonical penalty.

That list included not only pedophilia but also heresy, apostasy, and schism.

Donald Wuerl, archbishop of Washington, D.C., called the document a "welcome statement" even as he took pains to praise the role of women in the Church.

At the same time, the archbishop insisted that the "long and constant teaching" of the Catholic Church has held that ordination to the priesthood has, "from the beginning," been reserved to men, "a fact which cannot be changed despite changing times."

Msgr. Charles Scicluna, a Vatican official who has long been involved with addressing the sexual abuse crisis in the priesthood, explained that sexual abuse by priests is a more grave delict than most others because it involves an egregious violation of the moral law, but that the ordination of women would constitute "a wound that is an attempt against the Catholic faith on the sacramental orders."

However, few Catholic theologians would regard the ordination of women as a matter of Catholic faith, on par, for example, with various items mentioned explicitly in the historic creeds, such as the divinity of Christ and the resurrection of the body.

Indeed, the latest poll of U.S. Catholics done by *The New York Times* and CBS News disclosed that 59 percent now favor the ordination of women to the priesthood, while 33 percent are opposed.

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At the news conference in which these latest changes in Vatican policy were announced, Msgr. Scicluna boasted that the new rules provided the Church with more effective tools in the fight against sexual abuse.

"This gives a signal," he said, "that we are very, very serious in our commitment to promote safe environments and to offer an adequate response to abuse."

But the announcement was severely, if not fatally, compromised by the Vatican's linkage of sexual abuse by priests with attempts at ordaining women to the priesthood.

Not only did this inexplicable linkage detract attention from the enormity of the sexual abuse scandal, but it also served to focus the klieg lights once again on the Church's longstanding, negative attitudes toward women.

These attitudes are reflected not only in the women's ordination issue, but also in the Vatican-directed "visitation" of U.S. communities of religious women and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's "doctrinal assessment" of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents upward of 95 percent of all such communities.

Catholic women themselves (not all, by any means) are in a much better position than Catholic men, even those of us who are supportive of their concerns, to measure the everyday pain of frustration, rejection, and anger that these official attitudes and policies have generated over so many years.

In any case, the recent Vatican linkage of sexual abuse by priests and the ordination of women is not only a public relations disaster, but, what is far more important, it is yet another major affront to women in the Church.

They are, on the contrary, among the Church's greatest assets.

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