

Letter requests explanation on women priests

Brian Roewe | Mar. 12, 2012

Saying he wants to promote a dialogue, an Augustinian priest has written an open letter to Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston and other U.S. bishops seeking clarity and a "credible theological explanation" of why women can't be ordained to the Roman Catholic priesthood.

In a letter he mailed in late February to nearly 190 ordinaries, Fr. John Shea asks O'Malley and his fellow bishops "in [their] role as teachers to provide a clear and credible *theological explanation* of why women are not being ordained in the priesthood in the Catholic church."

Speaking with *NCR* March 6, Shea, an adjunct professor in Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry, insisted multiple times that his letter was not an attack on church teaching on the issue of women's ordination, but rather an attempt to engage the bishops in dialogue about a topic with which many of his students grapple.

"At least one of the prime motivations was I have students who are studying theology -- women and men -- who are very concerned for the issue of women's ordination," he explained. "And some women are trying to make a decision whether or not to stay in the church over this issue, and so I said, 'Well, why not write to the bishops?'"

"I'm just asking for a theological explanation, I'm not publicly attacking the teaching," he said.

Shea, 72, was ordained in September 1967 and has supported the ordination of women previously, though has avoided public stances alongside advocacy groups or through public statements. Since 1986, he has called every four years for open discussion of women's ordination in his Province of St. Thomas of Villanova.

In February 2011, Shea sent a letter to his provincial, Augustinian Fr. Anthony Genovese, and two of his superiors at the School of Theology and Ministry informing them he was stepping aside from active ministry until women were ordained priests in the church.

That May, he received a canonical warning from Genovese, accusing him of violating *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* -- the 1994 Pope John Paul II letter stating, "The church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful" -- and asking him not to speak publicly on the issue. Shea responded in June, agreeing not to speak publicly against the official teaching of the church.

He told *NCR* he didn't view his most recent letter as a violation of his promise.

"I'm not interested in attacking the pope. I'm not," he said. "I am very much interested in a theological explanation of this issue, because I'm very curious to see what it might be."

"I'm not trying to be a disobedient priest. Actually I'm trying to be in some sense very obedient."

Genovese told *NCR* through a spokeswoman for the province that he had no comment.

As of March 2, Shea, currently on semester break, said he had not received a response to his letter, though he has not had a chance to check his mail since then.

?The reason I did this, because I thought very carefully about this, was everyone has a right to write to their bishops and ask for something, and here I?m a practical theologian, and I can write and ask for [a theological explanation], so I did,? he said.

Shea?s letter outlines his intentions at the beginning, and delves into his rationale for requesting an explanation on women?s ordination.

?In the Catholic church there is a rule of silence,? Shea wrote. ?We are told that women?s ordination cannot be discussed. The issue that cries for *theological explanation* is not to be discussed in schools that have *theological explanation* as one of their prime reasons for being.?

In his 30 years of teaching and throughout his training and counseling experience, Shea said, he has never come across ?a single credible thinker who holds that women are deficient in religious development or maturity? nor has he found anything from the perspective of practical theology that doesn?t support women?s ordination to the priesthood.

Shea began teaching at Jesuit-run Boston College in 2003. In late February, the college informed him that it would not renew his contract for the upcoming semester. Shea is in the final year of a three-year contract and, according to a Boston College spokesman, the school has long desired to create a full-time tenure-track position within his department.

Shea previously taught at the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University in New York and at Merrimack College in North Andover, Mass.

[Brian Roewe is an *NCR* Bertelsen intern. His email address is broewe@ncronline.org.]

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