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Editorial: Ordination of women would correct an injustice

by NCR Editorial Staff

Editorial

The call to the priesthood is a gift from God. It is rooted in baptism and is called forth and affirmed by the community because it is authentic and evident in the person as a charism. Catholic women who have discerned a call to the priesthood and have had that call affirmed by the community should be ordained in the Roman Catholic church. Barring women from ordination to the priesthood is an injustice that cannot be allowed to stand.

The most egregious statement in the Nov. 19 press release announcing Roy Bourgeois' "excommunication, dismissal and laicization" is the assertion that Bourgeois' "disobedience" and "campaign against the teachings of the Catholic church" was "ignoring the sensitivities of the faithful." Nothing could be further from the truth. Bourgeois, attuned by a lifetime of listening to the marginalized, has heard the voice of the faithful and he has responded to that voice.

Bourgeois brings this issue to the real heart of the matter. He has said that no one can say who God can and cannot call to the priesthood, and to say that anatomy is somehow a barrier to God's ability to call one of God's own children forward places absurd limits on God's power. The majority of the faithful believe this.

Let's review the history of Rome's response to the call of the faithful to ordain women:

In April 1976 the Pontifical Biblical Commission concluded unanimously: "It does not seem that the New Testament by itself alone will permit us to settle in a clear way and once and for all the problem of the possible accession of women to the presbyterate." In further deliberation, the commission voted 12-5 in

favor of the view that Scripture alone does not exclude the ordination of women, and 12-5 in favor of the view that the church could ordain women to the priesthood without going against Christ's original intentions.

In *Inter Insigniores* (dated Oct. 15, 1976, but released the following January), the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said: "The Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination." That declaration, published with the approval of Pope Paul VI, was a relatively modest "does not consider herself authorized."

Pope John Paul II upped the ante considerably in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (May 22, 1994): "We declare that 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." John Paul had wanted to describe the ban as "irreformable," a much stronger stance than "definitively held." This met substantial resistance from high-ranking bishops who gathered at a special Vatican meeting in March 1995 to discuss the document, *NCR* reported at the time. Even then, bishops attuned to the pastoral needs of the church had won a concession to the possibility of changing the teaching.

But that tiny victory was fleeting.

In October 1995, the doctrinal congregation acted further, releasing a *responsum ad propositum dubium* concerning the nature of the teaching in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*: "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." The ban on women's ordination belongs "to the deposit of the faith," the *responsum* said.

The aim of the *responsum* was to stop all discussion.

In a cover letter to the *responsum*, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then head of the congregation, asked presidents of bishops' conferences to "do everything possible to ensure its distribution and favorable reception, taking particular care that, above all on the part of theologians, pastors of souls and religious, ambiguous and contrary positions will not again be proposed."

Despite the certainty with which *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* and the *responsum* were issued they did not answer all the questions on the issue.

Many have pointed out that to say that the teaching is "founded on the written Word of God" completely ignored the 1976 findings of the Pontifical Biblical Commission.

Others have noted that the doctrinal congregation did not make a claim of papal infallibility -- it said what the pope taught in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* was that which "has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal magisterium." This too, however, has been called into question because at the time there were many bishops around the world who had serious reservations about the teaching, though few voiced them in public.

Writing in *The Tablet* in December 1995, Jesuit Fr. Francis A. Sullivan, a theological authority on the magisterium, cited Canon 749, that no doctrine is understood to have been defined infallibly unless this fact is clearly established. "The question that remains in my mind is whether it is a clearly established fact that the bishops of the Catholic Church are as convinced by [the teaching] as Pope John Paul evidently is," Sullivan wrote.

The *responsum* caught nearly all bishops off-guard. Though dated October, it was not made public until Nov. 18. Archbishop William Keeler of Baltimore, then the outgoing president of the U.S. bishops' conference, received the document with no warning three hours after the bishops had adjourned their annual fall meeting. One bishop told *NCR* that he learned about the document from reading *The New York Times*. He said many bishops were deeply troubled by the statement. He, like other bishops, spoke anonymously.

The Vatican had already begun to stack the deck against questioning. As Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese reported in his 1989 book, *Archbishop: Inside the Power Structure of the American Catholic Church*, under John Paul a potential episcopal candidate's view on the teaching against women's ordination had become a litmus test for whether a priest could be promoted to bishop.

Less than a year after *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* was issued, Mercy Sr. Carmel McEnroy was removed from her tenured position teaching theology at St. Meinrad Seminary in Indiana for her public dissent from church teaching; she had signed an open letter to the pope calling for women's ordination. McEnroy very likely was the first victim of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, but there have been many more, most recently Roy Bourgeois.

Blessed John Henry Newman said that there are three magisteria in the church: the bishops, the theologians and the people. On the issue of women's ordination, two of the three voices have been silenced, which is why the third voice must now make itself heard. We must speak up in every forum available to us: in parish council meetings, faith-sharing groups, diocesan convocations and academic seminars. We should write letters to our bishops, to the editors of our local papers and television news channels.

Our message is that we believe the *sensus fidelium* is that the exclusion of women from the priesthood has no strong basis in Scripture or any other compelling rationale; therefore, women should be ordained. We have heard the faithful assent to this in countless conversations in parish halls, lecture halls and family gatherings. It has been studied and prayed over individually and in groups. The brave witness of the Women's Ordination Conference, as one example, gives us assurance that the faithful have come to this conclusion after prayerful consideration and study -- yes, even study of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*.

NCR joins its voice with Roy Bourgeois and calls for the Catholic church to correct this unjust teaching.

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