

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 22, 2014

Home > The women's ordination movement is about much more than women priests

The women's ordination movement is about much more than women priests

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

Thursday marked the 20th anniversary of the release of John Paul II's apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, known in English as "On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone." Back in 1994, May 22 was the Solemnity of Pentecost. The former pope -- and now saint -- used the occasion to set the record straight on who the Holy Spirit could and could not call to the priesthood.

In just over 1,000 words, John Paul II attempted to definitively dash the hopes of Catholics who dared to believe that when it comes to celebrating the church's sacraments, God was fully capable of working through female bodies just as well as male bodies.

He used the now well-worn reasons: Jesus chose only men as his Apostles; the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan; the role and presence of women in the church, "although not linked to the ministerial priesthood, remain absolutely necessary and irreplaceable."

It was *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* that Pope Francis invoked during his epic, impromptu airplane interview in July 2013, when he said, "With regards to the ordination of women, the church has spoken and says no. Pope John Paul said so with a formula that was definitive. That door is closed."

Yet, two decades later, there is still debate over whether *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* qualifies as an infallible teaching. The controversy centers on the way John Paul II signed the letter: "I 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."

As Bryan Cones pointed out several years ago in a blog post for *U.S. Catholic*, the formulation of his pronouncement did not meet the criteria to signal an infallible teaching.

It was then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who gave the teaching an aura of infallibility in 1995. In a response to a question about *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, he insisted that the teaching belonged to the deposit of faith.

Of course, Ratzinger wasn't pope then and, therefore, did not have the power to declare any doctrine infallible. Many have argued that his action was a case of "creeping infallibility," a phenomenon in which the level of authority of a papal statement increases over time.

Much has been written about this ongoing argument, and given Pope Francis' clear position against the ordination of women, the debate will only plod on.

Many will continue to characterize the question of women's ordination as little more than another culture war issue. But the truth is that this struggle runs much deeper than a battle between traditional and progressive values. Women's ordination is about so much more than simply making women Catholic priests. At its heart, it is a movement to convince one of the largest and most influential religious organizations in the world to lift up women globally as truly equal to men.

In his new book, *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence, and Power*, former President Jimmy Carter explores the religious and cultural structures that have led discrimination, war, poverty and disease to fall disproportionately on women. He writes: "The most serious and unaddressed worldwide challenge is the deprivation and abuse of women and girls, largely caused by a false interpretation of carefully selected religious texts and a growing tolerance of violence and warfare."

Advertisement

The statistics about the disproportionate suffering endured by women globally are grim. In a recent essay in *NCR's Global Sisters Report*, St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson explained:

Women, who form half of the world's population, work three-fourths of the world's working hours; receive one-tenth of the world's salary; own one percent of the world's land; form two-thirds of illiterate adults; and together with their dependent children form three-fourths of the world's starving people.

To make a bleak picture worse, women are subject to domestic violence at home and are raped, prostituted, trafficked into sexual slavery and murdered by men to a degree that is not reciprocal. Regarding education, employment and other social goods, men have advantages simply by being born male. ...

To point this out is not to make women into a class of victims but to underscore statistics

that make clear the struggles women face in society because of their gender. In no country on earth are women and men yet treated in an equal manner befitting their human dignity.

While in most cases the Roman Catholic church did not create these afflictions, its doctrine on women serves to reinforce women's suffering.

The hierarchy teaches that though women and men are equal in worth and dignity, their physical and anatomical differences are evidence that God intends different roles and purposes for them. God designed men and women to complement each other, and their genders dictate their distinct roles in both church and society.

Not surprisingly, in this system, men are always awarded power, authority and dominance, while women are relegated to the roles of service, nurturing and adoration. Church leaders may insist that women and men are equal in dignity and worth, but ultimately, women are always put in the position of obedience to men.

How can women ever achieve true empowerment when their religious leaders declare that it is God's plan that women are not entitled to equal religious or spiritual authority? How will women ever see true equality when the hierarchy teaches that even *God* believes that a woman's body is inadequate and invalid when it comes to possessing certain forms of power?

If the Roman Catholic hierarchy declared that women were entitled to equal authority and power in the church, imagine the influence it could have in societies where religious and cultural beliefs have sanctioned the secondary status of women.

The Roman Catholic church, with its presence in just about every country in the world, its billion members, and its especially charismatic pope could have an extraordinary impact on improving the dignity, worth and equality of women, especially in nations where women are dominated and devalued by the oppressive forces patriarchal culture.

But first, the hierarchy would need the humility to admit that it cannot control whom God calls to the priesthood. They would have to stop blaming Jesus for their own refusal to lift up women to truly equal status in the church. They would have to acknowledge the radical injustice inherent in the idea that anatomy dictates who can and cannot have power in the church.

The struggle over women's ordination isn't a culture war issue. It is a movement that shines light on the truth that the Roman Catholic church's denial of the full equality of women has global consequences. It seeks to dismantle the poverty, abuse and violence that are intricately tied to the systematic belief that women and men are not equal.

Women's ordination isn't simply about making women priests. It's about helping church leaders recognize that if they were to include women in their leadership as their equals, they could truly be a powerful force for economic and social justice for women and children throughout our world.

[Jamie L. Manson is *NCR* books editor. She received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her *NCR* columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA). Her email address is jmanson@ncronline.org.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Jamie Manson's column, "Grace on the

Margins," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.

Source URL (modified on 08/03/2017 - 8:13am): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/womens-ordination-movement-about-much-more-women-priests>

Links

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/join-conversation>