

Can Women be Ordained?

What does the Church teach?

In 1994 Pope John Paul II reaffirmed that the Church does not have the power to ordain women:

"Although the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and universal tradition of the Church and firmly taught by the magisterium in its more recent documents, at the present time in some places it is nonetheless considered still open to debate, or the Church's judgment that women are not to be admitted to ordination is considered to have a merely disciplinary force. Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Luke 22:32) 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." Ordinatio Sacerdotalis, 4.

Is this teaching infallible?

In 1995 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in conjunction with the pope, responded to a question as to whether this teaching is infallible or not. They responded that it is indeed *"infallible."*

As such, it *"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 (cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium 25:2)"* Response of Oct. 28, 1995.

In 1998, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with regard to the Church's teaching that women may not be ordained, explained: *"The Supreme Pontiff, while not wishing to proceed to a dogmatic definition, intended to reaffirm that this doctrine is to be held definitively, since, founded on the written Word of God, constantly preserved and applied in the Tradition of the Church, it has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal magisterium."* Doctrinal Commentary on the Concluding Formula of the Professio fidei, Office of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, June 29, 1998.

Do we have to accept this teaching? Couldn't the next Pope change it?

Disciplines of the Church can be changed or reversed (such as no meat on Friday). Infallible teachings however, are not reversible. We accept them on faith as being irrevocable.

"And this is the infallibility which the Roman Pontiff, the head of the college of bishops, enjoys in virtue of his office, when, as the supreme shepherd and teacher of all the faithful, who confirms his brethren in their faith, by a definitive act he proclaims a doctrine of faith or morals. And therefore his definitions, of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church, are justly styled irreformable, since they are pronounced with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, promised to him in blessed Peter, and therefore they need no approval of others, nor do they allow an appeal to any other judgment. For then the Roman Pontiff is not pronouncing judgment as a private person, but as the supreme teacher of the universal Church, in whom the charism of infallibility of the Church itself is individually present, he is expounding or defending a doctrine of Catholic faith." Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, 25.

But doesn't it have to be a solemn, dogmatic, ex cathedra proclamation (like the Marian dogmas) for it to be considered "infallible"?

No. *"In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent. This religious submission of mind and will must be shown in a special way to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking ex cathedra... it must be shown in such a way that his supreme magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will. His mind and will in the matter may be known either from the character of the documents, from his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or from his manner of speaking."* Vatican II, Lumen Gentium, 25.



"Divine assistance is also given to the successors of the apostles, teaching in communion with the successor of Peter, and, in a particular way, to the bishop of Rome, pastor of the whole Church, when, without arriving at an infallible definition and without pronouncing in a "definitive manner," they propose in the exercise of the ordinary Magisterium a teaching that leads to better understanding of Revelation in matters of faith and morals. To this ordinary teaching the faithful "are to adhere to it with religious assent" which, though distinct from the assent of faith, is nonetheless an extension of it." Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 892.

What if we choose to dissent from this teaching that women can never be ordained?

"Whoever denies these truths would be in the position of rejecting a truth of Catholic doctrine and would therefore no longer be in full communion with the Catholic Church." Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1998.

Canon Law affirms that "each and everything set forth definitively by the Magisterium of the Church regarding teaching on faith and morals must be firmly accepted and held; namely, those things required for the holy keeping and faithful exposition of the deposit of faith; therefore, anyone who rejects propositions which are to be held definitively sets himself against the teaching of the Catholic Church." Canon 750.2

Because "sharing in the Church's faith" is a condition for "full participation in the Sacrament of the Eucharist," one who is unable to accept this teaching should refrain from taking Holy Communion. "If a Catholic were knowingly and obstinately to reject the defined doctrines of the Church, or knowingly and obstinately to repudiate her definitive teaching on moral issues... he or she would seriously diminish his or her communion with the Church. Reception of Holy Communion in such a situation would not accord with the nature of the Eucharistic celebration, so that he or she should refrain." United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Happy Are Those Who Are Called to His Supper:" *On Preparing to Receive Christ Worthily in the Eucharist* (2006).

What about the rights of women who feel they have a priestly vocation?

However sincere one may be, one cannot have a vocation or a right to something that doesn't exist. To encourage someone in this line of thinking would do them a tremendous disservice with potentially devastating consequences. In its Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood, *Inter Insigniores*, the Vatican explains it this way:

"Such an attraction, however noble and understandable, still does not suffice for a genuine vocation. In fact a vocation can not be reduced to a mere personal attraction, which can remain purely subjective... On the other hand, there is a universal vocation of all the baptized to the exercise of the royal priesthood by offering their lives to God and by giving witness for his praise... Women who express a desire for the ministerial priesthood are doubtless motivated by the desire to serve Christ and the Church... But it must not be forgotten that the priesthood does not form part of the rights of the individual, but stems from the economy of the mystery of Christ and the Church."

In explaining its excommunication of 7 women who proclaimed themselves to have been "ordained", the Vatican elaborates: "They formally and obstinately reject a doctrine which the Church has always taught and lived, and which was definitively proposed by Pope John Paul II, namely, 'that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women'" (*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, n. 4)."

"Moreover, by denying this doctrine, ... they are at odds with the doctrine on the Magisterium of the Successor of Peter, ... and they thereby fail to recognize that the teachings of the Supreme Pontiff on doctrines to be held definitively by all the faithful are irreformable." Decree of excommunication dated December 21, 2002 and approved by Pope John Paul II

What about in the Early Church?

in the early Church there were orders of virgins, widows, and deaconesses, but these women were not ordained. "The Fathers rejected female ordination, not because it was incompatible with Christian culture, but because it was incompatible with Christian faith." See the website of Catholic Answers for quotes from the early Church Fathers on this subject (<http://www.catholic.com>).

In 189 AD, Irenaeus spoke out against women who tried to claim for themselves a priestly role. **In 206 AD, Tertullian** asserted,

It is not permitted for a woman... to say sacerdotal [priestly] office." In 215 AD Hippolytus explained that "when a widow is to be appointed, she is not to be ordained, but is designated by being named [a widow]... Hands are not imposed on her, because she does not offer the oblation and she does not conduct the liturgy. Ordination is for the clergy because of the liturgy; but a widow is appointed for prayer, and prayer is the duty of all.

In 325 AD the 1st Council of Nicaea said: "We have made mention of the deaconesses, who have been enrolled in this position, although, not having been in any way ordained, they are certainly to be numbered among the laity" Canon 19.

Non ordained deaconesses were used in the early Church for the baptism of women, since those who were baptized needed to remove their clothes first.

For Further Reading:

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: "Ten Frequently Asked Questions about the Reservation of Priestly Ordination to Men" (1998), available online.