

The Beginning of Lent, 2014

Dear Cardinal O'Malley,

I am writing to you and to all the ordinaries of the dioceses in the United States to ask you and your fellow bishops in your role as teachers to provide a clear and credible *theological explanation* of why women are not being ordained to the priesthood in the Catholic Church. I write not to challenge the teaching of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* on women's ordination. Rather, my concern is the *theological explanation* of this teaching—theology being, as Anselm said, “faith seeking understanding.”

Two years ago, I wrote to all of you with the same request. At that time, I was teaching in the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College. The teaching on women's ordination was extremely important for many of the students—women, of course, but men as well—and a number of them were simply leaving the church because the *theological explanation* that was offered made no sense to them. Before my letter, I had already stepped aside from active ministry as a priest until women are ordained. After my letter, Jesuit-run Boston College terminated me as a professor. My provincial, with the urging of several archbishops, has given me two “canonical warnings” threatening me with being “punished with a just penalty” for voicing my concerns.

In case you are wondering who is writing to you, I am an Augustinian priest, solemnly professed for over 50 years. Before serving at Boston College (2003-2012), as Professor of the Practice of Pastoral Care and Counseling and Dual Degree Director (MA/MA and MA/MSW), I taught in the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University (1981-2002). My areas of expertise are in pastoral care and counseling (Fellow, American Association of Pastoral Counselors) and the psychology of religious development (Ph.D., Psychology of Religion), areas that today would be considered practical theology. I also have graduate degrees in theology, philosophy, pastoral counseling, and social work.

I mention this background because as a practical theologian I too have questions about the *theological explanation* of why women are not ordained. In all of my study, in all of my training, in all of my counseling experience, and in all of my years of teaching *I have not come across a single credible thinker who holds that women are not fully able to provide pastoral care. Likewise, I have not come across a single credible thinker who holds that women are deficient in religious development or maturity.* From the perspective of practical theology—a theology of the living

church, a theology that takes experience seriously—I find absolutely nothing that does not support the ordination of women to priesthood.

It seems that *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, the document on the ordination of women that the Vatican and the bishops keep pointing to, is actually an *historical explanation* of the issue. It looks back at what it we think Jesus was doing in appointing the 12 Apostles. An historical explanation, however, raises a number of questions. Was commissioning the 12 a unique event? Did Jesus mean to ordain the way we understand ordination today? Was it the intent of Jesus to inaugurate ministry only males could carry out? Did he ever say this? Was Jesus only doing what he thought would work best in the patriarchal culture of his day? What was it about the religious role of the scribes and the Pharisees—all of whom were male—that so incensed Jesus? Was Jesus patriarchal? Did he see women as inferior to men? Did Jesus envision women in ministry? Finally, what about the history of ordination in the last two thousand years, an amazingly checkered history that clearly includes women?

The problem with historical explanations is that they suffer from an incomplete logic. They cannot complete the circle. On their own, they cannot say that “what was” also “had to be.” On their own, they cannot say that this particular event must have this particular meaning. History necessarily involves interpretation. *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, for example, gives a paradigmatic meaning to the commissioning of the 12 Apostles. Could not another perfectly logical interpretation of the meaning of that event be that a number of patriarchal men—then and now—were and are dead set against women having any authority over them?

If history is not a good proof, it does have many valid uses. A very brief look at the history of slavery, the history of racism/religious intolerance, and the history of women’s inferiority in the church is helpful in challenging our tendencies to absolutize as well as in chastening some our hallowed self-evaluations. Each of these three issues is about what makes us equal and fully human. Each is the cause of incredible violence—often in the name of God—violence that is beyond all telling.

- *Slavery*—That men, women, and children would become slaves either by conquest, retribution, or inferiority was seen as something almost “natural.” Strangely, Jesus and St. Paul did not seem to have had a lot of problems with it. For centuries the permissibility of slavery was seen as part of “the ordinary infallible teaching” of the church. Over time, however, and in conjunction with racism and religious intolerance, the thinking in the church changed dra-

matically. Now, the inherent evil of slavery is part of “the ordinary infallible teaching” of the church.

- *Racism/Religious Intolerance*—Jews came to be seen as “perfidious” and were severely persecuted. Muslims were “infidels” and had crusades led against them by the popes. It is fair to say that for centuries the inferiority of Jews and Muslims was part of “the ordinary infallible teaching” of the church. Later, with the colonization of the Americas and then of Africa, the question was whether or not these native peoples were really human beings with souls like those of European males. It took a long time with immense suffering, but eventually the utter abhorrence of racism and religious intolerance became part of “the ordinary infallible teaching” of the church.
- *The Inferiority of Women*—Women’s inferiority was seen as “natural” by the cultures that cradled Christianity. In our history, this inferiority was generously reinforced by the teachings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. These two wonderful theologians—arguably the two most influential in the West—not only questioned whether women had valid souls, but they outdid each other in describing women in the most vile and profoundly dehumanizing ways. No thinking in the church is more virulent and intractable than the patriarchal strain that so disrespects women. When the Vatican reasoned in the 1970s and 1980s that women could not be ordained because “they are not fully in the likeness of Jesus,” it was affirming an “ordinary infallible teaching” with roots incredibly deep in the substrate of our church.

A *theological explanation* weighs any issue against the core of the Christian message. It obviously takes historical events and their interpretations into account, but the focus is on those understandings of the Christian faith so central that our Christian identity and the very meaning of the faith are at stake. In their ordinary infallible teaching that women cannot be ordained in the church because “they are not fully in the likeness of Jesus,” the Vatican and the bishops were offering a much-needed *theological explanation* of the issue. It was an explanation meant to complete the circle, an explanation meant to settle the question of women’s ordination in terms of Christian identity.

Unfortunately, this teaching that “women are not fully in the likeness of Jesus”—qualifying, as it does, as a *theological explanation*—is utterly and demonstrably heretical. This teaching says that women are not fully redeemed by Jesus. This teaching says that women are not made

whole by the saving favor of our God. This teaching says that the “catholic” church is only truly “catholic” for males. In time, many Vatican officials and bishops rejected the ordinary infallible teaching they had just affirmed. Now they say: “Of course, women are fully in the likeness of Jesus in the church.” Respectful words to be sure, but are they real?

We revere Jesus as *priest*, as *prophet*, and as *ruler*. If “women are fully in the likeness of Jesus” in our church, they fully share in the priesthood of Jesus—but in fact women are *completely excluded* from the priesthood of Jesus. If “women are fully in the likeness of Jesus” in our church, they speak for God as Jesus did—but women are *completely without voice* in the church; as if they were children they cannot read the Gospel at the liturgy and are forbidden to preach the Word. If “women are fully in the likeness of Jesus” in our church, then they fully share in the formal authority of our church—but women, solely because they are women, are *completely barred* from church authority.

As a bishop, how long will you champion the inferiority of women in the church? How long will your teaching on women be an obvious and eye-popping contradiction? How long will your demeaning patriarchal stance violate women’s human and religious equality in God’s name?

Two more years have come and gone. The priests are voiceless. The academic theologians are nice and safe. The bishops make statements but do nothing that would be recognized as engaged teaching. The adults—desperate for something that respects their intelligence—leave the church in droves. How many serious people, young and old, have given up on ever finding a *theological explanation* of women barred from priesthood—an explanation not hopelessly patriarchal and sexist, not serving inequality and subservience, not aiding and abetting violence?

Again, it is the beginning of Lent, a time of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, a time of for all of us in the church to be mindful of how we are in our caring and in our justice. Cardinal O’Malley, is providing a credible, non-heretical theological explanation of why women are not ordained in the church something you can do as part of your teaching responsibility as a bishop, as part of your caring and your justice?

Sincerely,

John J. Shea, O.S.A.