

## Elizabeth A. Johnson

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**T**hanks to the careful, quick work of canon lawyers and theologians, it has become clear that the Vatican's recent *Responsum ad dubium* is not itself infallible teaching. It has the status of a statement of a Vatican congregation, no more, no less. Yet the confusing use of infallibility makes equally clear that Rome is determined to close the question of women's ordination as it is maturing in the church.

Consulting the faithful on the matter of this doctrine would yield a different outcome, for interesting combinations of women's giftedness in ministry, pastoral need, and a deep sense of the injustice of exclusion lead many in the church to entertain the possibility of this development. Instead of working patiently and wisely with the question, however, institutional leadership short-circuits what may well be a God-intended development of doctrine and tries to impose its answer by authoritarian fiat.

I get the impression that the recourse to sheer power is happening because those who oppose women's ordination are losing the argument on the field of reasoning. These reasons are basically three: the example of Jesus, unbroken tradition, and the need for iconic resemblance.

Regarding the first, let it be stated as plainly as possible that Jesus never ordained twelve men, thus setting up an all-male priesthood. Such an interpretation is an anachronism projected backward onto the Gospels in the light of later development. In truth, biblical scholarship demonstrates that Jesus never ordained anyone; that a distinction must be made between the Twelve (who had no long-term successors), the apostles, and the disciples; and that women were among the most active and faithful of apostles and disciples. Furthermore, even if Jesus did ordain twelve men, this is no warrant for the church not to ordain women. The Spirit guides the church to do many things that Jesus did not, according to the needs of the gospel in the course of history.

Regarding the second, history is replete with examples of unbroken tradition-breaking due to the moral sensibilities of believers, the insights of critical thinkers, and careful searching on the part of the teaching office, all converging in the context of cultural change. At one time it was official church teaching that it was unlawful for married couples to take pleasure in the marital act; that killing infidels was a way to salvation; that taking interest on a loan was forbidden; that slavery was permissible; that discrimination against Jewish

people was legitimate; that biblical scholars could not use historical critical methods on Scripture texts.

How do we discern whether the teaching on women's ordination can be open to similar development? In *The Survival of Dogma*, Avery Dulles adduces the following principle: "No doctrinal decision of the past directly solves a question that was not asked at the time." For example, the fact that Paul, quoted by Trent, asserts that Adam was a single individual cannot be used to refute modern science's idea of polygenism; the question had not even arisen yet. By extension, "whenever the state of the evidence on any question materially changes, you have a new question that cannot be fully answered by appealing to old authorities." The stated reason women were not ordained throughout the centuries was that they were inferior, or "defective males" (Aquinas). That reason has crumbled in our day.

Regarding the third, let it be plainly stated that women are icons of Christ, *imago Christi*, in every essential way. There is a natural resemblance between women and Jesus Christ in terms of a common humanity and participation in divine grace. To teach otherwise is a pernicious error that vitiates the power of baptism. The naive physicalism that reduces resembling Christ to being male is so deviant from Scripture and so theologically distorted as to be dangerous to the faith itself.

The reasons, thus, do not hold up, try as one might to entertain them. According to traditional Catholic teaching, the human faculty of judgment is not free, unlike our will. We can give genuine assent only to what presents itself to our mind as true: "The truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it makes its entrance into the mind at once quietly and with power" (Vatican II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, 1). If a declared teaching or practice continuously jars our mind as missing the mark, as in the present case, it is our responsibility to explore and express the reasons why. This resistance is not to be equated with disloyalty or rebellion, let alone lack of faith, but with a form of loyalty and service. One is reminded of Saint Catherine of Siena.

Responsible dissent begins as an act of conscience and continues as part of a committed life in the church. It is not habitual but arises in particular instances out of concern for the truth. It requires a certain discipline in order to be done well. The value guiding it in all cases should be the common good. Differing with institutional authorities in the church must always be for the church, for the present and future growth of the whole community in truth and love. With that controlling value in place, several discrete norms shape individual and corporate dissent.

- Responsible dissent takes place in the context of a deep and abiding assent to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to the church's tradition which interprets it.

- At the outset, the presumption is in favor of the particular teaching. One should try through prayer and study with an open mind to appreciate the reasons for the present position. If, through this effort, serious and well-founded reasons for holding a contrary opinion persist so that it is impossible

in integrity of mind and heart to agree, then one must disagree.

- There should be self-criticism about motivation, testing whether dissent is driven by innate hostility or some other hidden agenda, rather than by sincere conviction of the truth.

- Since public dissent can detract from certain community values, it must be weighed and decided that the good to be accomplished is in proportion to the possible harm that might result.

- The manner of dissent should be respectful of the leadership office in the church, not impugning it although disagreeing in this instance.

- Presentation of one's views should also respect the consciences of others in the community who disagree, and the situation of those who have not investigated or cannot investigate complex issues.

- While clear in resistance, the voice of dissent should be inviting a dialogue, rather than competitive in a win-lose way. The overall purpose is to promote the truth in love by urging the teaching office of the church to deeper listening and reflection.

Over the years, informed, responsible disagreement has been a gift to the church whereby the criticism born of love has empowered growth. In my view, the recent noninfallible statement about the alleged infallibility of the tradition about women's ordination calls for just this sort of response. □

## Michael Novak

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What progressives these days are not doing is trying to offer contemporary reasons why Jesus did as he did in ordaining only males, and why the tradition of the church in holding to that practice seemed until the last twenty years entirely reasonable.

As C.S. Lewis noted, virtually every religion ordains priestesses; but not Christianity—and there are reasons for that uniqueness, worth meditating on.

A priest is not a minister. In ministerial roles, women do as well as, if not better than, men. The priestly role is cultic and representational. Religions in which there are no priests, only ministers, will of course ordain women.

The Catholic church in particular is fleshly and incarnational in its fundamental doctrines. The complementarity of the genders, and the differences between them, are crucial to its self-understanding. Catholicism is not a gnostic religion that treats the gendered body as insignificant. It is not a spiritualizing religion that attends only to our souls, not our bodies. It validates the female as female, the male as male. It celebrates the different roles of male and female both in the order of nature and in the order of grace.

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