

Ida Raming, Stephan Rohn

***Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* - a misogynistic and faulty apostolic letter of Pope John Paul II, which does not deserve acceptance and recognition**

On 9.9.2022, at the Plenary Assembly of the German Synodal Path (*Synodaler Weg*, www.synodalerweg.de/english), the foundational text "*Women in Ministries and Offices in the Church*" was adopted by a large majority of 92% (82% of the bishops). The text is preceded by the question (p. 2):

The doctrine of "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis" is not widely accepted and understood by the people of God. Therefore the question must be addressed to the highest authority (Pope and Council) whether the doctrine of 'Ordinatio Sacerdotalis' needs to be examined: In the service of evangelisation, it is a matter of enabling the appropriate participation of women in proclamation, in the sacramental representation of Christ and in the building up of the Church. Whether or not the doctrine of 'Ordinatio Sacerdotalis' binds the Church infallibly must then be examined bindingly at this level."

I. Faults in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*

On this occasion, the reasons given in the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (OS) of 1994 for the exclusion of women from the priesthood are given below and their faultiness is shown.

1. "Christ called only men as his apostles" (OS 2)

In reference to the 12 patriarchs/tribal fathers in Israel (in the OT), Jesus called 12 men (according to Lk). In this respect, Jesus acted according to the patriarchal structure of his time in ancient Israel. He could not have appointed women to this office because of their social status at that time.

For example, women had no right to testify in court. Their public word had no meaning whatsoever and would therefore have been completely ineffective in preaching. In fact, sending women out into the world as missionaries would probably have led to her death sentence.

Jesus could also not have abolished the slavery that prevailed in Israel at that time; for it was an entrenched legal institution. To assume that Jesus acted „*in a completely free and sovereign manner*“ in this respect, i.e. that *Christ's "way of acting was not based on sociological or cultural motives of the time"* (OS 2), fundamentally misjudges both the social reality of the time and Christ's practical options for action.

2. "Constant practice of the Church" which imitated Christ in choosing only men (OS 1)

A "*constant practice*" or tradition of excluding women from the priesthood has not been scientifically proven to date and is a mere assertion. In view of the underprivileged social position of women, the question of women's priesthood was not relevant for a long time. Many texts prove this, here is an example (ca 3rd-4th century) : "*The woman must veil her head because she is not made in God's image. In order that she may be visible as subserviant, and because sin has its beginning through her, she must wear this sign, and in the church, out of reverence for the bishop, she should not wear her head freely, but covered by a veil; likewise, she does not have authority to speak, because the bishop embodies the person of Christ. As, therefore, before Christ the Judge, so let her conduct herself before the bishop, because he is the Vicar of the Lord; for the sake of original sin she must show herself submissive.*" (Ambrosiaster's Commentary , ch. 19, Corpus I.C. , ed. Friedberg I 1255f., Ambrose was long considered the author; the above text is quoted in: I. Raming, *Der Ausschluss der Frau vom priesterlichen Amt. Gottgewollte Tradition oder Diskriminierung?* Diss.; Cologne-Vienna 1973, p. 61f).

Incidentally, there is evidence in church history of the opposite of such a "*constant practice*". There were women with a prominent position in the church. Since the Middle Ages, for example, these were the abbesses such as the well-known *Hildegard of Bingen* - who was even elevated to the status of church teacher.

For early Christianity, there is significant biblical evidence for women in Church leadership responsibility, well-known names are *Junia* (Rom 16:7), Deaconess *Phoebe* (Rom 16:1-2) and *Priska* (Rom 16:3-5).

Last but not least, the centuries-old tradition of venerating and representing Mary as a priestess is an indication that the claimed "*constant practice*" does not exist. The self-evidence of a *mulier sacerdotalis* (a priestly woman) expressed in the Marian tradition was obviously perceived as a threat to the clerical patriarchy with the rise of the women's movement, so that the depiction of Mary in liturgical priestly vestments was prohibited in 1913.

3. Mary, the mother of Jesus and "mother of the Church", did not receive "the missio proper to the apostles" (OS 3)

Like all women, Mary was subject to the patriarchal structure of society at that time.

Therefore, Jesus could not have sensibly called her into the circle of the twelve. He knew that he would not have been able to realise God's plan of salvation this way and, moreover, would have endangered his own mother. This important circumstance is not mentioned in the Pope's letter, which with this omission once again proves to be out of touch with reality and unconvincing.

4. Christ is represented only by a man (OS 2)

Even if one assumes the necessity of the representation of Christ in the priestly ministry, today it can only be a matter of making the risen Christ present. After his resurrection, Christ no longer has a gender in the hereafter. Therefore, gender can also no longer play a role in the representation of Christ today and remains open (cf. Mt 22:29-32).

However, if Jesus Christ were to remain a man in the hereafter, as the declaration *'Inter insigniores'* claims, it is not yet clear whether a specific gender is required for representation. The priest is to "make present" Christ and thus the "Lord and Saviour". The likeness to him required for this representation is doctrinally tied solely to the physical characteristic of maleness. This reductionist view emphasises manhood in a hypersexualised way and elevates it above womanhood in violation of the Bible. This is explicitly stated in the well-known Bible passage in which Paul addresses the Galatians (Gal 3:26-28):

"You are all sons and daughters of God in Christ Jesus through faith. For all of you who were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is no longer Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female; for you are all 'one' in Christ Jesus".

5. The Church has "no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women" (OS 4)

Not the Church, but God calls to the priesthood, as the Apostle Paul makes clear in Corinthians: *"God's Spirit apportions to each one, as God's Spirit wills" (1 Cor 12:11)*. This means that God chooses and does not allow himself to be dictated to only call men to the priestly ministry. Correctly, therefore, it should read: The Church has no authority to deny women access to the priesthood on principle.

Church doctrine denies that there are any vocations of women to the priesthood; they disrespectfully deny them generally. Many examples of women who credibly testify their vocations to the priesthood speak against this denial of reality. Numerous testimonies are documented in the book *"Weil Gott es so will" - Frauen erzählen von ihrer Berufung als Diakonin und Priesterin*, published by the Benedictine Philippa Rath in 2021.

These callings should finally be recognised and appreciated. Disobedience to God's Spirit is unacceptable. The persistence of unchristian patriarchy prevents the men's church from recognising the Spirit-led callings of women.

6. Infallibility of the exclusion of women?

It is disputed what binding effect OS has, in particular to what extent the Apostolic Exhortation can claim infallibility. According to Peter Hünemann, this is not a dogmatic declaration: "*Formally, the Pope does not present an infallible dogmatic definition. This is clear from the genus litterarium, the carefully delimited choice of words to characterise the authority of the office and the act of declaration itself*" (Peter Hünemann, *Schwerwiegende Bedenken. An Analysis of the Apostolic Exhortation 'Ordinatio sacerdotalis'*, in: Walter Groß (ed.) : *Frauenordination - Stand der Diskussion in der katholischen Kirche*, Munich 1996, pp. 120-127, here: p. 123.).

His judgement is based, among other things, on the vote of the Papal Biblical Commission which, in the run-up to the publication of *'Inter insigniores'*, had been asked whether the New Testament findings precluded the ordination of women to the priesthood. Their vote in 1976 was that from the New Testament "*there are no discernible obstacles to admitting women to priestly ordination*" (op. cit. p. 125). This vote of the Biblical Commission did not "suit" the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, although it had commissioned the corresponding study itself. It was consequently not published by the Vatican. In the book edited by *Walter Groß* "Frauenordination" (op. cit. pp. 25-31) it is, however, made accessible.

II. Theological Regression

If one classifies OS in terms of church history, it shows a clear step backwards. The Church was already further ahead in terms of gender justice, especially at the time of Vatican II.

1. Pacem in Terris

In the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (PT) written by Pope John XXIII in 1963, the Roman Catholic Church explicitly opened up to human rights for the first time. Pope John XXIII praised the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 as "*a clear proof of the farsightedness*" (PT 143) and concretised human rights according to which "*men and women enjoy equal rights and duties*". He stated that people had the "*inviolable right*" to "*choose for themselves the kind of life which appeals to them: whether it is to found a family or to embrace the priesthood or the religious life*" (PT 15). With this, Pope John XXIII opened the door to admit women to the priesthood in the future. He saw it as a divine sign of the time („*characteristic of the present day*“) that women play an evident part in the political life. "*They are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons*" (PT 41).

2. Gaudium et Spes

The Church's openness to women's equality is even more evident in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), the last document of Vatican II published by Pope Paul VI in 1965: "*Every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex or ... is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent.*" (GS 29).

The demand explicitly includes only "*social and cultural*" rights, but not ecclesiastical rights. This follows from the context in the Pastoral Constitution, the chapter "*The Community of Mankind*". But can the Church demand something from the societies of the world that she herself is not prepared to give? That would rightly be criticised as a double standard. Therefore, in the spirit of GS, the conclusion is inescapable that discrimination within the Church is also to be condemned and that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is "*contrary to God's intent*".

The plea for gender justice comes to a head in the following socially critical indictment: "*For in truth it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are still not being universally honored. Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right to choose a husband freely, to embrace a state of life or ... equal to those recognized for men.*" (loc. cit.).

Such progressive Vatican statements could also be seen in a different light: In view of still continuing ecclesiastical discriminations, many people today may ask themselves whether the demand for human rights is or was not just a sanctimonious hypocrisy. However, this would not apply to the Council Pope John XXIII.

3. Classification

30 years later, OS is clearly falling behind the values proclaimed as Christian in the 1960s. With this backsliding, the resurgent patriarchal mindset in the Catholic Church is failing to recognise the "signs of the times". At the same time, the Church - disregarding scientific findings - is alienating itself from the world and its social development, to which explicit reference was made in PT and GS, unlike in OS.

It is true that OS is often seen as an insurmountable obstacle to internal church equality with the women's priesthood. But this overestimates this Apostolic Exhortation to this day. OS will probably go down in church history as a sign of weakness. With its demand "*that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful*" (OS 4), it is a defensive act of the Church which tries to stop the inner-church consequences of the equality of men and women - which follows from the dignity of the human person. The spirit of freedom and equality can no longer be banished with arguments, but obviously requires repressive means such as the use of authority and power. OS thus documents the helplessness of a Roman *basta* policy that has become empty. It is an anti-synodal relic and thus a double step backwards: in terms of content and church policy.

III. Conclusion

The reasons given by Pope John Paul II in OS against the ordination of women are all untenable. Obviously, they only serve to prevent the necessary reforms regarding the position of women in the Catholic Church and to maintain the discrimination of women within the Church. Thus, this teaching not only endangers the future of the Church, but ultimately also leads to an erosion of the priestly ministry in the Church.

Sixty years after the opening of Vatican II, OS today seems like a desperate but ineffectual attempt by Pope John Paul II: to petrify Church teaching beyond his own death and to put shackles on his papal successors.

- - -

Translation of the article: Ida Raming, Stephan Rohn, Ordinatio Sacerdotalis - ein frauenfeindliches und fehlerhaftes Lehrschreiben von Papst Johannes Paul II., das keine Akzeptanz und Anerkennung verdient. Published in: Imprimatur 4. 2022, Trier/Germany 14.12.2022, pp. 228-232, online: http://www.imprimatur-trier.de/2022/Imprimatur-2022-04_9.pdf . Translated by Raming, Rohn based on DeepL