Women's Ordination & Papal Teaching: “Creeping Infallibility”?

The Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith’s recent *Responsum* on women’s ordination has raised cries that the Vatican in its alleged program of “retrenchment” is engaging in “creeping infallibility.” *Ethics & Medics* would not be the place to discuss this question, except that the *Responsum* resembles some similar “definitions” by John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* declaring that the concrete moral norms against direct killing of the innocent, abortion, and euthanasia are absolute.

**Two Controversies**

What needs emphasis is the *pastoral* purpose of John Paul II in evaluating two major controversies troubling the People of God: (1) the challenge of proportionalism to the moral doctrine that some concrete negative norms do not admit of exception; (2) the challenge of radical feminists to the sacramental doctrine that priests must be men—and even to the very existence of an hierarchical priesthood. These are not trivial errors: the first strikes at the foundations of Christian moral life and the second at those of its sacramental life.

**The Form of the Papal Teaching**

These declarations do not seem to meet the juridical, canonical criteria for judging dissenters guilty of heresy. Nor do they meet the theological criteria of infallible *ex cathedra* exercises of papal authority. But the *Responsum* is a definitive papal interpretation of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. It states that this *Ordinatio* is not merely disciplinary but pertains to the *depositum fidelitatis* because it is grounded in Scripture and Tradition and taught by the ordinary, universal magisterium. Therefore, the teaching of the *Ordinatio* is to be accepted as definitive and infallibly true. I would argue that the similar declarations in *Evangelium Vitae* concerning the absolute norms against killing the innocent, abortion, and euthanasia should be similarly understood as definitive and infallible for the same reasons. The Pope has chosen this form of teaching so as to settle conclusively for the good of the whole Church these two destructive controversies which were contrary to the letter and the spirit of Vatican II. At the same time in his pastoral care he does not want to force into heresy with its the canonical consequences those who find it difficult to accept these “hard sayings.” As such these pronouncements are at least theologically certain and to deny them is theologically irresponsible.

**Unjust to Women?**

In the press certain objections are being raised. The most radical is the claim that since to refuse ordination to women is unjust, and an unjust teaching cannot be true, this doctrine cannot be infallible. To claim it is infallible, therefore, is to admit that papal infallibility is a false and oppressive doctrine. As Avery Dulles has pointed out (“Tradition Says No,” *The Tablet*, Dec. 6, 1995, 1572 ff.), this argument rests on the assumption that to refuse ordination to women is an injustice; but this assumption is false, since no one, male or female, can have a right to a charism, i.e., a free gift.

**Failure to Consult Other Bishops?**

Another objection is that this cannot be a teaching of the “ordinary and universal magisterium” as alleged in the *Responsum*, since the pope did not consult the bishops in approving this response of the CDF. This too rests on a false assumption, namely, that he is declaring a new doctrine, when what he declares is that the ordinary and universal magisterium has always taught this doctrine. It also neglects the facts that from 256 A.D., when Pope Stephen I (DS 110-11) confirmed, against the opposition of St. Cyprian of Carthage, the validity of the baptism of heretics, to 1947 when Pius XII (DS 3857-61) confirmed the validity of ordination by the imposition of hands, the popes have repeatedly on their own authority and on the basis of Tradition decided the validity of the sacraments and in some cases the obligatory character of certain moral norms (e.g., Alexander VII in 1665 [DS 2021]; and Innocent XI in 1679 [DS 2101] and in 1680 [DS 2175] condemning teachings of laxist moralists). These papal acts, made as far as is known without consultation of other bishops, have been received in the Church as definitive. It is not known yet whether John Paul II made such a consultation before making these definitive pronouncements, but since these doctrines are all explicitly contained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which was submitted to the widest consultation of bishops ever held in the Catholic Church, why did he need to consult further?

**Failure to Consult the People of God?**

Again it is objected that the People of God were not consulted, nor is it clear that they will “receive” this teaching. This is to forget that Vatican I in declaring papal infallibility also declared that its truth does not depend on its reception. But as a matter of fact the *sensus fidelium* (witness of the faithful) on the topics in question was already a part of the Tradition to which the pope refers. Up until the proposal by the proportionalists of their new methodology of moral discernment and by the radical feminists of their new theory of “equality of discipleship,” the teachings now reaffirmed by the Pope were part of the catechism.

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taught to and received by the People of God who summarily rejected recurring attempts by a few to deny them.

**Novelty and Tradition**

Yet, it is true that at the present moment there is much confusion in the flock about these teachings as a result of the energetic advocacy of revisionist theories and their popularization in the press. But it is precisely in such situations that the pastors of the Church have the duty, as John Paul II has realized, to reconfirm the Tradition, to lead us out of dead-end paths, and to reroute us on our true mission of evangelization of the world to which Vatican II pointed us. We have every reason to believe that when the faithful once understand what these controversies were really all about the light of the *analogia fidei* will manifest to them how inconsistent these novel views are with Tradition and Scripture, as it did to the novelties of Gnosticism, Arianism, the Reformation, Jansenism, and Modernism.

One can of course be surprised that John Paul II chose this somewhat indirect way of definitively settling the proportionalist and ordination questions, since this has again made possible misunderstandings in the press and further obfuscation by some theologians. But *Veritatis Splendor*, *Evangelium Vitae*, and *Inter Insigniores* were all attempts by John Paul II and the CDF to explain their views as clearly and as pastorally as possible. A little good will should make it clear that he is stating a considered judgment with an authority that calls for unity of witness in the Church, not for “kicking against the goad” (*Acts 26:14*).

**Equality or Discipleship?**

John Paul II’s words have evoked among some a great deal of talk about “equality,” but not much about “discipleship”—which after all means “docility to one’s teacher.” Yet he has found the gentlest, most pastoral way of affirming the Tradition of the Church and Vatican II while firmly freeing it of misinterpretation through this response of the CDF. It says in effect, “I witness to you as successor of St. Peter, that what I have definitively declared on these matters is not a mere disciplinary decree nor a theological opinion of my own, but the truth of the Tradition of the Church by which you and I, in ‘equality of discipleship,’ are bound.”

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