

**Augmenting the Sacred Foundation:
Authority and Ordination in the Roman Catholic Church**
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Introduction

In May of 1994, Pope John Paul II issued an apostolic letter to all bishops in the Roman Catholic Church. Dubbed the "Pentecost Letter" because of the date of its release, John Paul II's letter called on his venerable Brothers to stop discussing the issue of whether women could be ordained to the Roman Catholic priesthood. The Pope said that he issued this letter "in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance." To put the issue to rest once and for all, he declared that "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all of the Church's faithful" (*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, p. 2). Distinguished by the negative claim that the church was **not authorized** to do something, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, stunned many who had struggled with the arguments around this issue for twenty years or more.

Publicly, even the Roman Catholic bishops who had spoken in favor of ordaining women were quieted in apparent obedience to John Paul's admonition. Given what appeared in press releases accompanying the declaration, some Catholics misunderstood and thought that all of the faithful had been forbidden to discuss this issue, now allegedly resolved by Papal decree. Whatever reasons account for it, for about a year and a half after the Pentecost letter, little was heard about the arguments for and against the ordination of women in official Church circles.

Instead discussions shifted to what kind of authority the Pope was exercising in that letter. Was he saying that anyone who did not accept the teaching could be ex-communicated? Did the use of the word "definitively" hint toward an exercise of papal infallibility? If he meant it to be taken as an exercise of infallibility, why did he not simply declare it so, ex cathedra, so there would be no doubt? Can a Pope really abdicate responsibility regarding the sacramental life in the Church by denying its authority to act in such a weighty matter?

Finally, one bishop broke the official silence on the ordination issue by confronting head-on the authority issues raised by Ordinatio Sacerdotalis.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly the Sacred Congregation for the Universal Inquisition), issued in November of 1995 a ***Responsum ad Dubium***. Intended literally to respond to doubts that surfaced following the release of ***Ordinatio Sacerdotalis***, the response addressed at least two authority issues directly: the deposit of faith and infallible teaching. Here is the text that has brought discussion of the Church's authority vis-à-vis the ordination of women back into the public forum:

*Reply to the dubium concerning the teaching contained in the apostolic letter **Ordinatio Sacerdotalis**.*

Dubium: *Whether the teaching that the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women, which is presented in the apostolic letter **Ordinatio Sacerdotalis** is to be held definitively, is to be understood as belonging to the deposit of faith.*

Responsum: *In the affirmative.*

*This teaching 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). Thus, in present circumstances, the Roman pontiff exercising his proper office of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32), has handed on this same teaching by a formal declaration, explicitly stating what is to be held always, everywhere and by all as belonging to the deposit of faith.*

The sovereign pontiff John Paul II, at the audience granted to the undersigned cardinal prefect, approved this reply, adopted in the ordinary session of this congregation, and ordered it to be published.

Rome, from the offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on the feast of the apostles Ss. Simon and Jude, October 28, 1995

[Signed] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect

Once this document became public, the importance of the women's ordination issue paled in comparison to the authority issues that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith raised in the *Responsum ad Dubium*. Church conservatives and reformers alike reacted swiftly to the declaration, and reactions were as diverse as is the membership in this Church called one. Some said the document had no doctrinal weight.¹ Others said infallibility was itself a flawed doctrine.²

¹ For excellent discussions of this opinion see: Ladislav Orsy, S.J., "The Congregation's Response: Its Authority and Meaning," *America*, December 9, 1995, pp. 4-5; Francis A. Sullivan, S.J. "Guideposts from Catholic Tradition," *America*, December 9, 1995, pp. 5-6.; Nicholas Lash, "On Not Inventing Doctrine," *The Tablet*, December 2, 1995, p. 1544. Lash goes so far as to suggest that papal approval of the CDF document constituted an abuse of authority since the conditions and requirements for its claims had not been met.

² See Joan Chittister who wonders about the 'infallibility of infallibility' in "Ratzinger Raised Bigger Issues than Ordination," *National Catholic Reporter*, December 8, 1995, p. 7.; Hans Kung calls for another look at infallibility in "Theologians Now Face Either-Or Situation," *National Catholic Reporter*, December 15, 1995, pp. 6-7.; Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Infallibility: Untenable on Every Ground,' *National Catholic Reporter*, December 29, 1995/ January 5, 1996, p. 19.

Still others applauded the Congregation's action in publishing a document that would surely put the issue of women's ordination to rest once and for all.³

How could a document named "response to the doubt" inspire so many different interpretations of its meaning and significance to believers? If anything, more doubt has been stirred up. Not only is there still disagreement on the women's ordination issue; now there is confusion about what the Church and its designated leaders are authorized to do. Indeed, there is even question about how seriously to take the response to the doubt. Are the faithful left with an infinite regress of doubt? Or is there some way to hold together what the Holy Spirit is revealing with what church documents are teaching? Some way to treasure strong faith without insulting human intelligence?

It is important to say at the outset that the purpose of this paper is not to debate the validity of the arguments for and against the ordination of women to the Roman Catholic priesthood. I am of the opinion that when the Church has offered reasons against women's ordination, the arguments simply do not hold. These flawed arguments, however, do not automatically make the case for women's ordination. There is also a shortage of sound theological argument in favor of the ordination of women. Those that argue from a ground of justice and equality betray a misunderstanding of church teaching in these areas. This is not to say that

³ See Avery Dulles, "Tradition Says No," *The Tablet*, December 9, 1995, p. 1572-1574.; Many bishops added press releases and letters to their dioceses after the release of the *Responsum Dubium*. See especially Francis Stafford, "Statement on the CDF *Responsum* Regarding Ordination of Women, November 17, 1995, Denver, CO. and Anthony M. Pilla, President NCCB, "Statement on the CDF *Responsum* Regarding the Ordination of Women", November, 1995. Also Helen Hull Hitchcock as quoted by Peter Steinfelds in "Wariness Greets Vatican Doctrinal Claim," *New York Times*, Sunday, November 26, 1995. Hitchcock thinks that the document is so authoritative that those who disagree with its findings will have to "make a clear decision whether or not they are Catholics."

debate is fruitless in this struggle. Having endured years of intense scrutiny of its position, even the institutional church is backing away from the reasons traditionally given why women could not be ordained. And so it should. Who could anymore hear that women are subordinate to men in the order of creation? ⁴ That women are naturally unsuited to image Christ in the Eucharist? That Jesus didn't ordain women so the Roman Catholic Church can't either? ⁵

Rather, the concern of this paper is with issues of authority in the recent teachings. My purpose is threefold. The first is to help the reader to understand the meaning of authority and why authority in the Church is so important to preserve. The second purpose is to help the reader to understand exactly what is meant by the two authority issues that Cardinal Ratzinger has brought to the fore in this discussion: the deposit of faith and infallibility. The third purpose is to show that it is possible for thinking Catholics to take the authority of the Church seriously without compromising a sincere search for the truth of things. The company of the Holy Spirit has been promised to this Church for all time. Surely the Spirit of Truth will not abandon the Church, even in these times of crisis and division and doubt.

⁴ Lest anyone think we have to go all the way back to Thomas Aquinas for opinion that women are by nature inferior to men, hear this from a priest quoting his seminary textbook from the 1950's, nearly two thousand years into the history of this church: "The reason why a woman cannot receive holy orders is because the clerical state demands a certain superiority since it involves ruling the faithful; whereas a woman by her very nature is inferior to man and subject to him, even though at a personal level she can excel a man in her natural and graced giftedness" (Noldin, *Summa Theologiae Moralis*, vol III, n. 465). As this enlightened priest editorializes: "such is the thinking identified with passing on the deposit or treasure house of our faith." Fr. Kevin Kelly, "Letters," *The Tablet*, December 2, 1995, p. 1548.

⁵ See *Inter Insigniores*, 1976

The Problem of Authority

There is no way around it: in some circles, authority has a very bad name and for very good reason. In the twentieth century alone, authority has been responsible for the injustices that have kept us in war; for the lies that shake our faith in government; for the kind of discrimination that allows one class or race or sex to dominate another; for the structures that threaten human freedom and creativity. Authority, it would seem from recent experience, threatens everything that human beings need to live well together: truth, justice, life, order.⁶

Roman Catholics are no strangers to the dangers of authority in ecclesial life.

When authority threatens life in the Church, however, the stakes are much higher than they are in civic life. The Church is, after all, the people of God and the Body of Christ. The authority that represents the Christian Church represents much more than a nation or the human laws that govern it. This Church is called to be a light to all nations. Threats to such a beacon can be threats to faith itself.

Given the dangers that authority poses to these high values, it might seem as though institutions, both human and divine, would be better off without it.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. Authority is essential to life in human community. Indeed, there can be no community without it. It is not legitimate authority but its abuses that threaten our treasured institutions. It would be a

⁶ I am indebted for these and many of my reflections on authority to a twentieth century Thomist, Yves R. Simon. See especially, *The Nature and Functions of Authority*, Marquette University Press, 1941 and *A General Theory of Authority*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1962. The core of this paper is an application of Simon's philosophy of authority

mistake to think that authority could be undermined without destroying the very meaning of community life.

The Roman Roots of Christian Authority⁷

One way to understand authority is to trace the word back to its origin. An etymology is particularly apt to this discussion since the word from which authority derives was first used during the Roman Empire. "Authority" is built upon our word "author." The word for "author" in Latin is auctor which means the source or the one who originates, creates or augments. An author is the originator or source of something new; a creative person whose creation augments the human treasury. What authority means now, namely, the power to influence thought, opinion or behavior, is directly related to how the awesome power of the author is understood in human history.

In the Roman Empire the highest value was the sacredness of the foundation. The Roman citizen belonged to a world that was Rome and whatever Rome added to itself. The purpose of political activity was to preserve the foundation and to build on it from the very specific locality in which each citizen was rooted. In fact, the Latin patria literally means, "rooted in the soil." Not surprisingly, it is from this root words for patriotism and patriarch come. After all, it was the father whose seed took root, thereby determining which locality could lay claim to the citizen's loyalty. In Rome, once the foundation was in place, it bound the citizen's

⁷ For an excellent discussion of the historical contexts in which authority is understood, see Hannah Arendt, "What Was Authority?" in *Authority: Nomos I*, edited by Carl J. Friedrich. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 81-112.

allegiance and identity. Everyone in Rome was connected through their fathers to an empire that rooted them all.

Just as politics bound the citizens of the Empire to Rome, so too did religion bind believers to a sacred foundation. The word religion comes from the Latin, religare which means "to be tied back to." In Rome, then, religious ties linked believers to a common past, a founding event which defined their belief. When the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, making it a politically sanctioned religion instead of an object for persecution, the Christian Church began to adapt itself to a Roman worldview. Before Constantine, Christians had an anti-social reputation. Today, they might be labeled counter-cultural. Once Christians were free to identify themselves and worship publicly, however, they began to fit in with the political and social status quo of the time. As Romans, Christians could institutionalize their religious belief.

[T]he Church became so "Roman" and adapted itself so thoroughly to Roman thinking in matters of politics that it made the death and resurrection of Christ the cornerstone of a new foundation, erecting on it a new human institution of tremendous durability. ... The basis of the Church as a community of believers and a public institution was now no longer the Christian faith in resurrection (though this faith remained its content) nor the Hebrew obedience to the commands of God, but rather the testimony of the life, of the birth, death and resurrection, of Jesus of Nazareth as a historically recorded event. As witnesses to this event the apostles could become the "founding fathers" of the Church, from whom she would derive her own authority, as long as she would hand

down their testimony by way of tradition from generation to generation.⁸

There was much good news to behold in the unification of Christians and Rome. For one thing, the vicious persecutions of believers stopped. For another, the hierarchical structure of Roman life enabled Christianity to spread throughout the world and to endure the centuries. Directly linked to the author of their faith, and assured of the legacy of their fathers, Roman Christians could lay down deep roots and begin to augment their sacred foundation.

The Deposit of Faith

Perhaps nowhere is the Roman influence on the inherited structure of Christianity more evident than in the idea of the deposit of faith. The original treasury of Christianity, after all, is believed to have been passed down through the apostles to all of their descendants in the faith. The foundational documents, authored by the witnesses to the life and death of Christ, are of primary significance but so too are any documents or sacramental practices that have officially augmented this treasured source of the faith. Though Christians believe they are a living body in human history, the sacred revelation of the particular details of the founder's life are thought to be limited to what the last witness to the human life of Christ wrote down.

The word "deposit" suggests the fact that God's self-revelation to mankind is definitive in the Christ-event, and that this definitive word of God is a treasure entrusted to the Church, to which nothing further will be added. Whatever the faithful can be called upon to believe as word of God must be really contained

⁸ Arendt, "What Was Authority?" pp. 103-104

(although not necessarily in explicit terms) in what the apostolic Church received and handed on.⁹

Until Vatican II, there had been a sense that this treasured deposit was handed down only through the successors to the apostles, the bishops of the Church. Since Vatican II, however, this sacred treasury is understood to belong to the whole Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith raised and answered a question related to the deposit of faith in *Responsum ad Dubium*. John Paul II in 1994 and Paul VI in 1976 had both declared that the Church had no authority to ordain women. Then the Congregation asked in 1995 whether those declarations belonged to the deposit of faith. It answered in the affirmative: it is to be understood as belonging to the deposit of faith that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women. Claims specific to the deposit of faith are two: 1) that this declaration is grounded in the written word of God and 2) that from the beginning it has been preserved and applied in the tradition of the Church. Believing that it could link an unbroken tradition to its sacred foundation, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the opinion that this matter was settled once and for all.

In Fr. Sullivan's definition, whatever belongs to the deposit of faith must be "really contained" though not necessarily "explicitly" in the witness's accounts of Christ's life. It is true that nothing in sacred scripture reveals that Christ ordained

⁹ Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 33

¹⁰ See *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, n.10

women. There is also no written record of the founder ordaining men. Even though sacred scripture does not explicitly reveal that the Church is only authorized to ordain men, recent Vatican documents certainly promulgate the opinion that this truth is "really contained" therein. The clash between a traditional way of understanding Christian revelation about ordination and modern scripture scholarship makes it very difficult to assess the claim about what is contained in the deposit of faith. Further, there is a legitimate difference of opinion about whether the tradition of ordaining men is truly "unbroken" in the Church's history. Both of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's claims, therefore, are subject to legitimate challenge on the grounds of truth.

There are some in the Church who worry about the institution's apparent preoccupation with rooting all justifications for action in the past. If those in authority continue to fix the Church's gaze on the past, they say, the living body of Christ may not get the new breath that it needs to survive into the future. Modern times call for fresh interpretations of holy scripture and for a willingness to let the spirit of our founder speak beyond the literal words we are given in the accounts of his life. Why is it so important to insure that anything we do is connected to those roots? Wouldn't authority better serve the Christian community by turning its attention from the past to the present and into the future?

The answers to these questions lie in a proper understanding of the role of authority in the life of the Christian community.

The Place of Authority in a Community of Believers

Authority is necessary to the unity of action and the unity of identity of any community of believers. And this does not have to mean that the authority in question is exercised in a patriarchal or paternal fashion. In fact, it may well be that one of the foremost reasons for the contemporary resistance to authority is the failure to realize that authority does not have to mean a paternalistic or coercive exercise that ends up treating people as children. Patriarchal authority is not what is at stake in this investigation of authority in the life of the Church. The concern here is for the legitimate role of authority in the life of adult believers assembled in community.

However closely identified the individuals in a community may be, there will always be a need for some power to be exercised that can unify their action. In fact, the healthier the community, the more individuals will have ideas about how things can or should be done together. Only an accepted authority can coordinate these creative impulses in such a way that the body acts as one.

Unifying common action is not the only essential role that authority has to play in the life of a healthy community. There is another function that also unifies yet in a different way. The unity that authority achieves in this function is a unity of identity. Authority, by making rules and principles that guide the lives of Christians, acts to achieve a common recognized identity for those who belong to the community.

This function, then, constitutes the second unifying function of authority: to make the rules that keep the identity of the community alive in the hearts and minds of its individual members. For it is rules that give structure and visibility to the claim of being Christian; some way to know that actions are consistent with claims of value; some way to reflect vision in action. Understood in this way, rules are not obstacles to freedom or to truth, they are pathways to them.

It is perhaps this kind of unity that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was trying to preserve in the *Responsum ad Dubium*. Since Christianity is a religion so rooted in the sacred life of its founder, the unity called for is not just with each other, those who are Christians in 1995. There is also a need to be united with Christians of all time. By claiming definitive rules for the sacrament of holy orders and by tracing those rules back to the revealed word of God, the Congregation could be trying to emphasize that unity that endures the ages.

Thus authority functions to unify the community in two ways: 1) it makes common action of many believers possible and 2) it makes the common beliefs of the faithful concretely alive in the rules they live by. In the first instance, authority is exercised with an eye toward choosing action. In the second instance, the focus is on making rules. In either case, when an exercise of authority is legitimate, the members of the community freely obey in the confidence that their very selves are reflected in the actions that obedience requires.

Infallibility

Return now to the claim of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that its opinion is authoritative. The claim is pertinent because the Congregation has stated that the teaching that the Church has no authority to ordain women requires "definitive assent." This assent is called for on the grounds that this teaching has been set forth infallibly. Exactly what does it mean for the Church to teach infallibly? What are the conditions that must be met for this exercise of authority to be legitimate?

One of the gifts handed down to Christians in the deposit of faith is the gift of truth. This Church will be accompanied throughout human history by the Holy Spirit which will protect it from error. Recall the promises Jesus made to the anguished community he was leaving behind:

If you love me, you will obey my commands; and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another to be your advocate, who will be with you for ever -- the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because the world neither sees nor knows him; but you know him because he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you bereft; I am coming back to you. In a little while the world will see me no longer, but you will see me; because I live, you too will live.¹¹

On the authority of this promise, Christians are assured that the Holy Spirit will be with the community who loves Jesus and keeps his rules. It is in this sense that

¹¹ John 14:15-20. *The Revised English Bible*, Oxford, 1989

the Church as a community enjoys an "indefectibility."¹² Though individual Christians are certainly subject to error or sinfulness, the Church as a body of believers is promised the company of the spirit of truth throughout its history. In this noble company, the Church will not and cannot teach us something that will lead us astray.

Related to the Church's indefectibility, is the teaching about the gift of infallibility. Infallibility is "a charism (or gift of the Spirit) that insures 'immunity from error' in the Church's definitive teachings on matters of faith and morals."¹³ Church teachings may be determined to be infallible in two ways. The first is through the exercise of papal infallibility and the second is by the exercise of the universal ordinary magisterium.

The constitution on papal infallibility that was issued by the First Vatican Council on July 18, 1870 was entitled Pastor Aeternus.¹⁴ Literally meaning, "eternal pastor," this document describes the teaching authority of the pope as follows:

when the Roman pontiff speaks ex cathedra, that is, when ... as the pastor and teacher of a// Christians in virtue of his highest apostolic authority he defines a doctrine of faith and morals that

¹² See Sullivan, *Magisterium*, pp. 4-17

¹³ John T. Ford, "Infallibility," in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, pp. 664-665.

¹⁴ Though debates about the definitive nature of Church authority have been traced way back in the history of the Church, it was not until the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) that a systematic effort was made to define papal infallibility and its legitimate exercise. The reasons for this effort were varied and there was certainly a critical mass of bishops who thought it was ill-advised for the Church to move toward adopting such a view of authority. It is important to note that at least one reason in favor of adopting guidelines for the exercise of papal infallibility was to restrain the power of the pope. That is, by confining this authority to a very specific exercise, the council was in fact denying that papal authority was all-inclusive, personal or separated in any way from the full life of the Church community. See Margaret O'Gara, *Triumph in Defeat: Infallibility. Vatican I and the French Minority Bishops*.

must be held by the Universal Church, he is empowered, through the divine assistance promised him in Blessed Peter, with that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed to endow his Church.

The conditions for an exercise of this kind of infallibility are therefore, 1) It must be exercised by the Pope ex cathedra, that is "from the chair" he occupies as the descendant of St. Peter; 2) It must concern a matter of faith or morals.

The second way to determine that a Church teaching is infallible is to judge that it has been taught infallibly by the ordinary, universal magisterium. The clearest expression of this determination comes to us from the documents of Vatican II, Lumen Gentium. 25:

Although the individual bishops do not enjoy the prerogative of infallibility, they can nevertheless proclaim Christ's doctrine infallibly. This is so, even when they are dispersed around the world, provided that while maintaining the bond of unity among themselves and with Peter's successor, and while teaching authentically on a matter of faith or morals, they concur in a single viewpoint as the one which must be held conclusively.

The conditions for an exercise of the infallibility of the ordinary, universal magisterium are therefore: 1) it is the bishops around the world who may exercise this authority, 2) they must be unified with each other and with the pope when

they teach in this way, 3) they are limited in this exercise to considerations of matters of faith and morals and 4) when acting in this way, they agree on one view that must be held by the faithful.

Now it is possible to determine whether the conditions for an exercise of infallibility are present in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's

Responsum ad Dubium.

First of all, it is clear that Pope John Paul II has not exercised papal infallibility in the promulgation of this document. What we have in *Responsum ad Dubium* is the **considered opinion** of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. By signing this document, Pope John Paul II only indicated that he knew this opinion was to be circulated. No where do we find any indication that this Pope is exercising infallibility in the ex cathedra sense described above. In fact, the pope doesn't even claim ex cathedra infallibility for his own written opinion on the matter, Ordinatio Sacerdotalis.¹⁵

But what about the claim that the teaching is infallible according to the rules of the ordinary, universal magisterium? Have the four conditions for the legitimate exercise of this authority been met? The answer is no. Regarding the first requirement, it must be bishops who exercise this kind of infallibility. Except for the bishops that might be members of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, no bishops that we know of were ever consulted on what they are teaching

¹⁵ There are some who think that the pope could have and should have issued the teaching in an exercise of this authority. For an interesting hypothesis on why he did not, see Michael Miller, "An *Almost* Infallible Teaching, in *Crisis*, September, 1995.

or believe about the ordination of women. Even if the opinions of some bishops were sought, it is clear that the second requirement is not met, namely that the bishops are teaching this way while in union with each other and the pope. The issue simply has not been raised when the bishops are together in solemn assembly where such matters are brought to the body. Third, there is room for serious doubt that the teaching on ordination should be considered to be a matter of faith or of morals. Many reputable theologians, including those assembled by the Vatican itself to study whether there was any basis in scripture for the ban against ordaining women, simply do not find in the gospels a basis for this teaching. Fourth and finally, we would be hard pressed to show that the bishops agree on one view that must be held by the faithful on this issue. Enough bishops in this country alone have made their opinions known so as to assure us at the very least of differences of opinion in this matter. Not even one of the four conditions necessary for an exercise of this kind of infallibility has been met.

For these reasons, it is fair to conclude that according to its own rules regarding the conditions required for infallible teaching, the Church is not teaching infallibly on the issue of the ordination of women, despite the stated opinion of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Some Final Thoughts

To say that recent Vatican pronouncements on the ordination of women do not enjoy the authoritative status of infallibility is not to say that these teachings ought to be disregarded by Roman Catholics. Given the belief that the Holy Spirit

will not lead the Church into error, the teachings of the institutional Church deserve careful attention and sincere discernment of what the Spirit of Truth is saying in these divided times. What seems like an abuse of authority to those who respect rules, may actually be an instance of an institution doing "the right thing for the wrong reason."¹⁶ Just because the reasons against ordaining women are problematic, does not mean that the teaching itself is wrong. It is at least possible that the Holy Spirit is calling us to a different way out of the problem."¹⁷

On the other hand, the gift of infallibility ought never to be used as a club to coerce the faithful into submission on some doctrinal issue. Since the doctrine of papal infallibility was defined by Vatican I, there has only been one exercise of it, ex cathedra by a Pope.¹⁸ This happened in November of 1950 when Pius XII defined the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary: "the Immaculate Mother of God, Mary ever Virgin, when the course of her earthly life

¹⁶ T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963). The martyr, Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury says: "This last temptation is the greatest treason, to do the right thing for the wrong reason." It is interesting to note as well that Cardinal John Henry Newman, who vigorously objected to the tactics used to pass the Vatican I teaching on infallibility, in the end was satisfied with the result because the extremists who thought that the Pope was personally and on all matters infallible, did not get their version of infallibility adopted. This too could be seen as an instance of the Holy Spirit preventing the Church from grievous error. See Sullivan, *Magisterium*, p. 95.

¹⁷ Mary Aquin O'Neill, RSM has an original angle on this subject. She has applied the Church's teachings on complementarity in nature to ecclesial life, challenging the institution to define the different but equal role of women in the life of the Church. If not ordination for women, then what? What role puts women in authority in the Church in a way equal to the authority that men have de facto after receiving orders? See especially "The Mystery of Being Human Together," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, edited by Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993) and "The Nature of Women and the Method of Theology," in the December, 1995 edition of *Theological Studies*.

¹⁸ The other Marian dogma, The Immaculate Conception, is considered by some to have been proclaimed through an exercise of ex cathedra authority, though it was issued in 1854, before Vatican I actually assembled to define infallibility

was finished, was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven." This declaration was issued after consultation with 98 percent of the Catholic bishops "who affirmed that the doctrine was both possible and opportune." Accordingly, Pius XII proclaimed "the faith of the Church that Mary in the fullness of her historical personality now lives in union with the risen Christ."¹⁹ The teaching was received joyfully by the faithful, who saw it as an affirmation of a truth that lived in their liturgical and prayer life. The dogma is also celebrated liturgically on August 15 by the whole Church. This illustration makes a central point about infallibility very clear: Catholics do not believe that Mary was assumed into heaven because Pope Pius XII declared it was so. On the contrary, Pope Pius XII declared it to be so because Catholics believed it. The faithful could rejoice in universal reception of a teaching that they knew in their hearts to be true.

Those in authority must also take great care not to allow abuses of authority to go unchallenged. I am referring here to the sacred responsibility of the bishops of the Church to function in what Vatican II declared to be their most important role, to guard and explain the gospel, especially in matters that confusing the faithful or divide the Church we call one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

Since it belongs to the nature of the Christian Church to be a people united in the profession of an apostolic faith, it has to have a common creed and a common understanding of its faith.

When conflicts arise as to the terms of its creed or when new

¹⁹ Elizabeth Johnson, "Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary," in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, p. 104.

questions are raised that demand authoritative answers, it is part of God's design that in every age there should be successors of the apostles with pastoral authority to act as judges in matters of faith. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 25. As Vatican II insists, this does not mean that bishops are above the word of God, but that they listen to it, guard it, and explain it faithfully, by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit. Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, n. 10.²⁰

Where are the successors to the apostles these days? There has been no public response from the bishops on the controverted claims that have been made on the authority of the teaching on the ordination of women. Further, except for those willing to go public proclaiming their own loyalty to the contents of the Vatican documents, no bishops are reaching out in their role as teachers to try to explain the authority of this issue and what it means for thinking Catholics. There are some, Cardinal Bernadin among them, who have expressed pastoral concerns for those who would be pained by the teaching. To my knowledge, however, not one bishop has functioned in what is supposed to be their prominent role according to Vatican II as teachers of the faithful. The unity of the Roman Catholic Church is threatened not only by the heavy hand of authority in Rome but also by the apparent abdication by the bishops of their own teaching authority. The Church would be well served if these men could fulfill their sacred obligations as apostles of the gospel.

²⁰ Francis Sullivan in "Magisterium," *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, p. 805.

On the issue of the ordination of women of course, the unity issues at stake are not merely those that divide within the Roman Catholic Church. Christian unity means more than unity among Roman Catholics and we are constantly seeking grounds for healing among all the Christian communions. Other Christians have ordained women. What is this exercise of authority saying about the judgments of those congregations? That they have done something they were not authorized to do by scripture? That the Holy Spirit abandoned them but not us? What about the Orthodox Churches? They concur in the judgment that the Church has no authority to ordain women. Do recent pronouncements unite us with them? Not really. After all, they do not accept the teaching on infallibility recognized by Rome. Such complex and delicate matters such as these will not and cannot be resolved by closing down discussion and discernment on any issue. And this issue, like so many that involve women in the Church, is especially delicate.

Women are particularly suspicious of any exercise of authority in the Roman Catholic Church. And for good reason. We are rooted in a history in which only those who could "seed" had any power to augment the sacred foundation. To this day, every Roman Catholic authority with the power to add to or develop the tradition we have inherited is male. Until that changes, until women can be viewed as authorities with real power to effect the growth of the living body of Christ, true unity can never be realized within the Roman Catholic Church or among all Christian communions. For these reasons, the unity of women and men in the Church is an urgent need indeed.

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