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Can't or Won't

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 21, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

I count myself among those who thought it was very bad for the Vatican to treat the ordination of women in the same document in which it dealt with new norms for punishing those clerics who sexually abuse minors. But, among those who criticize the document, one criticism seems to me misplaced and that is the charge of misogyny.

The Vatican has never said it won?t ordain women. It has said it can?t ordain women. To some, that may be a distinction without a difference, and I suppose it is if one is content to think of these issues in sociological or psychological terms. But, in theological terms, the distinction is significant. The Vatican position is that nowhere in the 2,000 year tradition of the Church do you find sanction for ordaining women and that, therefore, we must hold that the all-male presbyterate was intended by Christ. It doesn?t matter that once upon a time women could not be doctors or lawyers and now they can. That is sociology. It doesn?t matter that perhaps there are some in the hierarchy who like the all-boys club atmosphere and wish to preserve it. What is decisive is the theology. Those who advocate the ordination of women need to spend less time drawing up petitions or mounting protests and spend more time studying the tradition to see if there is not some hook upon which to construct a theological argument.

A friend who works in the Vatican told me that in the 1990s, Pope John Paul II asked some of his senior staff, including Cardinals Ratzinger and Kasper, to look for a similar hook that would permit him to over-rule the nineteenth-century edict by Pope Leo XIII declaring Anglican orders null and void. He saw this as an impediment to ecumenical relations with the Church of England and its many branches, and hoped there might be some way to get around it, in short, the Vatican wanted to change it. But, the investigation of the issue showed that it was not possible, that the Edwardian Ordinal of the English Church did not understand ordination the way the Catholic Church did. Thus, the sacrament was so deficient as to be invalid.

Now, we can agree or disagree with Rome?s position on the validity of orders. We can note that we recognize the ordination rites ? and the other sacraments ? of the Eastern Orthodox Churches. Indeed, Catholic theology sees no impediment to the Orthodox partaking of Holy Communion at a Catholic Mass; It is the Orthodox who forbid it, not the Vatican. But, the discussion of such issues is explicitly and necessarily a theological issue and, just so, it is constructed from a discussion about the tradition and the Scriptures. The fact that the Cold War ended, a sociological and political fact as large as the entering of women into the mainstream of economic and professional life, did not affect the theological debate one iota.

So, my point is not that women should or should not be ordained. My point is that the Vatican sees women?s ordination not through some misogynistic lens, but through a theological lens. If I were inclined to get involved in the women?s ordination movement, I would not sign petitions or attend invalid celebrations of the Eucharist. I would brush up my Latin and study the decrees of the Council of Trent pertaining to the priesthood. I would study all the conciliar texts going back to Nicaea. I would look not only at the Scriptures but at the way the early Church understood the Scriptures. If there is no hook upon which to construct a development of doctrine, there is no hook. Newman?s writings on the development of doctrine have been wildly interpreted by some as a

license to do whatever one wishes. The wild interpretations suffer from the common flaw: they forget that the thing being developed is doctrine, not whim, not philosophy or social science, but doctrine. It can and must develop, but it cannot be confused with a social science or a political platform.

There are things the Church simply can?t do. We cannot decide suddenly, a la Glenn Beck, that social justice is a perversion of the Gospel. We cannot remove Matthew 25 from the canon. We cannot follow Luther into believing there are only two sacraments. We cannot simply set aside the Petrine ministry, even though we know it has and will continue to change. There are things which are given. Is women?s ordination one of those givens? I have no idea. But, I know that there is a difference between saying we can?t do something and saying we won?t do something. It seems to me that much of the criticism confuses the two and posits the failure to address the women?s ordination issue as a moral failing, an instance of some childish desire to control, another example of the Church?s pitiful old-fashionedness. I think it is just as likely that the issue is one of theological integrity.

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