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Infallibility on women's ordination in question

Richard McBrien | Jun. 13, 2011 Essays in Theology

One of the most perplexing aspects of the sacking of William Morris, bishop of the Australian diocese of Toowoomba, Queensland, is Pope Benedict XVI?s claim that the Catholic Church?s prohibition of the ordination of women to the priesthood is the product of an infallible teaching.

In 2006 Morris issued a pastoral letter before the beginning of Advent in which he called attention to the alarming decrease in the number of active priests who will continue to serve the needs of the diocese by Easter 2014.

He urged that alternative strategies be considered if the Eucharist is to remain available to the Catholics of the diocese. These alternative strategies include: ordaining married, single, or widowed men who are chosen and endorsed by the local parish community; welcoming former priests, married or single, back to active ministry; ordaining women, married or single; and recognizing Anglican, Lutheran, and Uniting Church Orders.

Morris did not advocate any of these alternatives, but argued only that the Church be ?more open? to them.

At the same time, Morris emphasized that he remained ?committed to actively promoting vocations to the current celibate male priesthood and open to inviting priests from overseas.?

However, if it were not for the constant drumbeat of criticism on the part of ultraconservative Catholics -- most or all of whom have had no formal education in theology, Scripture, liturgy, or canon law -- and the appointment of another ultraconservative as Apostolic Visitor -- Charles Chaput, Archbishop of Denver -- Morris would not have been removed from his diocese.

The criticism from the far right and their connection with powerful individuals in the Vatican gave the ?investigation? all the impetus that it needed, and the selection of Chaput as Apostolic Visitor rendered the final result inevitable.

Morris revealed portions of the letter from Pope Benedict XVI informing him of his removal from office. In that letter, the pope insisted that his predecessor, John Paul II, had defined the teaching on the ordination of women as priests in his 1994 apostolic letter, *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*. In other words, the teaching was infallible and, as such, irrevocable.

It could not be considered, as Morris had suggested in his 2006 Advent pastoral letter, with a view to a possible change in practice. Such a change, Pope Benedict XVI pointed out, had been rendered impossible by John Paul II?s infallible teaching on the subject.t

This teaching had also been so described in a 1995 statement from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), which then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger headed. Ratzinger, of course, is now Pope Benedict XVI.

Ratzinger noted that the teaching on women?s ordination ?has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and

universal magisterium,? as well as by the 1998 apostolic letter of Pope John Paul II, *Ad Tuendam Fidem* (?For the defense of the faith?), accompanied by a commentary written by Ratzinger, who said essentially the same thing as he is now saying as pope.

But canon 749.3 stipulates that if there is any doubt about the infallible nature of a teaching, it is not infallible. The canon reads: ?No doctrine is understood to be infallibly defined unless it is clearly established as such.?

Therefore, even if then-Cardinal Ratzinger concluded that Pope John Paul II?s teaching on women priests in *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* was infallible, it could not be considered infallible because it was not ?clearly established as such.?

And even if a pope, such as Benedict XVI, wished to argue that a specific teaching of one of his predecessors was infallible, canon 749.3 would also seem to preclude such an argument.

Moreover, individual Catholic theologians, major Catholic theological organizations in the United States, and the Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland have expressed serious doubts about the claim that the Church?s current prohibition of the ordination of women to the priesthood is grounded in an infallible teaching.

Therefore, if this was the decisive reason for the sacking of Morris, his removal seems to have been without sufficient warrant. As such it would constitute a grave injustice to him, to the diocese of Toowoomba, and to the church in Australia.

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