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Pope Francis and women's ordination

Robert McClory | Sep. 16, 2013 The Francis Chronicles

Pope Francis keeps making news almost every day with spontaneous phone calls to laypeople, his willingness to dialogue with a journalist who is an atheist and his decision to stop naming monsignors. And now comes his newly named Secretary of State, saying the church needs a "more democratic spirit" [1] in these times.

While all this is most encouraging, many liberal Catholics are walking around with a cloud of gloom hovering over their heads. It stems from that comment Francis made to reporters while returning from Brazil. It spoiled everything for many when he said twice that the issue of women priests is "closed."

His statements came just after he had been talking about an alleged gay lobby in the Vatican. Someone then asked about women priests, and he said, "The church has spoken and says no ... That door is closed." He then noted that the role of women in the church cannot be limited "to altar girls or the president of charity; there must be more." But he quickly got back to the biting issue: "With regards to the ordination of women, the church has spoken and says no. Pope John Paul [II] said so with a formula that was definitive. That door is closed." He was referring to Pope John Paul's 1994 document, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. In it, John Paul said the church has no authority to ordain women, and this view must be held by all as a definitive belief. Then the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, headed by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, issued a clarification, stating that while *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* was not an infallible statement, it is the constant and clear tradition of the church that makes the ban on women priests infallible.

Ever since, theologians have argued whether this is the case. The pope's document in itself is definitive and demanding of acceptance by the faithful, they note, but it is not an infallible teaching. Definitive and infallible are not always and necessarily the same thing. The statement by the congregation, theologians agree, is not infallible, nor is any statement from the congregation infallible. The congregation was giving its carefully worded opinion that there exists an unbroken tradition of a male-only priesthood in the church. Yet that position is much challenged by evidence from the very early church that women held priestly roles. The unbroken tradition argument has been further shaken because the ban on married priests has been subject to growing rejection by Catholics for at least the last 50 years.

So what did Pope Francis really say? He said the door is closed, a statement of fact. He said the church has spoken and said no. Yes, the church -- that is, the hierarchical component of the church -- has surely said no. Note that Francis did not say, "I agree with the official position -- end of argument." Rather, his authority on the subject is Pope John Paul. It was he who said no with a "definitive," not infallible, formula. Note again, Francis does not say, "I fully concur with Pope John Paul's reasoning." He just presents the state of the question and moves on.

So was that a ringing endorsement of the male-only priesthood or simply a recognition of the way things are at present in the church? Was it a betrayal of the hopes of the millions who saw him as the reincarnation of Pope John XXIII or the only thing he could say without arousing the combined fury of one side or the other on this most hot button?

I'm not predicting the priesthood will be officially open to women in Pope Francis' time. But the kind of things he's saying and doing may well prepare for that step in a papacy in the not-too- distant future.

Note, finally, that all this talk is about a door, a closed door -- not a brick wall, not a barbed wire fence, not a concrete barrier. It's just a door. Anyone can open the door with the right key. And in the tradition of Catholicism, who holds the keys?

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