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Augustinian priest: Teaching that women are not like Jesus is 'heretical'

Brian Roewe | Mar. 27, 2014

The explanation for a male-only priesthood that views women as not fully in Jesus' likeness is a heretical teaching that implies women are not fully redeemed, said Augustinian Fr. John Shea in his second such letter since 2012 to U.S. bishops on the issue of women's ordination.

"This teaching that 'women are not fully in the likeness of Jesus' -- qualifying, as it does, as a *theological explanation* -- is utterly and demonstrably heretical.

"This teaching says that women are not fully redeemed by Jesus. This teaching says that women are not made whole by the saving favor of our God. This teaching says that the 'catholic' church is only truly 'catholic' for males," Shea wrote.

Letter from Augustinian Fr. John Shea to 180 bishops [1] by National Catholic Reporter [2]

Near the beginning of his four-page letter he mailed to 180 ordinaries, Shea, 73, made clear his intention was not to challenge or publicly dissent from the teaching of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* [4], the 1994 apostolic letter in which Pope John Paul II declared "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful."

"I'm not challenging the teaching, I'm challenging the theological explanation of the teaching. And it's kind of a fine point, but it's in fact what I am doing," the Boston-based priest told *NCR*.

Shea, a practical theologian who taught nearly 40 years between Boston College and Fordham University, wrote a similar letter [5] at the beginning of Lent 2012. In it, he sought "a clear and credible" theological explanation for the exclusion of women from the Catholic priesthood.

Shortly after that letter mailed, Shea received his second canonical warning from his provincial, Fr. Anthony Genovese, who said his continued public challenges to church teaching closed for debate "could result in serious consequences beyond my control." The first warning arrived a year earlier, after Shea wrote Genovese informing him he intended to step aside from the priesthood until ordination opened to women.

The reasons for another letter were plenty, Shea said: "Partially because of the changes in the church. Partially because of Pope Francis. Partially because it just continues and no one is speaking, which really bothers me. And to keep it alive."

Shea said the pope's reaffirmation of the church's position on women's ordination, as well as his call for a theology of women, particularly led to him readdressing this issue when he did.

"I don't want to give him a pass on this at all because for me, this is the most foundational issue in the church, it's the clearest issue in the church, in terms of justice," Shea said.

The connections between women's ordination and justice became clear for Shea while in India in the early 1990s. There, a priest from Thailand asked his advice how to pastorally address the practice of killing baby girls because the family lacked enough money for a dowry.

"It really hit me, and then I realized, how can the church speak to this because the church also talks about the inferiority of women? So that experience was very powerful for me," he told *NCR*, adding that when people are denied full personhood, that's where violence begins.

The tone of this letter is more pointed, said Shea, who is writing a book on adulthood and morality, and speaks stronger in urging the local teachers of the faith to address the issue.

"As a bishop, how long will you champion the inferiority of women in the church?" he wrote. "How long will your teaching on women be an obvious and eye-popping contradiction? How long will your demeaning patriarchal stance violate women's human and religious equality in God's name?"

So far, five bishops have replied. Each were polite, Shea said, and some even paternal in their responses. But none addressed the substance of his letter, instead reinforcing the church's teaching or asking him "have you read this and a few things like that."

A page-and-a-half letter came from Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski, while Bishop Edward Slattery of Tulsa, Okla., referred him to a lecture Cardinal Avery Dulles gave in April 1996 titled "Priesthood and Gender." The bishops of Portland, Ore.; Lincoln, Neb.; and the Chicago and Detroit archdioceses all at least acknowledged they had received Shea's letter.

The response at this point represents about a third of what Shea's first letter generated, which included Chicago Cardinal Francis George mailing a copy of Missionary Servant Sr. Sara Butler's 2007 book *The Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Teaching of the Church*.

Shea's latest letter draws a distinction between a historical explanation, which "suffers from an incomplete logic" and "necessarily involves interpretation," with a theological explanation, which "weighs any issue against the core of the Christian message."

Calling *Ordinatio* Sacerdotalis a historical explanation, Shea raised a number of questions:

> "Was commissioning the 12 a unique event? Did Jesus mean to ordain the way we understand ordination today? Was it the intent of Jesus to inaugurate ministry only males could carry out? Did he ever say this? Was Jesus only doing what he thought would work best in the patriarchal culture of his day? What was it about the religious role of the scribes and the Pharisees -- all of whom were male -- that so incensed Jesus? Was Jesus patriarchal? Did he see women as inferior to men? Did Jesus envision women in ministry? Finally, what about the history of ordination in the last two thousand years, an amazingly checkered history that clearly includes women?"

Shea argued that such a historical explanation brings numerous problems, among them: It cannot apply unilaterally a particular meaning to a particular event. Referencing the meaning the apostolic letter gave to the

selection of 12 apostles, he asked, "Could not another perfectly logical interpretation of the meaning of that event be that a number of patriarchal men -- then and now -- were and are dead set against women having any authority over them?"

He raised the shifts he perceived in the church's "ordinary infallible teaching" on slavery, racism, religious intolerance and the historical inferiority of women as a way to challenge church tendencies toward absolutism.

"Jews came to be seen as 'perfidious' and were severely persecuted. Muslims were 'infidels' and had crusades led against them by the popes. It is fair to say that for centuries the inferiority of Jews and Muslims was part of 'the ordinary infallible teaching' of the church," he wrote.

Should a conversation about women's ordination ever arise within the church's structures, Shea -- who has proposed his own province hold an open discussion at its next regional meeting -- said it should start with including women as primary participants.

"What I would like to see is a conversation where women are considered to be people and that would actually be there and listened to. That would be huge," he said.

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