

Ordained priests in the image of Christ the Bridegroom

In our survey of unchangeable Catholic teachings, drawing on the Holy See's 1998 *Doctrinal Commentary*, last time we finished looking at its examples of teachings from its first category, those taught infallibly by the Church *as having been divinely revealed*.

Today we start looking at a few examples the *Commentary* gives of teachings from its second category: those set forth definitively, even though not (or not yet) formally proclaimed to have been divinely revealed. As with first category teachings, these can be solemnly defined by a Pope or an Ecumenical Council, or taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.

The *Commentary* explains that 'every believer...is required to give firm and definitive assent to these truths, based on faith in the Holy Spirit's assistance to the Church's Magisterium, and on the Catholic doctrine of the infallibility of the Magisterium in these matters. Whoever denies these truths would be in a position of rejecting a truth of Catholic doctrine and would therefore no longer be in full communion with the Catholic Church.' (6)

There is no difference between the first and second categories, the *Commentary* emphasises, in the absolute 'irrevocable' adherence we owe to the teachings in each. (8) Rather, the difference in the assent owed, 'concerns the supernatural virtue of faith: in the case of truths of the first category, the assent is based directly on faith in the authority of the Word of God; in the case of the truths of the second category, the assent is based on faith in the Holy Spirit's assistance to the Magisterium and on the Catholic doctrine of the infallibility of the Magisterium.'

An example that the *Commentary* gives of a second-category teaching 'to be definitively held' is the doctrine that priestly ordination is reserved to men. (11) St John Paul II gave this its most authoritative expression. He proclaimed: 'In order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. *Lk* 22:32) I declare that 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.' (Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994))

In a statement formally approved by John Paul II the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith further clarified that '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.' It 'is to be held always, everywhere, and by all, as belonging to the deposit of the faith.' (*Reply* (1995))

Pope Francis has repeatedly reaffirmed the same doctrine. Often enough one still comes across denial of the teaching among Catholics. We cannot judge individuals, since it is possible that they are excused by ignorance at some level. However, for our own spiritual welfare we must be clear in our own minds that if we were to deny this definitive teaching we would, as the *Commentary* states, 'no longer be in full communion with the Catholic Church'. (6)

It is necessary to overcome the superficial notion that the Church is unjustly discriminatory or simply 'behind the times' in this matter. Deeper understanding of her teaching can heal the division and dissatisfaction that often surround the issue.

Christ established the priesthood as male because the priest sacramentally represents Christ, including specifically in His role of Bridegroom of the Church, God's People. (cf. *Mt* 9:15; *Jn* 3:29) This is above all in the Mass, in which the priest speaks in the person of Christ the words of consecration: 'This is my Body... This is my Blood' (these words being indeed a 'marriage vow' to the Church (cf. *Eph* 5:31-32; *Rev* 19:7-9)). Sacraments are signs that by divine power bring about what they signify, and so achieve their supernatural and spiritual effects only if they retain the sign-value intended by Christ. A bit like a male actor is more suitable for a male role, only a male priest can represent Christ the Bridegroom – but even more so than in the case of an actor since the priest represents not just by 'acting a part' but in his very being.

Not that Christ could have chosen no other way, or that this 'proves' the priesthood must be male – as with doctrines generally, the ultimate 'proof' is not that we can demonstrate it in itself, but simply the fact that 'the Church has said so' (and we can independently support, but furthermore hold by faith, that Church teaching is guided by the Holy Spirit).

The teaching Church, in turn, bases *her* knowledge of this doctrine primarily on the will of Christ, seen in Scripture in his choice of only males to be the twelve apostles, the first priests. (Cf. *Lk* 6:13-16; 22:14, 19-20; *Mt* 26:20; Council of Trent, DS 1752: 'If anyone says that by the words "Do this in remembrance of me" (*Lk* 22:19; *1 Cor* 11:24) Christ did not establish the apostles as priests... let him be anathema.') His choice is interpreted in the Spirit-guided Tradition of the Church as intended to be normative for the ongoing priesthood – so we are bound by that. The theology of the sacramental bridegroom imagery, while not claiming to be conclusive in itself, explores and illuminates Christ's own intention in making this choice.

In truth, no one, male or female, has a 'right' to priesthood, so there can be no injustice in its denial. It is a gift and call, given 'as God chooses'. (Note that a priestly calling is not just one's own 'feeling' but is finally voiced by the bishop.) There is no unjust discrimination in Christ's choice, any more than in God choosing only women for the gift and calling of motherhood.

Various misconceptions can lead to confusion over the Church's teaching:

- A downgrading of the importance of the human body, and so of sexual difference, to the point of saying, 'It is irrelevant whether we are men or women'. This downgrades the specific gifts and divinely intended symbolism both of masculinity and of femininity.
- A clericalist view of the Church, in which we only gain full value by 'climbing the hierarchical ladder' and becoming priests. This forgets the servant nature of priesthood, seeing it more as a goal of personal advancement that is unjustly denied. In truth, the Church is more fundamentally a Body rather than a 'pyramid'. Each part has its own special value: we are not in competition to be 'rulers'. The greatest are not the hierarchy, but Mary and the saints, and all are called to imitate Mary in faith and holiness. Hierarchical authority, the Church's Petrine aspect, exists to serve all the baptised in this path to holiness, the Marian aspect that is primary.
- A subtly anti-feminine mindset, which sees highest fulfilment only in women taking on the (essentially masculine) role of sacramental image of Christ the Bridegroom; the bridal and Marian imagery rightly belonging to the feminine is tacitly considered second-class.

Once we understand it, this teaching coming from Jesus is not a burden. To hold and proclaim it affirms the deep meaning of priesthood and the true and equal gifts of both men and women.