

# WOMEN PRIESTS

A Catholic Commentary  
on the Vatican  
Declaration

*edited by*

**Leonard Swidler and  
Arlene Swidler**



**PAULIST PRESS New York / Ramsey /  
Toronto**

Copyright ©1977 by  
The Missionary  
Society of St. Paul the  
Apostle in the State of  
New York

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without permission in writing from the Publisher

Library of Congress

Catalog Card Number: 77-83572

ISBN: 0-8091-2062-3

Published by Paulist Press

**Editorial Office:** 1865 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10023

**Business Office:** 545 Island Road, Ramsey, N.J. 07446

Printed and bound in  
the United States of  
America

# A Tale of Two Documents

**John R. Donahue**

For those Catholics concerned about ordination of women for the ministerial priesthood the period from July, 1976, through January, 1977, was the "best of times" and the "worst of times." Advocates of such ordination were encouraged by published reports in late June of some results of the April, 1976, meeting of the Pontifical Biblical Commission.<sup>1</sup> Most startling to some observers were the three votes attributed to the Commission: (1) a unanimous (17-0) vote that the New Testament does not settle in a clear way and once and for all whether women can be ordained priests, (2) a 12-5 vote in favor of the view that scriptural grounds alone are not enough to exclude the possibility of ordaining women and (3) a 12-5 vote that Christ's plan would not be transgressed by permitting the ordination of women.<sup>2</sup> For those opposed to the ordination of women the "best of times" came on January 27, 1977, with the publication by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Declaration (*Inter Insigniores*) on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood which declared Catholic teaching to be that "the Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination."<sup>3</sup>

Catholics and non-Catholics, lay people and scholars alike, are therefore confronted by an apparent conflict between an official Roman

statement (hereafter, referred to as the Declaration) and the report of an official Roman Commission. Where the Biblical Commission says that the New Testament leaves the question open, the Congregation states that it is precisely the will of Christ as attested in the New Testament which determined early Church practice and subsequent tradition. Independent of one's judgment about which view is more faithful to the New Testament and also independent of one's sympathies, in order to understand the difference between the two documents some comments must be made about the Vatican offices which issued the documents.

### *The Biblical Commission and Its "Report"*

The Pontifical Biblical Commission, the oldest of the formal commissions of the modern papacy, was established by Leo XIII on October 30, 1902, in order to oversee proper biblical interpretation and to foster biblical studies.<sup>4</sup> In the early decades of its history it was associated with a series of *responsa* or decrees which were in opposition to modern trends of biblical interpretation. It has also issued instructions, of which the most famous is the 1964 *Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels*.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to 1971 the only *formal members* of the Commission were the 10 or more Cardinals, even though from its inception the Commission employed for its deliberations consultors or experts in biblical studies. On June 27, 1971, in his *Motu Proprio* (Apostolic Brief), *Sedula Cura*, Paul VI promulgated a new set of regulations for the Commission.<sup>6</sup> In place of the Cardinal members, the Commission was to be composed of a Cardinal-President, a Secretary proposed by the President, and twenty formal members who were to be "scholars of the biblical sciences from various schools and nations."<sup>7</sup>

In its recognition of the need for trained scholars in the discussion of biblical questions and in its "internationalizing" of a Vatican office, the re-

organization was seen as a progressive move. At the same time the re-organization weakened whatever independent status the Biblical Commission possessed. The Cardinal President was to be the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Franjo Seper). The Biblical Commission itself was to be in effect a sub-commission of this same Congregation and whatever conclusions it reached were to be transmitted "for the use of the Congregation on Doctrine."<sup>8</sup> The Biblical Commission could no longer issue any independent reports; its only formal vehicle of communication was through the Congregation on Doctrine. In this light the apparent ignoring of the Biblical Commission's report by the Congregation of the Doctrine makes some sense, even if it does not evoke much assent. In the mind of the Congregation the work of the Biblical Commission is merely advisory. It is not seen as a consultative body of experts which may arrive at unexpected or un hoped for conclusions which would be normative in any discussion.<sup>9</sup>

The report of the Biblical Commission which was made public July, 1976 is not really an official or finished document but the unofficially leaked portions of sections of the Commission's deliberations. The question of the ordination of women occupied the Biblical Commission prior to and during its plenary sessions of April, 1975 and 1976. Given the time spent and the high quality of scholarship represented by members of the Commission, one could have hoped for a more thorough and adequate biblical statement on women. The Report cannot be read with this expectation. Its introduction and four sections comprise answers to specific questions, rather than organic parts of a finished piece. Because of the secrecy which surrounds the work of all Vatican Offices, the actual questions posed are unknown. Like the problems behind Paul's letters, the questions must be deduced from the often cryptic answers to them.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time the Report does summarize major aspects of the best New Testament scholarship on women. Also the significance of the Report is not in the cogency or polish of the public statement but in the

votes which accompanied it. In spite of its official status as a subcommission of the Congregation on Doctrine, and in face of public and clearly articulated statements about what was and was to be the official teaching on women's ordination, the Commission arrived at a conclusion different from that of the Congregation.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the ecclesiastical status of the report, the conclusions and the votes of the Commission are signs of an emerging pluralism in Catholic thought as well as of a changing relationship between the official Magisterium and theologians.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Congregation and Its Declaration*

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under whose direct authority the Declaration was issued has a long and important history. It was founded by Paul III in 1542 as "The Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition," was later called the Holy Office, and, on December 7, 1965, was re-organized by Paul VI and given its present name.<sup>13</sup> Though at this time some of the more harsh juridical procedures of the Congregation were mitigated, it still functions as a overseer of orthodoxy.

Given the history and juridical status of this Congregation and given the public statements of Paul VI over the past three years, the conclusion of the Congregation should have come as a surprise to no one. From all indications it was sometime in early 1975 that Paul VI mandated the Congregation to prepare a statement on women's ordination.<sup>14</sup> From this same period onward the position of Paul VI became increasingly clear. On April 18, 1975, he stated that "women did not receive the call to the apostolate of the twelve and therefore to the ordained ministry."<sup>15</sup>

In the exchange of letters with the Archbishop of Canterbury, especially in the letter of November 30, 1975, Paul VI expressed, in brief form, what was to be the substance of the argument in the Declaration: the example of Jesus in choosing only

men is determinative of Church doctrine and practice.<sup>16</sup> The only new elements in the final Declaration are certain expansions of this statement and the addition of the theological argument on the natural resemblance between Christ and the minister of the Eucharist. All of this suggests that during that very period when the Biblical Commission was studying the matter, the conclusions, the general shape of the argument and perhaps the actual formulation of the final Declaration of the Congregation were nearing completion.

In this light a discrepancy between the Commission's Report and the Congregation's Declaration is not surprising. What is, however, a bit surprising is the apparent absence of any formal participation in the deliberations by the Secretariat for Christian Unity. The initial contacts on the issue between Anglicans and Catholics took place through this Secretariat. However, when the Declaration was released there was no one present representing this Secretariat, and the Swiss Journal *Orientierung* reports that the Declaration hit the Secretariat members "like a bolt from the blue."<sup>17</sup> Such an apparent lack of communication between Roman offices dealing with a critical issue is surprising in view of the regulation of Paul VI in his 1967 reform of the Curia that when business falls under the province of a number of departments, it is to be discussed "on the basis of consultation of the departments concerned."<sup>18</sup>

This glance at the offices involved and at some of the events of the past few years suggests that the Declaration of January 27 cannot be seen as the end product of serious and sustained reflection and study on the part of a ...