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John O'Brien: Women's Ordination in the Catholic Church

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Book Reviews

JOHN O'BRIEN
**WOMEN'S ORDINATION
IN THE CATHOLIC
CHURCH.**

Eugene, OR: CASCADE BOOKS, 2020.
201 PP. (PBK).
ISBN 9781725268043. \$26.¹

Women's Ordination in the Catholic Church, by John O'Brien, comes at an interesting time, the right time. It poses the right questions and suggests interesting answers.¹ The controversy over the non-promotion or non-appointment (O'Brien prefers "non-ordainability") of women to the priesthood in the Catholic Church is beclouded with cultural assumptions and cultural wars over gender. Gender as a social construct determines male-female roles. Those gender roles are themselves time-space bound and not to be hardened into irreformable laws in face of surging social change. Nigerian feminist sociologists, working from postcolonial epistemological framework, go further. They argue that the colonial-postcolonial dominant ideology of gender is externally imposed; a product of wrongheaded "anthropology".²

O'Brien's work takes the reader through a thorough historical investigation of the foundations of and positions adopt-

ed on the non-ordainability of women to the priesthood by *Inter Insigniores*, Declaration of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) that Pope Paul VI approved, confirmed and ordered to be published, October 15 1976. This declaration has developed its own life; repeated and reaffirmed under subsequent popes. John Paul II, in *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (1994), concluded that non-ordainability of women should be definitively held by all the faithful. Benedict XVI and recently Pope Francis have repeated the precept. However, in the concluding chapter of his book, O'Brien takes the reader to December 28, 1970, when Bishop Felix Maria Davidek, the underground Catholic Bishop of the Czech Republic (supported by the Vatican) ordained Ludmila Javorova, priest. Davidek saw women ordination as part of the answer to the challenge of ministry in the communist republic: "female priests" could casually visit "female prisoners" without arousing suspicion. Davidek died in 1987. Ludmila's letter to John Paul II explaining the circumstances of her ordination never received a reply (p. 193). Would the Pope have modified his position for pastoral reasons (*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* notwithstanding)? One is left wondering!

Despite the fact that by the Pontificate of John Paul II the official position was that the conversation on women ordination was over, interest in the question keeps on increasing. That the position of *Inter Insigniores* was taken up by Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, only shows that it is

1. Originally published in *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology*, vol. 31 (2019): 142-7, ©The Ecumenical Association of Nigerian Theologians. Reprinted by permission of the author and publisher.

still an issue that deserves attention.

The Synod of Amazonia, in its Final Document (#103), proposed permanent women deacons. Pope Francis, in his characteristic approach to synodality, did not overrule the Synod. Nor did he, in *Querida Amazonia*, wish to “duplicate” the Final Document. Rather he wished to “encourage everyone to read it in full” (#3). The permanent diaconate of women is therefore still a subject of legitimate discussion. In fact, at the request of the International Union of Superiors’ General, Pope Francis did set up a study group (2016) on the ordination of deaconesses. Though the findings were inconclusive (“ordination” or “blessing?”), the matter is still on the table (p. 92). That is why as a theologian, John O’Brien thought that the 2018 note from the CDF repeating what has been said repeatedly since 1976 on Women’s Ordination in the Catholic Church merit comments in a monograph.

The merit of O’Brien’s important study, that any reader of this monograph would appreciate, is the patient historical research. He is attentive to the fluid nature or concept of ministry (*diakonia*) in New Testament times. He follows the best authorities to reject the habitual confusion of the notion of the Twelve (irreplaceable) with the Apostles that included women. For instance, Mary Magdalene was recognized and called “apostle”—the “apostle to the apostles”.³ According to O’Brien’s study, the practice in the time of the Fathers was fluid. Female deacons and widows are more common in the East, but not absent from the West. Note the interesting expression, *hē diakonos* (the female deacon) combining feminine article with masculine noun. This should not go unexamined. O’Brien insists that “funerary inscriptions . . . even well into the Byzantine period, indicate widespread use of the masculine form, *diakonos*, to refer to women who ministered in official capaci-

ties as ‘deacons.’ One of them, Sophia, is not only called ‘the deacon’ (*hē diakonos*) . . . but also called ‘the second Phoebe.’” (p.50)

The CDF, in *Inter Insigniores*, based its position against women ordination on the authority of the Fathers and Scholastics. Strangely, Aquinas was omitted from the cloud of witnesses. This aroused the interest of O’Brien. What actually were the foundations for denying ordination to women, a position that appeared closed by the Middle Ages?

Those familiar with the Scholastic tradition know that from Peter Lombard and Alexander of Hales through Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas the debate on sacraments sharpened, and the conversation around Orders narrowed (Fourth Lateran 1215); the priesthood intimately connected with the Eucharist (confecting *in persona Christi*). Aquinas saw no difference between the presbyter and the bishop: both are ministerial priests that confect the Eucharist. They differ only in the delimitation of areas of administrative competence or jurisdiction.⁴ Consequently, ordination gives the authority to convoke the assembly (church) to celebrate the Eucharist: the Eucharist makes the Church, and on the other hand, the Church makes the Eucharist. So, no Church as such without the Eucharist.

Since the Scholastics were crucial for the non-ordainability argument of CDF (*Inter Insigniores*), what is the basis for women exclusion from the administration of this sacrament, Eucharist, (they can administer “baptism”, the sacrament of initiation)? Duns Scotus was of the firm view that if the exclusion did not go back to Christ-tradition, the exclusion of women would be a great injustice against the female sex. *Inter Insigniores* named four leading Scholastics as witnesses to the rootedness in tradition of the exclusion—Bonaventure and Scotus, Richard of Middleton and Durandus

of Saint-Pourgain—but curiously excluded Thomas Aquinas. O'Brien's reading of the history is of the view that the *doctor communis* (Leo XIII), Thomas Aquinas, did not state, with the aid of extrinsic reasons (Scripture-tradition), that the exclusion of women unambiguously goes back to the teaching/practice of Jesus and the Apostles. Rather, Aquinas' explanation of the practice falls within attempted intrinsic (as opposed to extrinsic) theological reasoning (faith seeking understanding of this practice) (p.131). But ultimately it is dependent on the socio-psychological understanding of authority, arising from feudal/medieval notions of hierarchy. In this hierarchical reasoning, the man (male) is the head, superior in dignity (ordainable), over the woman; the woman, female- inferior, is by nature subject (non-ordainable). Therefore, one can ordain a slave-male, but not a free-born-female. This feudalistic sociocultural argumentation, based on "flawed anthropology of gender" (p.190), is unconvincing.

Inter Insigniores did state that Scripture has not made this matter of non-ordainability "immediately obvious" (p. 35). ("This is no surprise" says *Inter Insigniores*, "for the questions that the Word of God brings before us go beyond the obvious.")⁵ As it is not obviously proven to go back to the practice of Jesus, the Scholastics constitute the bedrock for the argument of *Inter Insigniores*. O'Brien appreciates this dependence on the Scholastics as covering the core of the debate. He carefully draws his conclusion following the lead of Karl Rahner who asserted that *Inter Insigniores* "should not be dismissed outright, it comes from Roman teaching and not simply the opinion of theologians". Nevertheless, despite papal approval, "it is not a definitive decision". Consequently, "It is in principle reformable and it can (which is not to say a priori that it must) be erroneous." (p.34).

On the question of male-priest representation (*in persona Christi*), of the Risen Christ, O'Brien sums up Rahner's thinking: "the mere fact that Jesus was male is no answer to the question of women's ordination, since it is not clear that a person fulfilling Christ's mandate and 'in that sense, but not otherwise', acting *in persona Christi* must at the same time represent Christ precisely in his maleness." O'Brien's argument closes, following Rahner, the "conclusion seems inescapable that the attitude of Jesus and the Apostles is sufficiently explained by the cultural and sociological milieu in which they acted." (p. 35) This response to the practice of non-ordainability as a matter of discipline arising from culture and not from doctrine-tradition of Jesus and the Apostles, enables the reader to follow with ease O'Brien's review of the fluid practice and recognition of ministry through history. One takes seriously the evidence of inscriptions memorializing ordained *presbytera* (not to be confused with wives of priests) in Sicily and other parts of Southern Italy in the 5th century. One notes with interest the condemnations of ordinations of deaconesses and *presbytera* as proof by negation—real ordinations whose validity is not denied but ordinations that are being declared illicit.

The case of abbesses in the West is of much interest. The decision to restrict their hearing of confessions to only the nuns under their watch provides another example of the call to the exercise of ministry. They were restricted because they were performing Reconciliation as part of their ministry, and as of right. Abbesses were, for O'Brien and his historical sources, the transmutation of the clerical order of deaconesses that the Council of Orange declared illegal in the 5th century. If the Abbesses presided over Reconciliation and gave absolution in the name of the church, theirs was ministry

deriving from ordination, appointment; and their installation was not a simple blessing. The Mozarabic *Liber Ordinum* (*Ordo ad ordinationem Abbatissum*), opens their ordination with the liturgical prayer invoking God who does not discriminate as to sexuality: “*Omnipotens Domine Deus, apud quem non est discretio sexuum.*” O’Brien notes that the Abbess “is clothed in sacred vestments and crowned with a mitre”; the crosier of the Abbess is not purely ceremonial, rather a symbol of office. (p. 114)

In the Eastern Church, one of the most interesting accounts on deaconesses comes from 5th century Constantinople, of John Chrysostom and emperor theologian Theodosius. Olympias was a 30-year-old widow when she was ordained deacon. She was inadmissible because she needed to attain the canonical age of 60 years. However, in the dominant socio- ecclesial ideology of “estate churches”, “bishops and estate owners understood the church as an extended household” (p.96). This impacted on ministerial offices. With Olympias widowed at age 22, and with immense wealth attracting all social categories including bishops, and with a revolt threatening Constantinople, the rules changed. The estate church of clans forced Constantinople to bend the rule, and Olympias became a deaconess at age 30.

Taking account of the sociocultural impacts on Women’s Ordination, it is less difficult to agree with O’Brien’s historical critical analysis of the Scriptural material—his preference for the Martha (Woman) of John’s Gospel (presiding over a house church) to the reduced role of the Martha (Woman) of Luke-Acts (never “a missionary preacher”). The fluidity of ministry gives one

more flexibility in interpreting the headship of house churches, the ministry of deaconesses and associates of Paul like Phoebe who took charge of churches. Phoebe, in particular, was the trusted bearer of Paul’s letter to the Church of Rome, a cluster of house churches that Paul has not visited (pp. 52-53); this displays the clear functioning of women in ministry.

Can one say that O’Brien, in this monograph, is patient with Pope Francis, i.e. trusting that with time, his new synodal style (e.g. the Pope’s reaction to the Final Document of the Synod of Amazonia), and building wider consensus, the Pope will pass to action on the ordination of deaconesses? This is the feeling one gets from O’Brien’s comments on the stand of Pope Francis. The mind of O’Brien is clear on the matter. Citing Cardinal Gracias (Mumbai), O’Brien could predict that “prelates from the nine-nation Amazonian region could still petition the Vatican on a case-by-case basis for the diaconal ministry of women through ordination” (p. 94n37).

The reader may agree or disagree with the conclusions of this interesting work. The last sentence comes as no surprise. It is framed in such a firm way as to leave the reader in no doubt about the position of the author, who gets the last word: “The practice and presumption of the non-ordainability of women is a matter of ecclesiastical law and not one of divine precept. That law is reformable. Women have been and can be ordained in the Catholic Church.” (194)

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ENDNOTES

1. The author was gracious to make available to me an advance copy of the book; for which I am most grateful.
2. The best known and most studied scholars are Oyèrónkẹ̀ Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women:*

Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London & New Jersey: Zed, 1987. Nkiru Nzegwu, *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture*. Suny Series, Feminist Philosophy. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.

- 3 O'Brien notes that "apostle" was used frequently in the 9th century *Life of Magdalene*, by Rabanus Maurus. (p. 48n10).
4. O'Brien notes correctly that Vatican II will set aside Aquinas' theology to teach that the episcopacy is the fullness of the priesthood.
5. *Inter Insigniores*, #2: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curial_congregations/dfaith/documents/rc_con_fai_ith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html [accessed August 13, 2020]

CARDINAL DIEUDONNÉ
NZAPALAINGA

***JE SUIS VENU VOUS
APPORTER LA PAIX.***

FRANCE: MEDIASPAUL, 2020. 156PP. (PBK).
ISBN 9782712215507. \$20.

Je suis venu vous apporter la Paix, ["I have come that you may have Peace"] was written by Spiritan Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga, Archbishop of Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic (CAR).

Born in a disadvantaged district of Bangassou, in the south of the CAR, Dieudonné Nzapalainga wanted to become a priest to follow the example of Father Léon, a Dutch Spiritan missionary very close to the poor. Having become a Spiritan in his turn, he spent several years in France before returning to the Central African Republic as District Superior. Appointed apostolic administrator in 2009 and then archbishop of Bangui in 2012, he became the voice of peace in the civil war that broke out in 2013.

He was created cardinal in 2016, at just 49 years old, after Pope Francis' remarkable visit to Bangui in November 2015. During that visit Pope Francis anticipated the opening of the Holy Door at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and thus inaugurating the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of

Mercy (December 8, 2015 to November 20, 2016) with the opening of the Holy Door of Bangui cathedral. The pope explained this prophetic action, "*The Holy Year begins earlier in this land that has suffered for many years as a result of war, hatred, misunderstanding and a lack of peace.*"

Personally committed to the peace process in his country, Nzapalainga participated alongside the president of the Islamic Council and the president of the Evangelical Alliance in Bangui, in the foundation of the interfaith Platform for Peace in Central Africa. This book gives a rare and original testimony to the Christian challenge to go beyond the usual divisions that separate people and foment suspicion, and to overcome the distrust that often overflows into violence. Shortly after his appointment as Archbishop of Bangui, Nzapalainga had to face the civil war that was ravaging the country and its capital. The conflict, initial-ly political, gradually became labelled and identified as a religious conflict between Christians and Muslims. To stem this wave of violence that nothing seems to be able to stop, he continues to travel all over the country to call for appeasement with an imam and a pastor. "The three saints of Bangui" as *Le Monde* would call them, have succeeded in averting massacres and committing communities to the path of reconciliation. They get involved as mediators