

Why an All-Male Priesthood Remains

by Monica Migliorino Miller - October 4, 2007

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[The Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Teaching of the Church](#)

Sara Butler, Hillenbrand Books, \$23, 132 pages

In May 1994, Pope John Paul II issued his apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* to deal with one specific issue: the Church's ban on the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood – a ban first articulated in the 1976 Vatican declaration *Inter Insigniores*.

In October 1995, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, reaffirmed the doctrinal status of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, stating that the ban on women priests was "taught infallibly." While the doctrine is settled, deep resentment continues in some quarters over the Church's insistence upon an all-male priesthood, and most Catholics still cannot articulate the Church's reasons for the teaching.

Enter *The Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Teaching of the Church*. It attempts to provide a new generation of young Catholics, most especially seminarians, with an understanding of the Church's teaching and to give them a "theological orientation" to the topic that engages the chief objections. The primary focus of the book is a consideration of what its author, Sr. Sara Butler, MSBT, terms the "fundamental" versus the "theological" reasons regarding the ban on women priests.

The fundamental reasons in *Inter Insigniores* begin with a statement that the Church has no authority to admit women to the priesthood. The Church is bound to follow an original gesture of Christ when He established the sacrament of Holy Orders. When Christ called only men to the company of the Twelve, we are confronted by Christ's will. The all-male priesthood begins with Christ, is continued by the apostles, and is part of the unbroken tradition of the Church. The document explains: "The Church intends to remain faithful to the type of ordained ministry willed by the Lord Jesus Christ and carefully maintained by the apostles."

Many argue, however, that Christ was subject to the historical conditions of His day. Now that times have changed, they say, the Church is free to abandon a practice that discriminates against women.

Butler points out that *Inter Insigniores* and *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* both insist on Christ's sovereign freedom in His choice of male apostles. Behind the fundamental reasons is a christological one and, while the Church's documents insist on Christ's freedom, it is the theologian's task to explain why this is important. Unfortunately, Butler does not offer this much-needed explanation.

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