

Newly released letters reiterate Vatican opposition to female priests

By Agostino Bono

Vatican City (NC) — Because the Catholic Church will not ordain women, such ordinations by some Anglican churches has become "an increasingly serious obstacle" to unity between the two churches, Pope John Paul II told the primate of the worldwide Anglican community.

The Catholic Church believes it cannot change the 2,000-year-old tradition of an exclusively male priesthood, the pope added in a previously confidential Dec. 20, 1984, letter to Anglican Archbishop Robert Runcie of Canterbury, England, head of the Church of England.

Another top Catholic official also wrote Archbishop Runcie that any dialogue on the issue must focus on how ordination of

women is an obstacle to unity.

The strong Catholic stand on the issue was made public June 30 when the Vatican released letters exchanged among the pope, Archbishop Runcie, and Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, president of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

The pope said his letter was prompted by the growing trend among Anglican churches to ordain women.

The issue is controversial among Anglicans. Many Anglican churches, such as the Episcopal Church in the United States, allow women to be ordained. Others, such as the Church of England, considered the "mother church" of the Anglican Communion, do not.

In a Nov. 22, 1985, answer to the pope,

Archbishop Runcie proposed "the urgent need for a joint study of the question of the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood."

Cardinal Willebrands, answering for the Catholic Church, said the issue was bound to arise naturally in current Anglican-Catholic dialogue on obstacles to full unity between the two churches.

"In the context of the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue, the most immediate question will be about how the ordination of women in some parts of the Anglican Communion affects progress toward fuller communion between us," the cardinal said in a June 17, 1986, letter to the archbishop.

In a previous letter to Cardinal Willebrands, Archbishop Runcie outlined the "sincere conviction" held by the Anglican leaders who support female ordination. He said he wrote the letter after consultation with worldwide Anglican leaders.

"On the Anglican side there has been a growing conviction that there exist in Scripture and tradition no fundamental objections to the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood," Archbishop Runcie said.

"The humanity taken by the Word, and now the risen and ascended humanity of the Lord of all creation, must be a humanity inclusive of women, if half the human race is to share in the redemption he won for us on the cross," the archbishop added.

"Because the humanity of Christ our high priest includes male and female, it is thus urged that the ministerial priesthood should now be opened to women in order the more perfectly to represent Christ's inclusive high priesthood," he said.

The archbishop noted, however, that there

is "deep division on this matter among Anglicans." He said that he did not expect the Church of England to change its opposition to female priests in the near future.

Anglican churches which have ordained women "have indicated to me that their experience has been generally beneficial," he said.

Cardinal Willebrands, in answer, criticized Anglican theological support for women priests.

"A development like the ordination of women does nothing to deepen the communion between us and weakens the communion that currently exists," the cardinal said.

"The ordination only of men to the presbyterate and episcopate is the unbroken tradition of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Neither church understands itself to be competent to alter this tradition," he said.

The Catholic position is that "we can never ignore the fact that Christ is a man," said Cardinal Willebrands. "His male identity is an inherent feature of the economy of salvation," he added.

"The question of the rights of women to hold secular office is a quite separate matter and should not be connected or paralleled with the question of women's ordination," he said.

Anglican Bishop Mark Santer of Kensington, co-chairman of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, said the discussion would be "primarily an ecclesiological question."

"What kind of communion can you have when you cannot actually recognize all of each other's ministers?" he asked.

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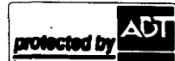
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