

## World &amp; Nation

# Pope's new letter seen as strong defense of women

By Jerry Filteau

Washington (NC) — While Pope John Paul II's new letter on women ruled out their ordination to the priesthood, initial reactions to the document viewed it as a strong defense of women's dignity.

"He says the inequality we've practiced is due to original sin, and we've got to work to overcome this sinful condition," said Bishop Joseph L. Imesch of Joliet, Ill., head of the U.S. bishops' committee that is writing a national pastoral letter on women's concerns.

The first draft of the U.S. pastoral calls sexism a sin. It is based on the view that attitudes or actions which treat women as less than equal to men must be overcome.

The papal letter "affirms the basic assumptions of our own document," Bishop Imesch said.

The papal letter, titled "Mulieris Dignitatem" ("The Dignity of Women"), was released by the Vatican September 30. The 119-page document focused especially on the place of women in Scripture, with particular emphasis on Eve, Mary and

Christ's approach to women.

The pope described the letter as a "meditation" on the "bases" of the equal dignity of men and women. He said specific issues of women's role in Church and society would be addressed in a separate document which is to appear later.

In the letter the pope argued against traditional views that God meant women to be subject to men. He said that when God told Eve, after she and Adam sinned, "he shall rule over you," it did not refer to the way God meant things to be, but rather to "the constant 'inclination to sin,' the tendency to go against the moral order," that results from original sin.

God's intended order, the pope said, is for men and women to be of equal dignity and united in marriage in "a mutual subjection" in which each affirms the other's personhood, dignity and vocation.

Pope John Paul described Mary as "the archetype of the whole human race" and said that "Christ's way of acting (toward women), the Gospel of his words and deeds, is a consistent protest against whatever

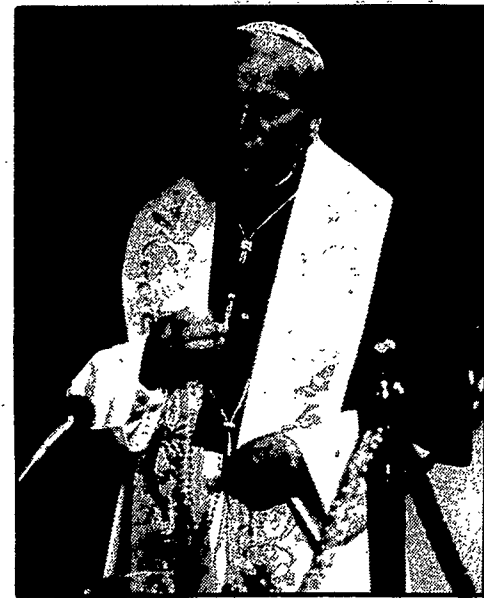
offends the dignity of women."

At a press conference in Rome Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, described the new papal document as a "passionate appeal" on behalf of woman as "guardian of the human being."

Cardinal Ratzinger defended the pope's reaffirmation of an all-male priesthood, saying the Church's teaching on that issue is a matter of faith in the way Christ instituted the sacraments, not a matter of women's dignity.

In the letter Pope John Paul argued that in Christ's teaching and actions "one can find nothing which reflects the discrimination against women prevalent in his day." That fact, he said, undermines the argument of some that Christ merely followed prevailing customs when he chose only male apostles.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark, a member of the U.S. bishops' committee drafting a pastoral letter on women's concerns, welcomed the pope's letter as "a contribution of particular importance to the Church's on-



going reflection on her developing appreciation of women in the Church and society."

Although Bishop Clark wrote in a prepared statement that he "looked forward to a more careful and thoughtful reading" of the papal letter, his initial impression was of a "carefully reasoned letter which invites a deeper understanding of the Church's tradition."

"I do not think it intends to break new ground," he wrote. "As the letter becomes more well known I shall look forward to the reactions it will elicit. My belief is that it is through such constructive initiatives as the one the pope makes with this letter and the discussions it will generate that the Church makes progress in her pastoral life."

The Women's Ordination Conference, a Virginia-based U.S. organization, agreed in a statement that it was "delighted" to see the pope addressing the issue.

"Every time the Vatican says something against the ordination of women, we get more press, more discussion, more interested people joining our organization," said Ruth Fitzpatrick, the conference's national coordinator.

Doris Donnelly, a theologian currently writing a book on Marian theology, said in a telephone interview that the new papal document "moves the discussion about women to a new level," chiefly through its interpretation of Scripture.

The pope's scriptural interpretations of women's dignity and equality exhibit an awareness of and sympathy to "the way that women are reading the Scriptures today," she said.

She said some people had expressed fears that the papal letter would "write off" the U.S. bishops' pastoral on women, but instead "it supports it, I would say."

Donnelly praised the pope's emphasis on "the radical equality of women," on the need for male responsibility in sexual relations and childbearing, and on the sinfulness of discrimination against women.

"Something curious about this document is that it is as much about men as it is about women," she said.

## Ordination causes setback in ecumenical dialogue

By Agostino Bono

Vatican City (NC) — The joint Anglican-Catholic dialogue commission has pledged "to carry forward the search for greater unity" despite the "major problem" of differences over female ordination.

"Issues relating to the ordination of women and its consequences for the work being done on the reconciliation of ministries" is a major theme on the Anglican-Catholic agenda, said a commission communique.

The communique was issued at the end of the commission's August 24-September 2 meeting in Edinburgh, Scotland. It was published in the September 25 Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*.

On September 24, a black American was elected the first woman bishop in the U.S. Episcopal Church and in the worldwide Anglican Communion. The Rev. Barbara C. Harris, a 58-year-old pastor in Philadelphia, was chosen to be suffragan (or auxiliary) bishop of Massachusetts by clergy and lay delegates to a diocesan convention.

Her election hinged on confirmation by a majority of diocesan committees representing Episcopal priests and laity nationwide, and a majority of the bishops heading U.S. dioceses. Although Bishop-designate Harris' election is expected to create considerable debate, a spokesman at the Episcopal Church Center in New York said that "it's been rare — only once or twice in history — that an elected bishop has not been affirmed." Her installation is expected in early 1989.

Ms. Harris was born in Philadelphia, was active in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and was ordained a priest in 1980. She is divorced. Prior to seeking ordination, she headed the public relations department of Sun Oil Co.

Rev. Harris' election is a "major setback" to dialogues aimed at uniting the Roman Catholic and the Anglican Communion as "one flock with one shepherd," according to Archbishop John F. Whealon of Hartford, Conn.

Archbishop Whealon, who is co-chairman of the U.S. Anglican-Roman Catholic Consultations, said the election of a woman bishop "means a shattering of that dream" of unity.

Atonement Father Thaddeus Horgan, associate director of the U.S. bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs, said the decision "accentuates the need" for continued dialogue between the two churches.

"While as an ecumenist, I sincerely regret that this impairs our sense of communion," as imperfect as it may be, "it doesn't negate my hope" for continued progress and eventual unity, Father Horgan said.

Anglican churches in several countries already ordain women priests, and earlier this year the Lambeth Conference, a major meeting of the worldwide Anglican leadership, left the door open for national Anglican churches to ordain women bishops.

Episcopal Bishop Frank Griswold of Chicago, a member of the U.S. Anglican-Roman Catholic Consultation, said Bishop-designate Harris' election is "a legitimate and welcome expansion of the Catholic tradition."

"It is clearly the vocation of the Anglican Communion to lead the way in integrating the gifts and graces of women into the historic threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons," he said in a September 27 statement.

Blessed Sacrament Father Ernest Falardeau, an observer to the consultations from the National Association of Diocesan

Ecumenical Officers, said the Roman Catholic response to the ordination of a woman bishop could take one of several paths: "respect the Anglican Communion's decision, try to get them to rescind the decision, or Rome could change its position."

"There is still a lot of work to be done," Father Falardeau said.

On several occasions, Pope John Paul II has told Anglican bishops that the ordination of women is a major stumbling block to unity of the churches because of the Catholic belief that Christ wanted an all-male priesthood.

The latest reaffirmation of the Catholic belief was in an apostolic letter he wrote, dated August 15, on the dignity of women. The document said Christ freely chose a male-only priesthood. The pope refuted arguments that Jesus did so simply because the culture and legal traditions of his times barred women from leadership roles.

Archbishop Whealon, in a telephone interview with National Catholic News Service in Washington, said it had been hoped that Anglican-Roman Catholic conversations would lead to an "Anglican rite" in the Church.

The rite would be similar to the Latin and Eastern rites of the Church, he said, in allowing Anglicans to keep their parishes and practices while at the same time recognizing them as part of "one flock with one shepherd," the pope.

The Roman Catholic Church would question not only the validity of the ordination of a woman bishop, but also the validity of orders she then confers upon others, Archbishop Whealon said.

The dialogues will continue, the archbishop added, but "at a lower level."

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