

Pope reasserts teachings against women priests

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — With his apostolic letter that definitively rules out women priests, Pope John Paul II gave a new framework of authority to a controversial church teaching.

Blunt and succinct, the six-page document makes its main point in the last few sentences: that the all-male priesthood is an essential element of the church's very constitution and therefore is not open to change or debate by its

members.

Issued May 30, the letter "On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone" contains no new teachings. Its importance lies in its authoritative form.

In one of the more unequivocal statements of this pontificate, the letter emphasizes that the nonadmission of women to the priesthood is something that must be "definitively held by all the church's faithful."

In the hierarchy of church teachings, that ranks very high. Vatican officials are hoping ordinary Catholics and the-

ologians will get the point and accept it.

The papal document "calls us to join in the obedience to the faith, and whoever does not do so obviously separates himself from the faith of the church," Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Vatican's top doctrinal official, told Vatican Radio.

The cardinal's remarks made it clear that dissent on the issue will not be tolerated.

The document is not an infallible pronouncement of the extraordinary magisterium of the pope. Vatican sources

said such an "ex cathedra" declaration was considered inappropriate in this case. For one thing, the pope was not defining a new dogma but confirming teachings that have been consistently taught over previous centuries.

Yet the sources said this does not detract from the authoritative weight of the document. Some even argue that it fits the criteria of infallible teachings of the ordinary magisterium, as outlined by the Second Vatican Council.

"The genre of the document itself is not 'ex cathedra,' but the doctrine is infallible teaching, as taught by all the bishops, and the pope here is giving his voice to it," said one Vatican official.

A Vatican statement said the papal letter expressed teaching that was not merely probable but "certainly true." The question of the all-male priesthood "does not belong to matters freely open to dispute," and those who teach a contrary position are leading consciences into error, it said.

Monsignor Inos Biffi, a Milan theologian, said that in treating the issue of women and ordination, the pope "brought to bear all his special and non-fallible charisma." The letter effectively "removes the question from free theological discussion" and cuts off speculation about a future change in policy, he said.

A Vatican official agreed, saying theologians would be free to examine arguments on the issue but not to endorse "anything contrary to that affirmed by the pope" or undermine the church's position.

The letter was described as a personal initiative of Pope John Paul, who spent a long time considering the text. Some observers saw it as an answer to the Church of England's decision last year to allow women priests, but the pope had already responded to that decision in a more direct way.

The letter is aimed more at the Catholic faithful, who may have known the church's position on women's ordination but thought it could change one day — whether that be in 10 or 20 or 100 years. The pope sees these kinds of doubts as divisive, and his letter makes every effort to clear them up.

That is why, after noting that "in some places" the church's teaching is still questioned, the pope delivers what he hopes is the final word on the subject: "I declare that the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the church's faithful."

For the pope, no rebuttals are allowed.

NCCB president says letter doesn't limit women's potential roles

By Julie Asher and Nancy O'Brien
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Restricting priestly ordination to men in the Catholic Church "does not limit the potential of women in the church," said Baltimore Archbishop William H. Keeler, president of the U.S. bishops' conference.

The archbishop, in reaction to a May 30 apostolic letter by Pope John Paul II on women priests, said: "The church is completely committed to the equality of all persons in dignity and nobility. The church however does not accept an understanding of equality which ignores the unique roles and gifts of women and men." (See article above.)

In his statement, issued in Washington, Archbishop Keeler urged "all those who may find this further affirmation of the church's authentic teaching difficult to accept to receive it lovingly, pray for understanding and to see in it a call for them to live out fully their fundamental Christian vocation according to the gifts that they have been given."

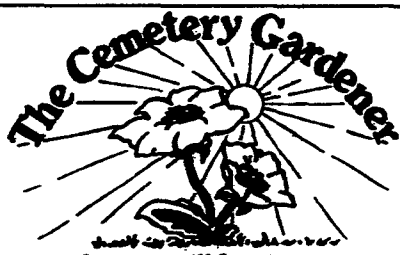
However, the archbishop said, the church still "affirms the fundamental equality of women and men, who are both created in the image of God."



AP/Wide World Photos

Smuggling continues

With binoculars in hand, William Swing, U.S. ambassador to Haiti, May 25 glances across Saumatre Lake at the Haiti-Dominican Republican border crossing of Malpasse, Haiti. The truck in the background is carrying containers of smuggled gasoline. Swing's inspection of the area where violations of a world trade embargo on Haiti occur daily, came hours before President Clinton's envoy arrived in the Dominican Republic, attempting to press Dominican leader Joaquin Balaguer into stopping smugglers.



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