

## Pope's letter received differently

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

In his recent apostolic letter on the ordination of women, the pope called a halt to any further public debate about the issue. As far as he is concerned, the matter is settled. The Catholic Church is not authorized to ordain women to the priesthood.

But there are two important questions raised by the papal letter that can be addressed without violating the pope's unequivocal order that the issue's merits no longer be openly disputed.

Those two questions have to do with the letter's authority and with its reception by the faithful.

1. The letter comes close to a claim of infallibility. Pope John Paul II uses the adverb "definitively" to characterize his judgment that the church has "no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination of women."

Theologians know that in recent decades the word "definitive" has often been used interchangeably with the word "infallible." This is so not only in the pre-Vatican II manuals of theology but in the conciliar teaching itself (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 25).

It's understandable, therefore, why a Milanese theologian would have described the papal letter's authority as "non-fallible" to indicate that it was only a hair's breath short of "infalli-



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ble."

We know, of course, that, like pregnancy, there is no such thing as "almost" or "a little bit infallible." A teaching is either immune from error or it is not.

Moreover, the church's Code of Canon Law makes it unmistakably clear that if there is any doubt whatsoever about the infallible nature of an official teaching, then that teaching is not infallible (canon 749.3).

By that standard, the pope's letter is not an infallible pronouncement — that is, a teaching for all time. A non-infallible teaching like this one can change.

2. The second question has to do

with reception, that is, with how the reaction to the letter is to be handled pastorally. I offer two examples by way of illustration.

The bishop of a relatively small midwestern diocese immediately declared that he accepted the papal teaching "without any reservation and with my whole heart" and asked the people of his diocese to accept it as well "with the obedience of faith."

By contrast, Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee released an extraordinarily thoughtful response which, like his midwestern counterpart's, assures the pope of his obedience to this "command," but which also addresses the pastorally sensitive issue of reception.

Archbishop Weakland asks what he is to do, as a bishop, about the Catholics under his pastoral care who will surely be distressed — some in the extreme — over this latest papal statement.

What effects will it have on "so many women and men, especially younger women and vowed religious, who still see this question as one of justice and equality, all protestations to the contrary notwithstanding?"

How is he to deal with "the anger and disillusionment which will inevitably result?" What is he to do "to instill hope in so many women who are now living on the margins of the Church?"

What effects, he asks, will the let-

ter have on theologians "who are still concerned about the theological underpinnings of the pope's teaching? Will they be able to express honestly their concerns?"

What effects will the letter have on those men and women "for whom the issue of the way in which the Church exercises its authority is already a problem? ... Are they to be put against the wall, as it were, over this issue?"

And what effects, lastly, will there be on ecumenical relations? Does the declaration mean that Catholics can now only have hope of eventual reunion with Orthodox churches? But even their bishops, the archbishop reminds us, "are usually shocked when the Pope teaches the bishops and does not speak in union with them."

Archbishop Weakland speaks of this as "a difficult moment for many" in his archdiocese, and he expresses the "hope that those who find it so will let me accompany them on that journey, as painful as it might be."

That is a refreshingly long way from simply asking his people to accept the teaching "with the obedience of faith." His is the response not of a good soldier, but of a good pastor.

"I am the good shepherd," Jesus said. "I know my own and my own know me" (John 10:14). Roughly translated: "I'm not out of touch with my people, and they're not alienated from me."

## Book tells how to avoid retirement 'trap'

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce  
Syndicated columnist

When Ginny and Jim French retired a few years ago, they promised themselves that they would not fall into the "trap" that had caught so many others.

"We had long suspected that retirement is like a yawning net, ensnaring many persons who no longer work for a living and holding them captive — immobile, ineffectual, and without dignity," Ginny said.

To learn how to avoid this trap themselves, the Frenches decided to ask other retirees how they had done it.

"We wondered where were the people whose resourcefulness could inspire the rest of us to latch on to something interesting exciting, remunerative, adventuresome, useful, daring, creative, fun, or none of the above, to fill the years that stretch ahead," Jim said.

The couple set out on a series of trips that eventually led them to every state. "Our intent was to seek out plain, ordinary people, even as you and I, who had kicked over their rock-



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ing chairs and found unique purposeful lives underneath," Ginny explained.

The result of their quest can be found in their new book, *Avoiding the Retirement Trap: 50 profiles of people from every state in the union who are doing something meaningful with their retirement* (ACTA Publications, Chicago.)

Here's what the Frenches discov-

ered from the people they profiled: "To describe one of these self-starters is to describe them all, because, amazingly, they have so many qualities in common. Their individual personalities seem to merge for us, and they have become almost a composite character in our minds.

- They do not think of themselves as old and don't talk about age.

- They know how old they are but consider it a dull subject for conversation.

- Never once during interviews did they use cliches like "I'm not as young as I once was," "I have to slow down now," "I can't do as much as I once did," or "Not at my age."

- They are vibrant and inquisitive.

- They are aware of what's happening in the world because they read and listen and care.

- They are enthusiastic about what they are doing with their lives, and, more importantly, they are interested in what *we* are doing with *ours*.

- Most appear to be in robust health, but in any case they are not obsessed with their physical conditions or subjects pertaining thereto.

- They realized far ahead that retirement was in the offing and they began planning accordingly. When the big day came, they were ready for it! Immediately they launched into a brand new course of action, allowing no time for depression or boredom to set in.

- They calculate that tomorrow is only 24 hours past today, and the chances are excellent that they won't lose any important skills (mental or physical) overnight. They fully expect, therefore, to be as active and productive tomorrow as they are today.

- They are impatient with all others who are wasting this phase of their lives and often employ such expressions as "people should get motivated," "use it or lose it," "you gotta get out of bed," "I had to do something," "rocking is not for me," "I couldn't just sit around."

- They have a sense of humor, laugh easily, are optimistic, and don't take themselves too seriously.

- They hug a lot, display a willingness to share their favorite things with others, and give strong evidence that their relationship with God is intact.

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