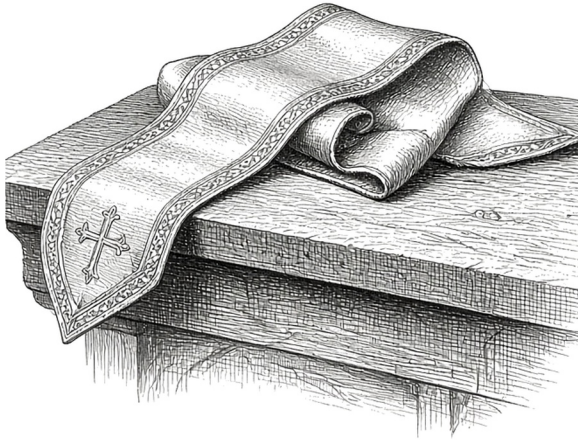




SILENT HOMILIES

The Church Has No Authority

*Why the Catholic priesthood is reserved to men —
and of sinners without consent for women*





SILENT HOMILIES

The Church Has No Authority

*Why the Catholic priesthood is reserved to men, said without
contempt for women*

Dedication

*For every woman who has loved the Mass and still asked the hard
question, and for every priest who has had to answer it without raising
his voice.*

Preface

Why this book was written

In May 1994 Pope John Paul II wrote a short letter called *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*.

The sentence people remember is the one this book will not avoid. He declared that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women, and that this judgement is to be held definitively by all the faithful.

He did not say that women are less holy. He did not say that they cannot teach, or that they cannot hold real responsibility. He said that the Church does not possess the power to do this particular thing.

That is a different claim from “we would rather not.” It is also a different claim from “women do not matter.” This book tries to keep those three sentences apart. When they are mixed together, a doctrine quickly turns into an insult.

Most people think of the Catholic Church as an institution that claims too much authority. On this subject she says the opposite. She says there is a sacrament she received and cannot redesign. She understands herself as the steward of what Christ gave her, not as the owner of the sacraments.

I write as a parish priest. I have sat in churches where the pews are mostly women. I have watched a parish office keep running because a woman knew every name, every form, and every quiet crisis. If you took the women out of many of our parishes tomorrow, the parish would not simply become smaller. It would stop functioning.

That is why this book cannot be only about a limit. It also has to be about the life that continues inside the limit: Baptism, service, holiness, and the women without whom there would be no parish left in which to argue.

A thoughtful critic may understand the Catholic argument completely and still reject it. For many modern readers, exclusion from an office because of sex looks like discrimination. That reaction is not stupid. The book will try to show why Catholic sacramental theology sees the issue differently. It will not pretend that the only problem is misunderstanding.

I have sometimes wished, standing in a kitchen with a woman who serves better than I preach, that the map were different. Wishing does not create a power the Church says she does not have. The honest Catholic sentence is not “I like this.” It is “we were not given this.” Those two sentences can live in one priest.

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How to use this book

If the teaching hurts, begin with Baptism and with the women the Church has already called holy. If you think this is only a rule from the 1990s, begin with the apostles and with the 1976 declaration *Inter Insigniores*. If you are a priest who has to explain this in a kitchen, begin anywhere and stay gentle.

You do not have to finish the book in order. You do have to keep two sentences together. The Church says she has no authority to confer priestly ordination on women. The Church has never said that women are a lesser kind of Christian.

Each chapter ends with a reflection and a short prayer. The chapter is meant to teach. The reflection is meant to make you look at the way you already live, speak, notice people, and rank them.

Part One

What the Church claims

Chapter 1

The sentence nobody can avoid

The Church did not say she would rather not. She said she cannot.

People usually expect the Church to claim more power than she should. On this subject she claims less.

In 1994 John Paul II did not write a long treatise. He wrote a short apostolic letter to the bishops. After recalling the constant practice of the Church, and after recalling the longer argument already set out in 1976, he said this:

“I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgement is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.”

The Latin is even tighter. *Facultatem nullatenus habere*: she does not have the faculty in any way. He located the matter in the divine constitution of the Church, not in a policy that a later generation might simply update.

That sentence is the centre of this book. Everything else is an attempt to explain it without turning it into a sneer, and without turning it into a slogan.

“We will not” is a decision. Decisions can be reversed when the climate changes. “We cannot” is a claim about what the Church is. It says that even a pope who wanted to confer this sacrament would not, by wanting it, possess the power to make the act the sacrament it claims to be.

Catholics already accept this kind of limit in other places, though they do not always notice it. The Church cannot baptise with milk. She

cannot celebrate the Eucharist with beer. She cannot declare that a valid marriage between two baptised people never happened simply because it became unhappy. She has enormous authority. She does not have unlimited authority over the sacraments. She receives them.

The surprising thing, for many readers, is that the Church applies that same logic here. She does not treat the male character of priestly ordination as a custom she happens to like. She treats it as something she was given and therefore cannot confer otherwise.

You may find that claim insufficient. You may find it painful. You may think the Church has mistaken a historical pattern for a divine limit. Those reactions belong in a serious conversation. What does not belong is the pretence that she has only ever said “not yet.”

She has said something stricter.

A year after the letter, a formal doubt was put to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Was this teaching to be understood as belonging to the deposit of faith? The answer was yes. The Congregation said the teaching requires definitive assent. It said the teaching had been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal Magisterium. That phrase means the teaching of the bishops with the Pope across the world and across time. The Congregation added that the Pope, confirming the brethren, had formally declared what is to be held always, everywhere, and by all.

The book will come back to those technical words and put them into ordinary English. For now it is enough to notice the shape of the claim. The Church is not announcing a preference. She is announcing a limit on her own power.

That is why the title of this book is not a boast. It is a confession.

A Reflection

We are used to institutions that protect their power. We are less used to an institution that says, on a matter people care about, “this is not ours to give.”

Notice what you do with that sentence. Some people hear it as humility and are almost relieved. Some hear it as a disguise for refusal and become angrier. Some hear it and immediately start ranking the people in the room by who is ordained and who is not.

That last reaction is worth noticing. If the first thing the sentence does in me is to sort human beings into the important and the remainder, I have already treated ordination as a verdict on worth. The Church says she is not doing that. I may be doing it anyway.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, you gave the Church powers, and you withheld some. Teach us to bear a limit without turning it into contempt, and to bear a hard teaching without pretending it is only a mood. Amen.

Chapter 2

Baptism before Orders

A woman is not a half-Christian.

Baptism makes a Christian.

That sentence is so familiar that we stop hearing it. We treat Baptism as a pretty beginning, a family photograph, a name in a register. The Church treats it as the first and most decisive consecration of a human life.

Through water and the Spirit a person is joined to Christ. She becomes a member of his Body. She is given a share in his priesthood, his prophetic office and his royal dignity. The Catechism calls this the common priesthood of the faithful. It is not a polite metaphor. It is the reason a mother can offer the day. It is the reason a dying man can unite his pain to the Cross. It is the reason every baptised woman already stands inside the holiest room the Church possesses.

Holy Orders is another sacrament. It does not make someone more baptised. It does not raise a man a rung above the woman who taught him the Sign of the Cross. It configures a man to Christ the Head for a particular service: to preach in the Church's name, to reconcile, to anoint, and above all to stand at the altar and do what only the ordained may do.

The ministerial priesthood exists for the common priesthood, not the other way round. The Catechism is blunt about the difference. The two participations in Christ's one priesthood are ordered to each other, but they differ in essence, not merely in degree. In ordinary language that means: they are not two versions of the same job. One is the priesthood of the whole baptised people. The other is a particular service

given so that the baptised people can live from the sacraments.

Confusing the two is the first reason conversations about women and the priesthood become unkind. If you think ordination is the certificate that proves you are a full Christian, then a woman who is not ordained will look like a half-Christian. That is not Catholic teaching. It is a clerical superstition. A woman is not a half-Christian because she is not ordained any more than a man is a half-Christian because he is not a mother.

I have baptised girls and boys at the same font with the same words. I have watched a grandmother hold a child over the water and realised that the Church's future was being carried, that morning, by a pair of tired arms that will never wear a stole. If this book does only one useful thing, let it be this: before we argue about Orders, we remember Baptism. Everything else sits on that water.

Why, then, do we need ordained priests at all, if Baptism already makes us a priestly people? Because the common priesthood still needs to be served. The ministerial priesthood is not a higher caste. It is a means by which Christ continues to build up the baptised. Without it there is no Eucharist in the Catholic sense, and without the Eucharist the common priesthood is starved of the gift it was given to offer. The two belong together. They are not rivals.

I have watched a child at the font look not at me but at her mother. That is theologically accurate. The priest pours the water. The woman has already carried the child to the door. The Church calls both of those acts holy. Only one of them is a sacrament of Orders.

There is no such person, in Catholic theology, as "just a laywoman." There are baptised women, some of them saints, some of them tired, all of them consecrated.

A Reflection

We often recognise the priest immediately because of what he wears. We may not recognise the Baptism of the woman sitting three pews away, because Baptism has no uniform.

Yet Baptism is the sacrament that made both of them members of Christ.

When I enter a church, do I instinctively rank people according to their visibility? Do I speak of “just a laywoman” as if the font had done only half a job? Do I treat the stole as the proof that a life has finally become serious?

The Church says the most important consecration in the building has already happened to everyone who is wet with that sacrament, including the women who will never vest. I should ask whether I actually believe that, or only when it costs me nothing.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you were baptised in the Jordan and you made Baptism the door of your Church. Forgive us for treating the font as a formality and the stole as a rank. Teach us the common priesthood of the faithful. Guard us from the superstition that only the ordained are fully yours. Amen.

Chapter 3

What priesthood is for

A sacrament can be necessary without being the measure of a person's worth.

If Baptism is first, what is priesthood for?

Catholic theology answers that question more narrowly than popular speech does. In ordinary talk, “priest” can mean the most religious person in the room, the professional Christian, the one who is closer to God. None of those meanings is the Catholic one.

The ministerial priest is given a share in the office Christ entrusted to the apostles: to teach, to sanctify and to govern the faithful. At the centre of that office is the Eucharist. The priest stands at the altar in the person of Christ the Head and speaks the words that are not his own. He also absolves, anoints, and, if he is a bishop, ordains. These are not decorations around a more important management job. They are the reason the sacrament exists.

That is why the Church can say two things at once without contradiction. The Eucharist is necessary for the Church's life. The man who consecrates it is not, by that fact, the most important Christian in the room.

A sacrament can be necessary without being the summit of human dignity. Food is necessary. It is not the definition of a person. The priest's consecration is a particular gift in the household. It is not the household's measure of greatness.

This matters because many arguments about women's ordination are not, underneath, arguments about a sacrament. They are arguments about status. If the only serious Catholic life is the ordained life, then

reserving priesthood to men will always sound like a declaration that men are more important. The Church rejects that assumption. She does not always live as if she rejected it. That failure is part of the problem this book has to face later.

The priest is not the parish. He is not the faith. He is not the only person in the building who has been given a mission. He is a man configured to Christ for a service the baptised cannot give themselves. A priest can forget why he was ordained. He can begin to think that the collar gives him importance rather than responsibility. When that happens, he has misunderstood his priesthood. When the rest of us forget the same thing, we start treating every other gift as a rehearsal for the one gift we think counts.

Priesthood is for the offering of the Eucharist, for the forgiveness of sins, for the shepherding of a people who already belong to Christ. It is not a prize for holiness. It is not a certificate of intelligence. It is not a promotion from Baptism. If we keep those sentences in mind, the later chapters will make more sense. If we lose them, every later chapter will sound like an insult, whatever words we use.

A Reflection

Ask yourself what you privately mean by the word priest.

Do you mean the man who can do what only the ordained may do? Or do you mean the person who matters most?

Those two meanings live close together in Catholic rooms. They are not the same. One is a description of a sacrament. The other is a ranking of souls.

I should notice which meaning I reach for when I am tired, when I am impressed, and when I am disappointed in the clergy. The meaning I use when I am tired is usually the one I actually hold.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, you gave your Church priests so that your people would not be left without the Eucharist and without mercy. Keep us from treating that gift as a rank. Keep priests from treating it as a possession. Amen.

Chapter 4

Why the Twelve matter

Jesus honoured women and still chose twelve men for a particular office.

Christ chose twelve men as apostles.

The Church has always read that choice as more than a habit of first-century manners. She has also always insisted that he broke other customs of his time with ease.

He spoke with the Samaritan woman when a respectable rabbi might have walked on. He let Mary of Bethany sit as a disciple. He defended the woman who anointed him. He entrusted the first public announcement of the Resurrection to Mary Magdalene. He did not, however, place a woman among the Twelve.

That combination is the biblical heart of the Catholic argument, and it should be stated without pretending it is obvious. A modern reader looks at the Gospels and sees a Lord who honours women far beyond the manners of his time. The same reader then asks, quite reasonably, why that Lord would stop at the threshold of the college that becomes the episcopal office.

The 1976 declaration *Inter Insigniores* spends patient pages on this point. It does not say that Jesus was trapped by his culture. It says the opposite. A Lord who ignored so many social fences would not have been unable to ignore this one if the college of the Twelve had been only a social arrangement. The Church has not claimed the right to revise that sign.

The number twelve is not decoration. It is a claim about Israel. The Twelve stand in relation to the twelve tribes. They are the beginning of a

reconstituted people. Catholic faith reads the later episcopal college, and the priesthood that shares its work, as a continuation of that apostolic office. The Church therefore treats the form of the college as belonging to her constitution, not as furniture she may rearrange when the culture changes.

Notice what the argument is not. It is not that the Twelve were the only people Jesus loved. It is not that women were spiritually second. The Gospel is full of the opposite evidence. It is that this particular office — the office that becomes, in Catholic faith, the episcopal college and the priesthood that shares its work — was given in a form the Church does not believe she may redesign.

Respect and office are not the same gift. He respected the Samaritan woman enough to reveal himself to her. He respected Magdalene enough to send her to the brothers. He did not make either of them one of the Twelve. The Church reads that as a limit on her own power, not as a comment on those women's worth.

This is where people become restless, and they are not foolish to become restless. We have learned to ask whether a male-only college was simply the furniture of a patriarchal world. The Catholic answer is not "stop asking." The Catholic answer is that the question has been asked for decades, in official documents, and that the Church still reads the Twelve as a choice that belongs to her constitution.

If that still feels tight, it should. The tightness is real. So is the honour he gave them.

A Reflection

It is easy to use one page of the Gospel to silence another.

Some of us remember the calling of the Twelve and forget the Samaritan well. Some of us remember the well and treat the Twelve as an embarrassment.

I should ask which page I prefer, and why. Preference is not the same as reading. The Church is asking me to keep both pages open at once: the Lord who honoured women, and the Lord who chose twelve men for a particular office. If I can only keep one of those pages, I am no longer reading the Gospel. I am editing it.

A short prayer

Christ who chose the Twelve and sent Magdalene, keep both memories alive in us. Do not let us rewrite your friendships into a modern committee. Do not let us use your choice as a weapon against the women you honoured. Amen.

Chapter 5

The women around Jesus

The Gospel is not a story in which women arrive late.

Before the Church ever argued about Orders, the Gospel had already given women a place that no honest reader can call secondary.

Luke names women who provided for Jesus out of their own resources: Mary called Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many others. They are not a crowd at the edge of the picture. They travel with him. They support the work. In a world where respectable religious teachers did not gather women as disciples in that way, the detail is not small.

The Samaritan woman at the well is given a conversation that many men in the Gospel never receive. Jesus tells her who he is. She leaves her jar and becomes a witness to her own town. The men of the town come to him because of her word, and then because they have heard him themselves. The Church has never needed to pretend that scene is minor.

Mary of Bethany sits at his feet. In that culture the posture is the posture of a disciple. Her sister Martha serves, and is not therefore a lesser Christian, though the scene has often been used to rank the two women against each other. Jesus defends Mary's choice without cancelling Martha's work. The Church needs both memories.

A woman anoints him. The disciples complain about the cost. He defends her. He says that what she has done will be told wherever the Gospel is preached. The promise has been kept more faithfully in the text than in some of our sermons.

Women stand at the Cross when most of the Twelve have run. The Gospels are not shy about that fact. The first witnesses of the empty

tomb are women. In a legal culture that often discounted the testimony of women, the evangelists keep the names anyway. They could have tidied the story. They did not.

None of this is a modern discovery. The Church has read these pages for two thousand years. What has sometimes failed is not the text. It is the habit of speaking as if the New Testament were a men's document with a few female interruptions.

Catholic teaching about priesthood does not require us to minimise these women. It requires the opposite. If the argument from the Twelve is going to be honest, it has to be made in a Church that has actually noticed who was at the well, who sat at his feet, who paid for the journey, who stood under the Cross, and who ran from the tomb.

The women around Jesus do not settle the question of Orders by themselves. They do settle a different question. They settle whether Catholicism can speak of women as an afterthought and still claim to have read its own book. It cannot.

A Reflection

When I picture the Gospel, who is standing near Jesus?

If the picture in my head is twelve men and a blur of unnamed women, I have not been reading carefully. If the picture is only the women, and the Twelve have become an awkward footnote, I have not been reading carefully either.

The honest exercise is simpler. Read one scene in which a woman is honoured, and then admit what it does and does not decide. It decides that she is not extra. It does not, by itself, decide who stands at the altar. Holding both of those thoughts at once is harder than choosing a side.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, you spoke to women when others would not, and you received their faith, their courage and their care. Forgive every sermon that made them an afterthought in your Gospel. Teach us to read the pages that are actually there. Amen.

Chapter 6

Mary and the measure of holiness

The holiest human person after her Son was not ordained.

Mary is not a priest of the altar.

She is the Mother of God. That fact is not a debating point. Catholics sometimes use her as a cheap argument, the way a tired uncle uses a proverb. That helps nobody. Mary is not a slogan waiting to end a conversation. She is the woman in whom the Church sees what a human life looks like when it is wholly given to God.

She said yes. She carried him. She gave him his human nature. She stood at the Cross when most of the Twelve had run. She prayed with the apostles before Pentecost. The Church gives her a place of honour that no priest, bishop or pope possesses.

If the priesthood were simply the highest prize for holiness, she would have had it. The fact that the holiest human person after her Son was not ordained is, for the Church, a clue that Orders is not a ladder of worth. It is a particular configuration to Christ the Bridegroom and Head in the sacrament of the Eucharist and of reconciliation.

This does not, by itself, prove that priestly ordination must be reserved to men. Mary's unordained holiness would still be unique if the Church ordained women tomorrow. What it does prove is something Catholics keep forgetting. Ordination cannot be the Catholic measure of human greatness.

If it were, we would have to say that the Mother of God occupies a lower rung than a newly ordained curate. Nobody who prays the Hail Mary believes that. Holiness is not an office. Office is not holiness. The Church has always known the difference in her prayers. She forgets it in

her manners.

This does not make the priesthood unimportant. It makes the priesthood particular. The Eucharist is necessary for the Church's life. The man who consecrates it is not, by that fact, the most important Christian in the room.

I have seen this most clearly at funerals. A woman who kept the faith in a family for forty years is carried in. The priest meets her at the door. He has the oil and the words. She has the life. If we leave that church thinking that the important person was the one in vestments, we have misunderstood both the Mass and the dead.

Honouring Mary does not let the Church off the hook. It shows what the Church actually thinks greatness is. It does not excuse a parish that treats living women as furniture. If Mary is the argument, the argument cuts both ways. It forbids us to treat ordination as the only serious Christian life. It also forbids us to treat the Church's limit as a sneer. She is not a priest. She is not therefore small.

The rosary in a grandmother's hands has probably converted more households than some of our clever schemes. That is not a slight on the priesthood. It is a fact about how faith actually travels. Mary's yes is the pattern. The priest's consecration is a different gift in the same household.

If a newly ordained man is treated as more important than the Mother of God, the parish has not become too Marian. It has become too clerical.

A Reflection

We often assume the person nearest the microphone is the most important.

Catholicism places the Mother of God above every priest and bishop in holiness while giving her no priestly office.

What does that reveal about my own idea of importance?

When I praise Mary, am I using her to end a conversation, or am I letting her correct the way I rank the living women in front of me? The first use is easy. The second would change a parish.

A short prayer

Holy Mary, Mother of God, you said yes to God and you were never a priest of the altar. Teach us that holiness is not an office. Keep priests from thinking they have outranked you. Keep the rest of us from using you as a proverb. Amen.

Chapter 7

Mary Magdalene and the empty tomb

Apostle of the apostles — and what that does not prove.

On Easter morning the first public witness of the Resurrection is a woman.

The Western Church has long called Mary Magdalene *apostola apostolorum* — apostle of the apostles. The title is old. It is not a modern campaign slogan placed on her after the fact. Hippolytus of Rome used language of that kind in the early third century. Medieval preachers kept it. The Church knew what the Gospel had done.

In 2016 Pope Francis raised her memorial to a feast, the rank given to the apostles themselves. The decree that accompanied the decision used the old title on purpose. The point was not to turn Magdalene into a priest. The point was to stop treating her as a minor figure who happens to appear in the Easter readings.

John's Gospel is careful. Mary stands weeping. She sees the Lord and does not at first know him. He speaks her name. She is sent to the brothers with the news: "I have seen the Lord." That is the first Easter announcement. It is not a homily in the later technical sense, and it is not honest to dress it up as if it were. It is something more primitive and more decisive. The risen Christ makes a woman the first messenger of the fact on which the Church stands.

What does that prove? It proves that women are not spiritually secondary. It proves that any Catholic who talks as if women were an afterthought in the New Testament has not read the New Testament. It proves that the Church lives off news that a woman was trusted to carry.

What does it not prove? It does not, by itself, prove that Magdalene was a priest, or that the Twelve were a mistake, or that the later sacrament of Orders is a betrayal of Easter. The same Lord who sent her to the brothers is the Lord who had already chosen the Twelve. The Church has always held both facts in one hand. Drop either and the story becomes a weapon.

The Church does not treat every trust as the same trust. Magdalene is trusted with witness. The Twelve are trusted with a college that becomes the sacrament of Orders. Those are not two versions of one prize. They are two gifts. Confusing them is how we turn Easter into an argument and lose the woman who was actually there.

I like to stand in an empty church on an Easter Monday and remember that the first person who knew what the empty tomb meant was not wearing a chasuble. She was carrying news. The Church lives off that news. Every priest who has ever preached an Easter homily arrives after a woman has already spoken.

A Reflection

Easter can be used as a weapon from either side.

One side remembers Magdalene and treats the male priesthood as a betrayal of the garden. The other side defends the priesthood and lets her become a name in a reading.

I should ask which misuse is more natural to me. Then I should read John 20 slowly enough to notice that the Lord does two things in the same morning: he sends a woman with the news, and he does not thereby cancel the college he had already formed. The text is larger than the use I want to make of it.

A short prayer

Risen Lord, you sent a woman with the first news. We thank you for Mary Magdalene, apostle of the apostles. Forgive every sermon that made women an afterthought in your Gospel. Let the Church hear her running feet again, and still remain the Church that does not claim a power she was not given. Amen.

Chapter 8

Inter Insigniores

1976: the longer argument came first.

Inter Insigniores came first, in 1976.

Paul VI asked the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to set out why the Church did not consider herself authorised to admit women to priestly ordination. The occasion was not abstract. In those years other Christian communities were beginning to ordain women, and Catholics were asking whether the Catholic Church would follow. The Archbishop of Canterbury had written to Paul VI. The Pope's reply was already clear: the Church does not consider herself authorised to do this. Inter Insigniores is the patient explanation of that sentence.

The document is longer than John Paul's later letter. It needed to be. It argues from Scripture, from the unbroken practice of East and West, and from the sacramental sign. It also says clearly that Christ's choice was not a surrender to the low view of women around him.

That last point is essential. If Jesus had simply copied the manners of his age, the Catholic argument would collapse. Inter Insigniores refuses that explanation. It points to the freedom with which he treated women, and then asks why, given that freedom, the college of the Twelve remained male. The document's answer is that the choice belongs to the economy of salvation, not to social convention.

The declaration also refuses a bad modern habit: the habit of treating Galatians 3:28 as if it abolished every distinction of office. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." That is a sentence about baptismal dignity and salvation. It is not a sentence about who

may stand at the altar. The same apostle who wrote it also wrote about ministries that are not identical. Equality of dignity is not identity of function.

One sentence in *Inter Insigniores* is worth keeping near at hand. The greatest in the Kingdom are not the ministers, but the saints. If Catholics remembered only that, a great deal of the cruelty around this subject would lose its fuel.

The document is sometimes treated as a relic. It is not. *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* stands on it. The 1994 letter is short because the 1976 declaration had already done the longer work. If you speak only of 1994 you make the teaching sound like a sudden papal mood. It was not.

Inter Insigniores also distinguishes the Church's claim from a pile of customs. Tradition, in the Catholic sense, is not everything old. It is the Church's long memory of what she received. Tradition can carry discipline that later changes. Fasting rules change. The language of the liturgy can change. The Church's claim here is that this particular practice is not that kind of discipline. You may find the argument insufficient. You may not honestly call it a whim.

The declaration is not cruel about women. It is explicit that the reservation of priesthood does not mean lesser dignity, and that it cannot be construed as discrimination in the sense the world usually means by that word. Whether a modern reader accepts that distinction is another question. The document at least knows the distinction has to be made.

A Reflection

Many Catholics have strong opinions about this teaching and have never read the first long official explanation of it.

That is not a moral failure. Official documents are not light reading. But it does mean that a good deal of our confidence is second-hand.

I should notice whether my view of the subject, for or against, has ever been formed by the actual pages the Church wrote when she tried to explain herself. If it has not, I am arguing with a rumour of the teaching, or with a rumour of the objection. Rumours are easier. They are also how rooms become unkind.

A short prayer

For Paul VI and the writers of Inter Insigniores: give us their patience. For every reader who finds the pages hard: give us their refusal to treat Christ's choice as a prejudice. For the saints who are greater than the ministers: make us want that greatness more than a title. Amen.

Chapter 9

Ordinatio Sacerdotalis

1994: no authority whatsoever.

Ordinatio Sacerdotalis closed a debate some had begun to treat as a debate about discipline.

On 22 May 1994, the Solemnity of Pentecost, John Paul II wrote to the bishops. The letter is short enough to read in a sitting. That was part of its purpose. He was not opening a new enquiry. He was removing doubt about a matter he said belonged to the Church's divine constitution.

He recalled that priestly ordination had from the beginning been reserved to men in the Catholic Church. He recalled the practice of the Eastern Churches. He recalled Paul VI's correspondence with the Archbishop of Canterbury. He recalled Inter Insigniores. He recalled that Christ chose those whom he willed, and that the apostles did the same when they chose fellow workers.

Then he said the sentence that still divides rooms.

"Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren, I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgement is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful."

Three phrases need ordinary English.

"No authority whatsoever" means faculty, not taste. The Pope was not saying that the Church had decided not to ordain women. He was

saying that the Church believes she does not have the power to do so.

“Divine constitution” means this is not a rule of good order, like the age for confirmation or the form of a parish council. It belongs to what the Church is, not only to how she currently organises herself.

“Definitively held” means the faithful are not free to treat the question as open in the way a disciplinary question is open. The Church has other questions she leaves in that condition. She has said this one is not among them.

A year later, on 28 October 1995, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith answered a formal doubt. The doubt was precise. Is the teaching that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women, presented in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* as to be held definitively, to be understood as belonging to the deposit of faith?

The answer was yes.

The Congregation added an explanation. The teaching requires definitive assent. It is founded on the written Word of God. It has been constantly preserved and applied in the Tradition of the Church from the beginning. It has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal Magisterium, the teaching of the bishops with the Pope across the world and across time. In the present circumstances the Pope, confirming the brethren, had formally declared what is to be held always, everywhere, and by all, as belonging to the deposit of the faith.

This is where accuracy matters. Catholics sometimes call *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* itself an *ex cathedra* definition, as if the short letter were a solemn new dogma pronounced in the most formal papal key. That is not how the Congregation described it. The Congregation said the teaching had already been infallibly proposed by the ordinary and universal Magisterium, and that the Pope had formally confirmed what

must be held. The distinction is technical. It is not a way of weakening the claim. It is a way of not claiming more, or less, than the Church claimed.

You may find that hard. You may not honestly call it optional and still speak as a Catholic in the ordinary sense of that word.

What the letter does not do is tell a parish how to treat the women who keep it alive. That work is left to the rest of the magisterium, and to the manners of priests who have actually met those women. A definitive teaching can still be held cruelly. Holding it definitively and holding it cruelly are not the same act.

A Reflection

“Definitive” is a word that can make a Catholic feel either safe or trapped.

I should ask which of those feelings rises first in me, and what that feeling is protecting.

If I accept the teaching, do I use the word definitive as a way of refusing to listen to the person in front of me? If I struggle with the teaching, do I need the Church to have overstated her claim in order for my struggle to be allowed?

The documents are short. They can be read. Much of the heat around them is generated by people who have only heard the rumour of a sentence.

A short prayer

Lord, on Pentecost 1994 a pope said the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer this sacrament on women. Give us the courage to hold a hard teaching without cruelty, and the honesty not to call optional what the Church has called definitive. Amen.

Chapter 10

A steward, not an owner

The Church may change many things. She says she may not change this.

Catholics sometimes imagine that the Pope can do anything he likes if he wants it badly enough.

That is not how the Church understands herself. A pope has real authority. He does not own the sacraments. He is a steward. A steward may arrange the house. He may not sell the house or rebuild it according to a new design of his own.

This is why the Church can change some things and not others. She can change the language of the Mass. She can change fasting rules. She can change the age at which Confirmation is given. She can change the way parish councils work. She can open instituted ministries to women, as Pope Francis did in 2021 when he revised canon law so that women as well as men could be instituted as lectors and acolytes. Those changes matter. They are also changes of a different kind from a change to the matter of a sacrament.

The Church cannot decide that water is optional in Baptism. She cannot decide that bread and wine are optional in the Eucharist. She cannot decide that a valid marriage between two baptised people can be dissolved by a later change of heart. She says she cannot decide that a woman may be ordained a priest.

The point of listing those examples is not to flatten them into one pile. The point is to show the kind of claim being made. On some questions the Church speaks as a legislator. On others she speaks as a recipient. *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* places priestly ordination in the second

category.

People find this frustrating because they want the Church to be consistent in a different way. If she can change the liturgy, why can she not change this? The Catholic answer is that not every old practice is a sacrament, and not every sacrament is a custom. The hard work is telling the difference. The Church has spent decades saying that this difference is real.

You may think she has drawn the line in the wrong place. That is a serious disagreement. It is not the same disagreement as accusing her of simple stubbornness. A steward who will not sell the house is not doing the same thing as a landlord who will not listen.

A Reflection

Most of us treat authority as something that either expands or shrinks.

The Church is asking us to imagine a third possibility: an authority that is real and yet bounded by what it received.

I should ask whether I can live with that kind of authority. Do I only respect a Church that can give me what I want? Do I only respect a Church that never says no? Both habits make the sacraments look like policies. They are not.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, you entrusted the Church with gifts she did not invent. Teach us the difference between a steward and an owner. Keep us from treating your sacraments as material we may redesign when the culture changes. Amen.

Part Two

Why this is not a verdict on women

Chapter 11

Ordination is not importance

Catholic teaching does not measure a person by the stole.

If the Church is right about Orders, she still has to be right about people.

The teaching that priestly ordination is reserved to men is not a ranking of human worth. It does not mean that a priest is more loved by God than a woman in the third pew. It does not mean that a bishop is holier than the grandmother who taught him to pray. It does not mean that the only serious Catholic life is the ordained life.

Catholics know this in theory. They forget it in practice. A young man is ordained and suddenly people speak to him as if he has become a different kind of human being. A woman who has run the parish for twenty years is introduced as “just a volunteer.” A religious sister who has taught three generations is treated as background to the priest’s visit.

That forgetfulness is not required by the teaching. It is a habit. The habit has a name later in this book: clericalism. For now it is enough to say that the Church’s official doctrine does not support it.

The Catechism is clear that the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood differ in essence, not only in degree. That sentence is often used to defend the uniqueness of Holy Orders. It should also be used to defend the uniqueness of Baptism. The priest is not a more complete version of the baptised person. He is a baptised man given a particular service.

If Catholics measured importance by holiness, they would have to start with Mary, with the martyrs, with hidden carers, with people whose names never appear in a diocesan directory. If they measured importance by the future of the faith, they would have to start with the

people who actually hand it on: parents, grandparents, catechists, sisters, teachers. Many of those people are women.

The priesthood remains extraordinarily important. Without priests there is no Eucharist in the Catholic sense, no sacramental absolution, no anointing in the Church's ordinary way. That is not a small thing. It is simply not the same thing as a verdict on who matters.

A Reflection

Think of the last parish gathering you attended.

Whom did you treat as the centre of the room? Whom did you treat as useful background?

Those instincts are often kinder than our theories. They also reveal what we actually believe about importance. The Church says Baptism is the first consecration. I should ask whether my manners agree.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, you loved the Twelve and you loved the women who followed you. Keep us from measuring a Christian life by a collar. Teach us to honour the priesthood without using it as a ranking of souls. Amen.

Chapter 12

Women who taught the Church

A Doctor of the Church is not a mascot.

The Catholic Church has given four women the title Doctor of the Church.

The title is not a polite compliment. It means that the Church recognises in their writing a teaching gift that belongs to the whole Church, not only to their own century or their own convent. They are Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, Thérèse of Lisieux and Hildegard of Bingen. None of them was ordained. All of them have taught priests.

Catherine of Siena lived in the fourteenth century. The Pope was then living in Avignon, not in Rome. Catherine, a young laywoman of the Dominican Third Order, wrote to him with a frankness that still startles people. She told Gregory XI that he was responsible for the flock and that he should return to Rome. He did return in 1377. She did not become pope. She became, in the Church's later judgement, a Doctor. The point is not that a letter from a woman runs the Church. The point is that the Church has officially recognised that a woman who never stood at the altar could teach the man who did.

Teresa of Avila reformed Carmel in sixteenth-century Spain. She founded houses, wrote books that remain among the Church's greatest guides to prayer, and met opposition from officials who thought a woman should not be doing such work. The Inquisition examined her. She kept writing. She kept founding. She told her nuns to think carefully and to pray. Four centuries later the Church called her a Doctor, not because she was charming, but because her teaching on prayer is food for the whole Church.

Thérèse of Lisieux died at twenty-four. She never left her Carmel in Normandy. She never preached a mission. She wrote, in obedience, the story of her life. The “little way” she described is not childish. It is a teaching about love in ordinary duties, hidden sacrifices and trust. In 1997 John Paul II declared her a Doctor of the Church. A young enclosed nun became a teacher of bishops. That fact should disturb anyone who thinks teaching authority in the Church can only wear a stole.

Hildegard of Bingen lived in the twelfth century. She was an abbess, a composer, a writer on medicine and a correspondent of bishops and popes. She preached in public, which was unusual. She rebuked clergy for their failures. In 2012 Benedict XVI named her a Doctor of the Church. A medieval abbess still speaks in a Church that has not ordained her.

These four women do not settle the question of priestly ordination. They settle a different question. They settle whether the Catholic Church can speak as if women have only ever been recipients of teaching and never teachers. She cannot. She has already said otherwise in the most formal way she knows.

A Reflection

We often treat the women Doctors as ornaments.

We put their statues out in October or on their feast days and then return to speaking as if the serious teachers of the Church were all men.

I should ask whether I have ever actually read one page of Teresa, Catherine, Thérèse or Hildegard. If I have not, I am using their names as decoration. Decoration is not the same as being taught.

A short prayer

Lord, you gave the Church teachers who never wore a stole. Thank you for Teresa, Catherine, Thérèse and Hildegard. Give us the humility to learn from them, and the honesty not to treat them as ornaments. Amen.

Chapter 13

Foundresses, abbesses and hidden authority

Women have exercised real responsibility in the Church for centuries.

Women have exercised real responsibility in the Church for centuries. Some governed religious communities, founded schools and hospitals, managed large institutions and advised bishops and popes.

In the early and medieval Church an abbess could hold serious authority over a monastery, its lands and its people. She was not a bishop. She was not a priest. She was also not a mascot. In some double monasteries she governed both women and men. The details varied from place to place. The fact remains: governance in the Church did not wait for a stole.

St Angela Merici founded the Company of St Ursula in Brescia in 1535. She wanted women to live a consecrated life in the world and to teach girls. The Ursulines became one of the great teaching families of the Church. Angela was not ordained. She changed the map of Catholic education.

St Louise de Marillac, with St Vincent de Paul, shaped the Daughters of Charity in seventeenth-century France. They went into streets and hospitals rather than remaining behind a grille. The model spread across the world. Much of what Catholics now take for granted in nursing and poor relief has that origin.

St Mary MacKillop founded the Sisters of St Joseph in Australia in 1866 so that poor children could be taught. She was briefly excommunicated by a bishop who later lifted the penalty. She kept founding schools. She is now Australia's first saint. The obstacle did not

cancel the work.

St Frances Xavier Cabrini was sent from Italy to the United States and founded houses for immigrants. She crossed the Atlantic again and again. She is the patron of immigrants. St Catherine McAuley founded the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin in 1831 because she had seen what poverty did to women and children. St Teresa of Calcutta founded the Missionaries of Charity in 1950 because she had seen what poverty did in the streets of Calcutta. None of these women was a priest. All of them changed the life of the Church.

The famous saints are only part of this history. Most of the women who passed on the faith will never be canonised or mentioned in a history book. They were mothers, teachers, religious sisters, catechists and parishioners whose names were known only in their own communities.

This history does not prove that women should be ordained priests. It proves that the Church has already known how to trust women with work that is not ornamental. When Catholics speak as if women have only ever been allowed to arrange flowers, they are not defending tradition. They are forgetting it.

A Reflection

Think of the institutions that actually formed you: a school, a hospital, a parish group, a grandmother's kitchen.

How many of those places were kept alive by women whose names you barely know?

Gratitude does not require a statue. It requires an accurate memory. I should ask whether my picture of "the Church" includes those women, or only the men I can see at the altar.

A short prayer

Lord, thank you for the women who founded houses, taught children, nursed the sick and kept communities alive. Teach us to remember them accurately, and to stop speaking as if the Church began when a man put on vestments. Amen.

Chapter 14

The women who carry parish life

If they left tomorrow, many parishes would stop.

If you want to know who carries a parish, do not look only at the sanctuary on Sunday.

Look at the sacristy on a Saturday morning. Look at the baptism register. Look at the person who knows which house has a new baby and which house has a diagnosis. Look at the person who still has the key to the hall. Look at the person who teaches the children their prayers when the official programme is thin.

In many parishes that person is a woman. Sometimes she is a religious sister. More often she is a laywoman with a paid job or a pension and a second unpaid job that nobody quite names.

I have watched this for years. A parish secretary holds more of the parish's memory than the priest who arrived last September. A catechist knows which child is frightened and which parent is pretending. A woman on the cleaning rota notices the leak before the finance committee does. A Eucharistic minister carries Communion to a house the priest has not yet learned to find.

None of that makes her a priest. All of it makes her necessary.

Catholics sometimes praise this work in a way that sounds like a consolation prize. "Women do the real work." The sentence can be true and still be lazy. The work is real. It should be named, trained, thanked and shared. It should not be used as a way of changing the subject whenever the teaching about Orders is mentioned.

It should also not be used as a way of leaving women with the labour and men with the titles. If a parish depends on women and then speaks as if only the priest matters, the parish has not understood its own life.

I have sat in parish meetings where every practical suggestion came from women and every final decision waited for a man who had not read the papers. That is not fidelity to Holy Orders. That is bad manners dressed up as theology.

A Reflection

Who actually keeps my parish alive during the week?

Can I name them? Have I ever thanked them without making the thanks sound like a speech?

A Church that cannot see the people who already carry her will not suddenly become wise when she talks about vocations. Sight comes first.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, you noticed the women who provided for you out of their own means. Give us that kind of sight in our parishes. Thank you for the women who keep the house standing. Teach us to treat their work as work, not as background. Amen.

Chapter 15

Women in governance today

Ordination and government are not the same office.

The recent appointment of women to senior positions in the Roman Curia shows something important. The Church can entrust considerable responsibility and authority to someone who is not ordained.

This is not a rumour. It has names and dates.

In 2021 Pope Francis issued *Spiritus Domini* and changed canon law so that women as well as men could be instituted, stably and liturgically, as lectors and acolytes. In the same years he appointed Sister Nathalie Beccuaret as under-secretary of the Synod of Bishops, with a right to vote. Sister Alessandra Smerilli, a Salesian and an economist, became secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. Sister Raffaella Petrini became secretary general of the Governorate of Vatican City State and, in 2025, president of the Governorate.

In January 2025 Pope Francis appointed Sister Simona Brambilla prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. That office oversees religious orders across the world. She was the first woman to hold the title of prefect of a dicastery. In 2025 Sister Tiziana Merletti became secretary of the same dicastery.

In 2026 Pope Leo XIV appointed María Montserrat Alvarado, a laywoman and journalist, prefect of the Dicastery for Communication, and appointed Sister Alessandra Smerilli prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

These appointments do not turn those women into priests. They do show that the Church distinguishes between Holy Orders and the many

forms of authority needed to govern her life. A woman can lead a Vatican department without being ordained. That fact is easy to miss if every conversation about women in the Church is forced through the single door of priesthood.

Praedicate Evangelium, the 2022 constitution on the Roman Curia, made this distinction explicit. Governance in the Curia is a matter of canonical mission, not only of sacramental ordination. The Church can give that mission to a baptised person who is not a cleric.

This does not settle every argument. Some Catholics want these appointments to be a first step towards ordination. Some Catholics dislike the appointments because they fear exactly that. Both reactions treat government and priesthood as if they were the same file. The Church is trying, however unevenly, to keep the files distinct.

A Church that cannot say that sentence clearly will keep forcing every gift through one door. She will also keep failing to notice the gifts that are already in the house.

A Reflection

When I hear that a woman has been given real responsibility in the Church, what is my first thought?

Do I think, “At last, a step towards priesthood”? Do I think, “This is a threat to priesthood”? Or can I think, “This is a different kind of service, and it may be exactly what the Church needed”?

The first two reactions treat every office as a version of the same prize. That habit will make both supporters and opponents of the teaching restless for the wrong reason.

A short prayer

Lord, you give different gifts to different members of your Body. Teach us to recognise responsibility that is not ordination, and ordination that is not a ranking of worth. Bless the women now entrusted with offices that once seemed unthinkable. Amen.

Chapter 16

Deaconesses and the question that remains different

The Church has studied this question. She has not treated it as identical with priesthood.

Women called deaconesses existed in parts of the early Church.

Their functions differed from place to place. In some communities they assisted at the baptism of women, visited the sick, kept order among women in the assembly, and carried out works of charity. Historical rites of blessing or appointment existed. Scholars disagree about exactly how those rites should be understood. Some see a sacramental ordination in the later sense. Others see a blessing for a ministry that was real but not the same as the male diaconate.

The Catholic Church has studied the matter more than once in recent years. Pope Francis established a first commission in 2016 and a second in 2020, chaired by Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi. In December 2025 a summary of the second commission's work was published at the request of Pope Leo XIV.

The commission's conclusion was careful. It said that the present state of historical and theological research rules out admitting women to the diaconate understood as a degree of the sacrament of Holy Orders. It also said that this assessment, though strong, does not at present allow a definitive judgement of the same kind as the judgement concerning priestly ordination.

That distinction matters. The Church has said that she has no authority to confer priestly ordination on women, and that this is to be held definitively. She has not spoken about women deacons in exactly

the same register. She has studied, hesitated, encouraged other ministries, and so far declined to proceed with an ordained female diaconate.

In 2021 Pope Francis opened the instituted ministries of lector and acolyte to women. The Petrocchi commission itself hoped that women's access to ministries instituted for the service of the community might be expanded. Those are real developments. They are not the same development as ordaining women deacons.

This chapter is not a campaign for women deacons. It is not a campaign against them either. It is a request for accuracy. The historical deaconess is not a secret priestess waiting to be rediscovered. The present official position is not simply identical with the definitive teaching on priesthood. A different file is still a real file. Treating every ministry question as if it were the priesthood question is how conversations become dishonest.

A Reflection

We like simple maps.

Either the early Church ordained women, or it did not. Either the present Church has closed every related question, or it has opened every related question.

The actual history and the actual documents are less tidy. I should ask whether I can live with that untidiness, or whether I need the past to be a weapon for the side I already prefer.

A short prayer

Lord, you know the ministries of the early Church better than we do. Give scholars honesty, give pastors patience, and give the rest of us the humility not to force every historical detail into the argument we already wanted. Amen.

Chapter 17

Other Christian communities

The disagreement is older than our tempers.

The Catholic Church is not the only Christian community that has faced this question.

Some communities now ordain women as priests and bishops. The Church of England began to ordain women as priests in 1994, the same year as *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, and later consecrated women as bishops. Many Protestant communities had already done so. The Orthodox Churches, like the Catholic Church, have not ordained women as priests.

Paul VI's correspondence with the Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1970s already named the difficulty. The Catholic Church said she did not consider herself authorised to do what another community was preparing to do. That disagreement has pastoral consequences. It affects how Christians recognise one another's ministries. It also affects families in which one spouse is Catholic and the other belongs to a community that ordains women.

This book is not a survey of other Churches. It is enough to say that the Catholic position is not an isolated eccentricity invented in 1994. It stands with a much older stream of East and West. It also stands in disagreement with communities whose faith, baptism and love of Scripture Catholics are bound to respect.

Respect does not require pretence. Catholics can honour the pastoral gifts of women ordained in other communities without saying that the Catholic Church has the authority to do the same thing. That sentence is difficult in mixed company. It is still the Catholic sentence.

The disagreement is older than our tempers. Treating it as a recent Catholic mood is a way of not taking either side seriously.

A Reflection

If I have friends or family in communities that ordain women, how do I speak?

Do I sneer? Do I pretend there is no real difference? Do I use their practice as a stick with which to beat my own Church, or the other way round?

None of those habits is the same as telling the truth with charity.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, you prayed that your disciples would be one. Give us honesty about our disagreements and charity in the way we speak of other Christians. Keep us from using this question as a weapon. Amen.

Chapter 18

Desire, discernment and vocation

A sincere desire is not yet a sacrament.

If a woman tells a priest that she believes God is calling her to priesthood, he should listen carefully before answering. He does not have to pretend that the Church's teaching is uncertain. But he should take her faith, her prayer and her pain seriously.

Desire is not nothing. Many vocations begin with a desire that is later purified. Some desires are from God and lead to a different door than the one first imagined. Some desires are from God and lead exactly where they seemed to lead. Discernment exists because the heart is not a simple instrument.

A priest who answers with a joke, or with a lecture, or with a sudden softness that implies the teaching might one day change, has not helped her. The first duty is to stay in the conversation long enough to hear what she is actually saying. She may be saying that she loves the Eucharist. She may be saying that she wants to preach. She may be saying that she wants to serve in a way her parish has never allowed a woman to serve. She may be saying that she has been wounded by priests. Those are different sentences.

The Church already has rooms for some of those desires: consecrated life, theology, catechesis, spiritual accompaniment, governance, instituted ministries, the thousand hidden works of mercy. None of those rooms is a consolation prize. They are real vocations. A woman may still find that none of them is what she meant. That pain should not be mocked.

A vocation is not the same thing as a right. In Catholic theology nobody has a right to Holy Orders. A man who wants to be a priest can also be told no. The seminary exists partly to say no. The difference is that a baptised man can, in principle, be ordained, and a baptised woman, according to the Church's teaching, cannot. That difference is the wound in the conversation. It should be named without cruelty.

The priest's task is not to recruit her into a campaign, and not to shut the door in her face. It is to help her remain in the Church that baptised her, and to ask with her what Christ is actually asking.

A Reflection

When someone tells me a desire I cannot bless in the form they want, what do I do?

Do I disappear? Do I argue? Do I offer a smaller thing as if it were the same thing?

Listening is not the same as agreeing. It is also not the same as managing the person until they go quiet. I should ask which of those I usually choose.

A short prayer

Lord, you call people in ways we do not always understand at first. Give priests the patience to listen. Give those who are hurt the grace not to leave the house that baptised them. Give us all the courage to tell the truth without contempt. Amen.

Part Three

How to live the teaching without clericalism

Chapter 19

In the person of Christ the Head

The argument is more than “Jesus was male.”

At Mass the priest is not simply the person chosen by the congregation to lead the service. Catholic teaching says that in the celebration of the sacraments he acts in a particular way in the person of Christ.

The Latin phrase is *in persona Christi Capitis*: in the person of Christ the Head. In simple terms, the priest does not act at Mass merely as a representative chosen by the people. In the sacraments, Christ acts through his ordained ministry.

This is why the Church does not treat priesthood as a job that can be redesigned by a vote. She treats it as a sacramental sign. A sign in the Catholic sense is not a decoration. It is a means by which Christ does something. Baptism uses water. The Eucharist uses bread and wine. Holy Orders uses a baptised man who is configured to Christ the Head.

Some Catholics find the next step difficult. The Church also speaks of Christ as the Bridegroom of the Church, who is his Bride. The priest, acting in the person of Christ the Head, stands in that relationship at the Eucharist. Inter Insigniores made this part of the argument. Some Catholics find this language difficult or uncomfortable. That discomfort should be admitted. It should not be mocked, and it should not be used as a reason to pretend the Church never said it.

The argument is more than “Jesus was male.” If it were only that, it would be a thin argument. The Church is saying that the sacrament has a form she received, and that the form includes the man who stands at the altar as a sign of Christ the Head and Bridegroom.

This chapter is the most abstract in the book. It needs to stay concrete. What happens at Mass is that Christ gives himself to his Church. The priest is not the owner of that gift. He is the man through whom the gift is given in the way the Church believes Christ instituted. If that still seems a strange claim, it is at least a sacramental claim, not a claim about male superiority.

A man can hold this theology and still treat women badly. A man can reject this theology and still treat women well. The theology does not automatically produce virtue. It does ask the Church not to treat the priest as a chairman who happens to wear unusual clothes.

A Reflection

When I watch a priest at the altar, what do I think I am seeing?

A skilled performer? A community leader? A man doing a job? Or a sacrament in which Christ is acting?

My answer will shape how I treat both priests and everyone else in the building. If I see only a job, I will want the most qualified applicant. If I see a sacrament, I will still want holiness and competence, but I will not treat the office as a prize the community awards.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, you are the Head of the Church and the Bridegroom of your people. Teach us what you mean by acting through your priests. Keep this mystery from becoming an excuse for pride, and keep it from being dismissed as a theory. Amen.

Chapter 20

The arguments we must stop using

These are not the Catholic argument.

Some arguments used in defence of the Church's teaching are not the Church's argument.

"Women are too emotional." That is not Catholic teaching. It is an insult.

"Women cannot lead." The history of abbesses, foundresses, Doctors and parish life makes that sentence ridiculous.

"Mary was not a priest, so women should be quiet." Mary is not a muzzle.

"If we ordain women we will have to change everything else." Panic is not theology.

"St Paul hated women." That is a poor reading of a complicated set of texts, and it is not how the Church presents her case.

"Jesus was a man of his time." Inter Insigniores explicitly rejects that explanation as the reason for the Twelve.

Bad arguments do real harm. They make the official teaching look like prejudice with incense. They also give critics an easy target. If the only defence a young Catholic has heard is a sneer about women's nature, she will quite reasonably conclude that the teaching is a sneer about women's nature.

The Catholic argument, as the documents actually state it, is narrower and stranger. It is that the Church received a sacrament with a form she cannot redesign, that the form includes the male character of

priestly ordination, and that this is not a verdict on women's dignity.

That argument can still be rejected. It cannot honestly be replaced by the pile of bad reasons that sometimes travel with it. A priest who uses those bad reasons has not defended the teaching. He has made it harder to hear.

A Reflection

Which of those bad arguments have I used, even as a joke?

Jokes travel. They tell a young woman what we actually think.

I should ask whether I am willing to give up a cheap defence in order to keep a true one. Cheap defences are easier in a kitchen. They also poison the kitchen.

A short prayer

Lord, forgive the arguments we have used that were not yours. Forgive every sentence that made a woman feel despised in your name. Give us the courage to defend only what the Church actually teaches. Amen.

Chapter 21

Clericalism

The real insult is not the limit. It is the ranking.

Clericalism is the habit of treating ordained men as a higher class of Christian.

It can look like privilege: the best chair, the last word, the assumption that the priest's time matters more. It can also look like fear: nobody tells him the truth, nobody corrects him, nobody expects him to wash up. Both versions treat the sacrament as a rank.

Pope Francis spoke about this often. He was not inventing a new problem. Parishes have known it for a long time. A priest can be kind and still be clericalist. A parish can love its priest and still be clericalist. The habit lives in the laity as much as in the clergy. People create the pedestal and then complain about the statue.

The teaching that priesthood is reserved to men becomes cruel when it is held inside this habit. The limit then sounds like a ranking. Women are kept out of an office that everyone has already decided is the only office that counts. The official doctrine denies that ranking. Clerical manners confirm it every week.

The answer is not to make priesthood sound unimportant. Priesthood is beautiful. A priest hears Confessions that nobody else will hear. He brings Communion to someone dying. He baptises a child. He sits with a bereaved family. He celebrates Mass for people he loves. He anoints. He prays when nobody sees him. That is not a technical function. It is a life given for the sacraments.

The correct Catholic message is not "priests are not important." It is "priesthood is extraordinarily important, but ordination does not make

a man more valuable, more holy or more loved by God than other baptised people.”

If a parish can hold those two sentences together, the teaching about women and priesthood will at least be heard in the right room. If it cannot, no amount of official language will save the conversation.

A Reflection

Where do I practise clericalism?

Do I laugh at a priest's poor joke because he is a priest? Do I refuse to tell him when he is wrong? Do I treat his failure as more shocking than another man's, or his success as more impressive?

Those habits look like respect. Sometimes they are only ranking. Ranking is what makes the Church's limit sound like contempt.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, you washed the feet of the Twelve. Keep your priests from loving the first place. Keep your people from building pedestals. Teach us a respect that does not turn into ranking. Amen.

Chapter 22

What a priest owes women

A man who defends this teaching has duties of his own.

A priest who accepts the Church's teaching on this subject is not free to stop there.

He owes women a clean argument. He may not defend the teaching with insults about nature, emotion or competence.

He owes them sight. He should know who actually carries the parish. He should thank them without making a speech of it. He should not treat their work as a substitute for his own, or as a threat to it.

He owes them the sacraments. The women who keep the parish alive still need Confession, anointing, a preached Gospel and a Mass that is not hurried because he is tired of the room.

He owes them honesty. If a woman asks why she cannot be a priest, he should not pretend the Church has not spoken. He should also not pretend that her question is stupid.

He owes them protection from his own vanity. A man who enjoys being the only person in the sanctuary can use this teaching as a shield. The teaching is not a shield. It is a limit on the Church. It does not give him a higher nature.

He owes them the example of a priesthood that looks like service. If the only priest a girl ever sees is a man who waits to be served, she will quite reasonably conclude that the office is about being served. If she sees a man who hears Confessions patiently, visits the sick, and treats the sacristan as a colleague, she may still disagree with the teaching. She will at least have seen the thing the teaching is about.

I have failed these duties. Most priests have. Naming them is not a performance of guilt. It is part of holding the teaching without contempt.

A Reflection

If I am a priest, which of those debts is unpaid in my own parish?

If I am not a priest, which of them have I stopped expecting because I have grown used to their absence?

A teaching that is never accompanied by decent manners will not be heard as a teaching. It will be heard as a mood.

A short prayer

Lord, make your priests debtors in the right way: debtors to the people they serve, especially to the women who keep the house standing. Forgive our vanity. Give us clean arguments and better manners. Amen.

Chapter 23

When the priest is not there

The Church has already lived through absences.

There have been times and places where priests were expelled, imprisoned, killed, forbidden to minister, or simply unavailable.

Catholic women did not wait for permission to keep the faith alive.

In Japan, after the great persecutions of the seventeenth century, communities of hidden Christians — kakure kirishitan — kept a form of the faith for more than two hundred years without priests. They baptised. They handed on prayers. They hid images of Mary under the appearance of the Buddhist Kannon. When a French priest, Bernard Petitjean, opened the new church at Ōura in Nagasaki in 1865, it was a group of laypeople, with women among them, who came and asked whether he honoured Mary and whether he was celibate. Those were the tests they had kept. A woman, Yuri Sugimoto, is remembered among those who spoke. The faith had been damaged by isolation. It had also been carried.

In recusant England, when the Mass was illegal, women kept priest's holes, taught children the prayers, and held households together while men were imprisoned or in exile. In Ireland, during the penal years, mothers and grandmothers handed on the catechism when schools were forbidden. In parts of the Soviet world, grandmothers taught the Sign of the Cross when the parish church had been closed.

None of this makes priesthood unnecessary. The hidden Christians of Japan longed for a priest. When one returned, they asked for the sacraments they had not been able to receive. The point is different. The life of the Church cannot be reduced to the priest, even though the

sacraments that need a priest are at the centre of that life.

A parish that treats women as optional has not read this history. A parish that treats priests as optional has not read it either.

A Reflection

If the priest of my parish disappeared tomorrow, what would remain?

Would anyone still know the prayers? Would anyone still visit the sick?

Would anyone still teach the children?

Those questions are not a way of making priests less necessary. They are a way of noticing who already carries the faith when the sanctuary is empty.

A short prayer

Lord, you kept your Church alive in houses and hiding places when priests could not come. Thank you for the women who taught the prayers and hid the faith. Give us that kind of fidelity, and give us priests again wherever they are lacking. Amen.

Chapter 24

Power given for service

Sacramental authority is not a reason for status.

The last word of this book should not be a limit. It should be a picture of the house in which the limit stands.

The Catholic Church believes that Christ gave her sacraments. She believes that some of those sacraments can be celebrated only by a man who has been ordained. She believes that this is not a statement about who is more important. She believes that Baptism already makes a woman a member of Christ, a sharer in his priesthood, and a person who may be holy beyond any priest she will ever meet.

She also believes that priesthood is a gift of astonishing weight. A man is given the power to speak Christ's words of forgiveness. He is given the power to stand at the altar and do what the Church cannot do without him. That power is for service. The moment it is used for status, it has already been misunderstood.

A Church that cannot say no to women's ordination without saying no to women has not understood her own teaching. A Church that says no to women's ordination and then treats women as a problem has not understood her own teaching either.

The absence of priestly ordination has never meant the absence of women from the heart of the Church. Mary is there. Magdalene is there. The Doctors are there. The foundresses are there. The hidden Christians are there. The women who keep the parish alive on an ordinary Tuesday are there.

The stole is one room in the house. It is not the building.

The Church has no authority to confer priestly ordination on women. She has every authority, and every duty, to treat the women already in her house as what Baptism made them.

A Reflection

What would change in my parish if we really believed that last paragraph?

Would we speak differently about vocations? Would we thank different people? Would we stop using the word “just” before the word “laywoman”?

A doctrine that never reaches the kitchen has not yet been received. I should ask what my kitchen has already received, and what it has quietly refused.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, the priesthood is yours. The Church is yours. We are yours. Keep your priests faithful to what they were given, and humble about what they were not. Keep your Church from using a limit as an insult. Make us a people who can tell the truth about a sacrament and still recognise one another at the font. Amen.

A last word

The title of this book still sounds surprising.

People expect the Church to claim too much authority. Here she says she does not have it. She says she cannot confer priestly ordination on women. She says the limit belongs to her constitution, not to a mood she might get over.

That sentence is not a boast about power. It is a confession of a limit.

The limit cannot be honestly taught if Catholics simultaneously behave as though ordination were the only form of serious Christian importance. A Church that says she cannot do this, and then treats every unordained life as a lesser life, has not held her own teaching. She has held a counterfeit.

The Church must hold together what she says she cannot do; what Baptism already gives; the sacramental nature of priesthood; the gifts and authority of women; the call to holiness; and the duty to reject clerical contempt.

She will not hold those things together by slogans. She will hold them together by the way a priest speaks in a kitchen, by the way a parish notices hidden work, by the way a doctrine is explained without raising the voice, and by the way women are actually trusted with the responsibilities Baptism already makes possible.

A reader who still disagrees should at least be able to say that the objection was understood. For many people the teaching looks, on its face, like discrimination. Catholic sacramental theology sees a received sign, not a verdict on women's worth. Those two descriptions will not be reconciled in one chapter. They can at least be stated without contempt.

The priesthood belongs to Christ. The Church belongs to Christ. Women and men belong to Christ.

The Church has no authority to confer priestly ordination on women. She has every authority, and every duty, to treat the women already in her house as what Baptism made them: members of Christ, not a problem to be managed, and not a background to the real story.

A prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, the priesthood is yours. The Church is yours. We are yours. Keep your priests faithful to what they were given, and humble about what they were not. Keep your Church from using a limit as an insult. Keep us all from treating office as holiness. Bless the women who love the Mass and still ask the hard question. Bless the men who must answer it without raising their voice. Make us a people who can tell the truth about a sacrament and still recognise one another at the font. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us. Amen.

Sources and further reading

PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

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John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (22 May 1994).

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Responsum ad Dubium* concerning *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (28 October 1995).

Catechism of the Catholic Church, especially 897–913, 1536–1600, 1577.

Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, chapters II–IV.

Pope Francis, *Spiritus Domini* (10 January 2021), revising canon 230 §1.

Pope Francis, *Praedicate Evangelium* (19 March 2022).

Study Commission on the Female Diaconate (Petrocchi), synthesis published 4 December 2025.

SCRIPTURE

The calling of the Twelve; the women who provided for Jesus (Luke 8); the Samaritan woman (John 4); Mary of Bethany (Luke 10); the anointing; the women at the Cross and at the tomb; John 20; Galatians 3:27–28.

HISTORICAL AND MAGISTERIAL CONTEXT

Paul VI's correspondence with the Archbishop of Canterbury on the ordination of women.

The naming of women Doctors of the Church: Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, Thérèse of Lisieux, Hildegard of Bingen.

Recent Curial appointments, including Sister Nathalie Becquart (2021), Sister Alessandra Smerilli (2021, prefect 2026), Sister Raffaella Petrini (Governorate), Sister Simona Brambilla (prefect, January 2025), María Montserrat Alvarado (prefect, 2026).

The hidden Christians of Japan and the 1865 meeting at Ōura.

FURTHER READING

The documents above, read in full rather than in quotations. A short official text, read slowly, is more useful than a long argument about a text one has never opened.

A word of thanks

This book remains a Silent Homilies book: written to be read slowly, and if need be read aloud, without raising the voice.

Thanks are due first to the women who keep parishes alive and who have asked the hard question without contempt. Thanks are due also to the priests who have had to answer it in kitchens, hospital corridors and parish halls, and who have tried to answer it without using the teaching as a weapon.

The faults in the explanation remain the author's. The teaching belongs to the Church.

Printing this book

This book is designed for A5.

Print double-sided, flipped on the short edge. If your printer asks, choose short-edge binding.

A cream or off-white paper is kinder to the eyes than a hard white.

The cover drawing is part of the book. If you print at home, print the first page in the best quality your machine will give.

Silent Homilies books are meant to be held, marked, and lent. They are not meant to look expensive. They are meant to last long enough to be read twice.

A note

If this book has helped you understand a hard teaching a little more clearly, you are welcome to support the work that makes Silent Homilies possible.

The writing is offered freely. Printing, time and the next book are not free.

Any gift is received with gratitude. Please give only if you wish, and only if you can.