

ORDINATION TO THE PRESBYTERATE AND EPISCOPATE A TRADITIONAL UNDERSTANDING

When media reporters and other writers discuss any aspect of sacred orders in the Episcopal Church, U.S.A., almost without exception a statement will be included to the effect that only three dioceses in the country do not ordain women to the priesthood. Why do the bishops of those dioceses refuse to “go with the flow”? After all, the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate was approved in 1976 and the General Convention of 2000 created the A045 Task Force to ensure compliance with the previously optional legislation; why the resistance to compliance? Does the traditional understanding of holy orders in the Church catholic have validity?

Because of these and other similar questions discussed at a number of meetings of the Standing Committee of the Diocese of Fort Worth, Bishop Iker appointed a group of four parish priests to compose this compendium of essays in an effort to illuminate the traditional understanding of why only baptized males are considered as the proper subjects for ordination to the priesthood and episcopate. The essays include: 1) a synopsis of the current situation, 2) the witness of Holy Scripture, 3) the witness of sacred tradition, and 4) the place of reason in supporting the traditional understanding.

Here is the context in which these essays are written. Every candidate for holy baptism affirms the Apostles Creed in its entirety, which, of course, includes the articles “I believe in the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints ... ” These essays are written within this consideration of catholicity – wholeness – which must, because of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, include not only the Church Militant (the Church on Earth) but also the Church Expectant (Paradise) and the Church Triumphant (Heaven). By this we affirm that we are not detached or dislodged from those Christians who have preceded us for 20 centuries.

By virtue of the communion of saints, no generation of Christians is isolated, and the bishop never represents himself alone. He does not proclaim his own ideas. He is an ambassador of Jesus and as such must only teach “the faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). In fundamental matters of faith, the majority cannot be isolated into a particular convention or national group, but must rather extend across the ages into eternity. This is what it means to be apostolic and catholic. One of the chief tasks of the bishop is to be a spokesman for the majority across time, to be a true voice for the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. In this sense he is not free to embrace contemporary and novel ideologies that are at odds with apostolic faith and order.

Despite its embrace of women’s ordination, in a somewhat interesting manner the Episcopal Church still renders service to this catholic, apostolic, and cosmic understanding of the priesthood and episcopate being male only. In practice, men who have been ordained to the priesthood in Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches are received into the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church does not require re-ordination. Both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches adhere to the ancient and universal criteria of only baptized males as candidates for ordination.

While not intended to be an exhaustive work, we hope the reader will find this compendium of essays to be informative and to stimulate the desire for further study. The authors of these essays are parish priests in the Diocese of Fort Worth with broad pastoral experience. The Very Rev. Christopher T. Cantrell is rector of Church of the Holy Apostles, Fort Worth, Texas, and a graduate of Nashotah House. The Very Rev. William A. Crary Jr., also a graduate of Nashotah House, is rector of St. Laurence Church in Southlake, Texas. The Rev. Quintin Morrow, rector of St. Andrew Church, Fort Worth, Texas, is a graduate of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry. The Rev. Canon Robert L. Young is a graduate of the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest and is rector of St. Andrew Church, Grand Prairie, Texas. Gratitude is extended to Mrs. James Garrard and the Very Rev. Richard McHenry for assistance in editing and to Susan Steele and Suzanne Gill for production support.

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