The Question of Ordaining Women to the Roman Catholic Priesthood, In Light of Tradition

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Historically, the issue of ordaining women priests in different faith traditions has been a complex and controversial subject. Debates in the different traditions on ordaining women have addressed a variety of issues, ranging from whether or not women possess the natural leadership necessary for a priest, to the question of whether priesthood is a proper vocation for women. Different faith traditions have, of course, reached different decisions on the admission of women to the priesthood. While there has not been a unanimous admission of women to ordination, the majority of Christian denominations and Jewish traditions currently ordain women as priests or rabbis. ¹

The most noticeable exception to this trend is the Roman Catholic Church, which has never ordained women. The specific reasons for the Church’s stance were not clearly articulated until the 1970’s, when the Anglican community of Hong Kong, the Anglican community in Canada, and the Episcopal community in Philadelphia, decided to ordain women.² The Roman Catholic Church felt compelled to respond to these appointments because they were “carried out within communities that considered that they preserved the apostolic succession of order”. ³ Basically, the problem was one of consistency. The Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Episcopalian traditions all held that “authority in the church has been transmitted by ordination or laying on of hands from the apostles to present-day clergy”.⁴ However, while the Anglican and Episcopal churches admitted women to the priesthood, the Roman Catholic Church did not. The Church thus found

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³ Catholic Information Network, 14.
⁴ Catholic Information Network, 14.
itself in the position of having to explain its reasons for excluding women from the priesthood.

The explanation came in the form of *Inter Insigniores*, also called "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood," released by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on October 15, 1976, and promulgated on January 27, 1977 under Pope Paul VI. The document simply states that "the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith judges it necessary to recall that the Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination." But the matter was hardly closed. Discussion and debate on the topic continued for many years, prompting the Vatican to release another document. "On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone" known as *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, signed by John Paul II on May 22, 1994. Much of this second document is a reiteration of *Inter Insigniores*, but *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* does add a few new insights to the situation, the strongest of them being the declaration by John Paul II, that "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful."6

This thesis will examine the institutionalized Church's position on the ordination of women as presented in the above two documents, *Inter Insigniores* and *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. Part One of the paper will present and examine the six historical arguments that form the basis for the Church's refusal to ordain women. These include (1) the Church's constant tradition, (2) the attitude of Christ, (3) the practice of the apostles, (4)...

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6 Pope John Paul II, "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis," *Origins* 24 (9 June 1994): Par. 12. In all subsequent notes referring to "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis," Pope John Paul II will appear as the citation, followed by the number of the paragraph being cited.
the permanent values placed on the attitude of Jesus and the apostles, (5) the priesthood in the light of Christ, and (6) the priesthood explained by the mystery of the Church. Analysis of these arguments will show that the stance of the Church is limited by the ahistorical, selective, and inconsistent view of tradition that is used to ground the documents' stance. Part Two of the paper will provide an alternative to the traditional criteria for the priesthood that is based on a more comprehensive and historically conscious understanding of tradition.

Part One:

**Analysis and Critique of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* and *Inter Insigniores***

**First Argument: The Church's Constant Tradition**

The first argument presented by the institutionalized Church against the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood is the preservation of the Church's constant tradition. Outlined by Paul VI in *Inter Insigniores* states that the Church has never felt that priestly or Episcopal ordination can be validly conferred on women, because "the Church intends to remain faithful to the type of ordained ministry willed by the Lord Jesus Christ and carefully maintained by the Apostles," which the document infers is a strict, male-only, ministry.\(^7\)

Both documents further state that tradition of an all male priesthood is so blessed by God that nothing throughout history has tarnished the idea.\(^8\) One example of the tradition rising above its historical and social circumstances is seen in the lines devoted to

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\(^7\) The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Inter Insigniores," *Origins* 6 (3 Feb 1977): par.1. In all subsequent notes referring to "Inter Insigniores," C.D.F. will appear as an abbreviation for the author, and will appear as the citation, followed by the number of the paragraph being cited.

\(^8\) C.D.F., 2; Pope John Paul II, 2.
the Patristics. *Inter Insigniores* argues that even the misogynistic undertones found in the Patristic’ writings—which had “undeniable influence of prejudices unfavorable to woman”—did not negatively affect the tradition of the priesthood.\(^9\) In the view of the Church, misogyny had nothing to do with the exclusion of women from the priesthood; rather, female exclusion exists because Jesus started the all male priesthood and this tradition has “enjoyed peaceful and universal acceptance” throughout the majority of history.\(^10\) This understanding is reiterated in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, which states, “Priestly ordination...has in the Catholic Church from the beginning always been reserved to men alone. This tradition has also been faithfully maintained.”\(^11\)

The basic claims in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* and *Inter Insignores* are rooted in the understanding that tradition never changes or advances. Tradition is “constant” in that there is never deviation from what has come before. When applied to the issue of female ordination, this means that women will continue to be excluded from the priesthood because the tradition has never admitted them, and the current hierarchy of the Church will not break with tradition because it would set a precedent. The question that immediately follows is whether the Church’s concept of constant tradition is a legitimate and convincing one.

**First Critique:**

According to Terrence Tilley, “For Roman Catholic thinkers, the concept of tradition is theologically very important because it is associated with disputes concerning

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\(^9\) C.D.F., 1.
\(^10\) C.D.F., 2.
\(^11\) Pope John Paul II, 1.
divine revelation, its sources, and its bearers.” It is obvious that for such a central aspect of the faith a clear definition must be found. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, it is stated:

*Tradition* transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound, and spread it abroad by their preaching.\(^{13}\)

Timothy G. McCarthy offers a supplemental definition of tradition, which fleshes out the Catechism’s description. In his book, *The Catholic Tradition: The Church in the Twentieth Century*, tradition is defined as

the living faith of the church that establishes the community’s identity and mission .... Tradition consists of content about Jesus Christ and his church, which is handed down consciously and purposefully from one generation to another.

*Each generation is its heir and continues the process by holding fast to the faith and bearing witness to it.*\(^{14}\)

In the everyday life of the Church, then, tradition refers to subject matter regarding Jesus and the Church, which is passed on and then *deemed valid and internalized* by the generation to which the knowledge is being passed. An example would be Christ’s death.

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and resurrection. These aspects of Christ have been handed down "consciously and purposefully from one generation to another" and "each generation continues" the tradition by declaring it valid "and bearing witness to it." 15

In seeking out the definition of the term tradition, then, it is observed that this vital aspect of the faith community is much more than a simple history of beliefs or past actions in the life of the church. Tradition is vital to the understanding of practices held by the Church, and, when spoken about in terms used by McCarthy, seems uncomplicated. How, then, could there be confusion or misunderstanding about the defining qualities or role of tradition? There must be a deeper understanding of the importance of a continual belief or practice to bring validity to the actions and teachings being passed on. So the misunderstanding comes not from the question, 'what is tradition?' but 'how is tradition determined to be validly internalized?' 16

According to the model of tradition held by the institutionalized church, tradition is equated with permanence. Theologian John Thiel describes this model as a prospective one that ensures the "hand-to-hand transmission of tradition's contents from the time of Jesus and the apostles to the present moment." 17 This prospective conception, regards

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15 McCarthy, 118.

16 Theologies of tradition are obviously vast and varying. The two different models of tradition discussed in this thesis will be inadequate to create a full understanding of all that tradition may encompass, and so should be seen as an attempt to clarify tradition first and foremost for the context of this thesis, and not as a fully realized or formulated theology of the subject.

17 John E. Thiel, "Perspectives on Tradition," CTSA Proceedings. 54 (1999): 2. It is vitally important here to state that I am in complete agreement with Thiel when he states, "While the Catholic belief in the absolute and universal truth of God's once-given revelation is basic and indispensable, the prospective conception of tradition that has sheltered that belief is not" (4). He clarifies further that "The Catholic belief in a closed revelation need not, and should not, extend to belief in a finished or completed tradition, if only because tradition continues in history" (4). In Thiel's the seventh footnote, he cites Bernard Lonergan, who applies this idea to a tangible example. Lonergan states that the "permanence of the dogmas...results from the fact that they express revealed mysteries. Their historicity, on the other hand, results from the facts that (1) statements have meanings only in their contexts and (2) contexts are ongoing and ongoing contexts are multiple" (5). In uncomplicated terms, then, the point is that while the Church has possessed God's revelation to the world since the time of Christ, the Church's
tradition “as finished or completed,” and the nature of this finished revelation is found in “what has already transpired in the past.” The prospective conception understands God’s presence in the world as minimal, and typically imposes past tradition onto a new generation without the receiving generation enacting and consciously validating the tradition. In fact, Thiel states “prospectivity views tradition as a truthful deposit of faith handed down unchanged to later generations” (2). Thus, from the Church’s viewpoint, tradition is seen as a straight communication of God’s truth in a broken world. God has revealed God’s self in the past in the words and deeds that started the tradition. This is one reason why the institutionalized Church can state that priestly ordination has, “from the beginning always been reserved to men alone” and “has never felt priestly or Episcopal ordination can be validly conferred on women.” In prospective tradition, the male priesthood is just one more example of what has been, and so always will be, because God’s revelation to humanity is complete.

When adhering to the prospective view of tradition, the Vatican documents make perfect sense, and are entirely logical. Tilley makes the point that “We cannot ‘make up’ traditions. God or the Church or history or some other process independent of human understanding of that revelation has often changed over time. This idea is imperative when discerning the larger context for my thesis.

18 Thiel, 2. Thiel clarifies (because of the different theologies of tradition have been studied before the model he presents as prospective) that the development of doctrine, when in the context of the theology of tradition, is a complex issue. He states, “The theology of tradition, though, has flourished in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in various understandings of doctrinal development that have sought to reconcile historicity and the abiding authority of divine revelation in scripture and tradition” (1). Thiel’s purpose is to illustrate the “often troubled relationship between traditional continuity and traditional development” and to discern “how to speak well of tradition’s continuity in light of the real development, often a religious euphemism for ‘change,’ that all things historical undergo” (1). An example of development reconciling history and our understanding of revelation is even the prospective model of tradition Thiel mentions. The development in the prospective model is found in the changing understanding of the “truthful deposits of faith handed down unchanged to later generations” (2).
19 Thiel, 2.
20 C.D.F., 1; Pope John Paul II, 1.
creativity must give traditions to us... [they] are typically taken as ‘found,’ not made.” However, Tilley’s study also brings to light several flaws in the prospective model. The most obvious is that it fails to imagine tradition “in the ways it is actually experienced by believers in history” and “cannot be reconciled with the facts of history or hermeneutical insights on the workings of human understanding.” The prospective model of tradition takes the role of humanity—and humanity’s contributions to the Church—and minimizes them, in the same manner that it minimizes our growing understanding of the revelation of God throughout history.

The work of Timothy G. McCarthy uses the Patristics as an example of this central flaw in prospective tradition. He states, “Over the course of the church’s history one can find not only popes and bishops but also outstanding theologians like Ambrose, Augustine, Albert the Great, and Aquinas fostering anti-sexual, misogynist theories,” which the documents acknowledge. However, the refusal of the institutionalized Church to admit the impact humans have had in doctrine and tradition is a substantial shortcoming. Humanity’s influence in the shaping of tradition is impossible to ignore, especially when there are many examples to the contrary.

Such bias is seen in Augustine’s teaching on original sin, which claimed that it was transmitted through sexual intercourse. Although it has since been discredited, Augustine’s theory greatly influenced the Roman Catholic understanding of that subject. Another example of bias is Aquinas’ teaching regarding women as “defective” and “misbegotten males.” He explicitly states, in reference to priestly ordination, that

21 Tilley, 16.
22 Tilley, 6.
23 McCarthy, 300.
24 McCarthy, 407. (Summa theologiae 1, 92, 1).
because “a woman is in the state of subjection, it follows that she cannot receive the sacrament of orders.” As human beings, medieval theologians were fallible human beings who were influenced by their prejudices against women. However, in the static understanding of tradition held by the institutionalized Church, the human element in the formation of tradition is ignored. From a contemporary, historically conscious perspective, this is an obvious flaw.

Another flaw with the prospective model is its static, unchanging nature. In reality, tradition is a dynamic, living experience of the Spirit. Allowances must be made for the possibility of a change in tradition to meet a different hermeneutical and historical context. In an ironic twist, the institutionalized Church has given those advocating the admission of women to the priesthood a precedent for such allowances. The most notable example is the changes to doctrine instituted by Pope Pius IX regarding the Immaculate Conception of Mary. For over one thousand years the Church taught that Mary was subject to original sin, which is obviously not taught today. Another teaching about Mary, which also evolved throughout history, was her distinction as *theotokos* or god-bearer. This title was given to Mary in 431 CE at the Council of Ephesus. The title

26 This thesis only mentions teachings about Mary when referring to our continual understanding of revelation and its effect on teachings and practices. However, there are numerous other cases where the Church has amended its teachings and practices because continual understanding of revelation occurred. Many examples can be found in, for example, Francis A. Sullivan’s *Creative Fidelity: Weighing and Interpreting Documents of the Magisterium*. He states, “To give an example: the bishops gathered at the Council of Florence in 1442 no doubt expressed the common teaching that the whole episcopate at that time when they said that all pagans and Jews would certainly go to hell if they did not become Catholics before they died. This is certainly not the doctrine of the modern Catholic Church. Other examples of doctrines that had a long tradition but were subsequently reversed concerned the morality of owning slaves and exploiting their labor, and the obligation requiring rulers of Catholic nations to prevent the propagation of Protestantism in their territories” (182-183).
27 Thiel, 14.
28 McCarthy, 375.
was not only given to honor Mary, but also to declare that Jesus was one divine person, instead of having a double personality, an idea taught by an Antiochean bishop named Nestorius. These changes not only show that Mary’s role and status were undefined for many years, but also that belief about the very being of Jesus was debated and shaped by the historical culture of the early Church.

Such examples show the institutionalized Church has often acknowledged and accepted the dynamic nature of tradition; however, when considering the ordination of women, the Church immediately falls back to a static, a-historical view of tradition. It seems that the current emphasis on prospective tradition in considering the ordination of women stems more from convenience than conviction. Its use in the next five arguments produce a position that renders it liable to criticism.

Second Argument: The Attitude of Christ

The second argument against the ordination of women uses the attitude of Christ. 

*Inter Insigniores* states that because “Christ did not call any woman to become part of the Twelve”, then women are not called to the priesthood today. Similarly, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* quotes Pope Paul VI, who says, “The real reason is that, in giving the Church her fundamental constitution, her theological anthropology—thereafter always followed by the Church’s tradition—Christ established things in this way.” *Inter Insigniores* continues, “If [Jesus] acted in this way, it was not in order to conform to the customs of his time, for his attitude towards women was quite different from that of his

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29 McCarthy, 375.
30 C.D.F., 5.
31 Pope John Paul II, 5.
milieu.” 32 *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* further clarifies any doubt about Jesus’ practices when it states “In calling only men as his apostles, Christ acted in a completely free and sovereign manner…without conforming to the prevailing customs and to the traditions sanctioned by the legislation of the time.” 33 It is made very clear that it is the divine will of God that prompted Jesus to call men to the Twelve, and “not sociological or cultural motives peculiar to his time.” 34

Further in *Inter Insigniores*, the document states “we have here a number of convergent indications that make all the more remarkable the fact that Jesus did not entrust the apostolic charge to women” to supplement the fact that the matter is not “immediately obvious.” 35 The text also quotes Pope Innocent III, explaining the actions of Christ: “Although the Blessed Virgin Mary surpassed in dignity and in excellence all the Apostles, nevertheless it was not to her but to [the Twelve] that the Lord entrusted the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.” 36 According to *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, “these men…were specifically and intimately associated in the mission of the incarnate Word himself” and so they did not “receive only a function which could thereafter be exercised by any member of the Church.” 37 This same document continues to remove any doubt of this practice, as they state the exclusion of women from the priesthood was “made in accordance with God’s eternal plan” because “Christ chose those whom he willed,” and whom he willed were men. 38

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32 C.D.F., 5.
33 Pope John Paul II, 6.
34 Pope John Paul II, 5.
35 C.D.F., 8.
36 C.D.F., 8.
37 Pope John Paul II, 7.
38 Pope John Paul II, 7.
Second Critique:

These conventional teachings of the institutionalized Church are biblically and historically inadequate on several points. The most obvious is the fact that Christ did not speak of a priesthood. The scriptures clearly establish that his ministry focused on proclaiming the Kingdom of God. According to The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Edition, Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God nine times; not once did he speak of a priesthood. 39 Jesus did not proclaim a hierarchy or even a Church: he only preached about the kingdom of God. His followers were disciples and apostles, not priests and bishops. Not even in the time of Paul did this understanding change, as is evident from Paul referring to himself as an apostle, and not as a priest (1 Cor. 9:1). 40 In fact, “The formal priesthood” did not become apparent until “somewhere in the course of the 2nd Century.” 41 Raymond Brown, writing about the claim that Jesus instituted the priesthood at the last supper, explains that

The statement is true to the same but nuanced extent that the historical Jesus instituted the Church. By selecting followers to take part in the proclamation of God’s kingdom, Jesus formed the nucleus of what would develop into a community and ultimately into the Church...Jesus supplied his followers with a community rite that would ultimately be seen as a sacrifice and whose celebrants would hence by understood as priests. 42

40 Coogan, 280.
42 Brown, 20.
In this way, Brown shows how that our understanding “of the claim that historically Jesus instituted the priesthood at the last supper” must be clarified. Contrary to the prospective model of tradition held by the institutionalized Church, Brown shows that the fully formed concept expressed in the term ‘priest’ which emerges about the year 100 A.D. had undergone a continually nuanced development since the time of Christ. The question then arises as to which people were called during that period, and to what ministry.

The Vatican documents cite some biblical sources that indicate the discipleship of women. In citing Luke 8:2-3; Mt 28:7-10; Lk 24:9-10; and Jn 20:11-18, the documents present examples of female disciples and their importance to the ministry of Jesus. This testimony of women disciples has been reinforced by recent theological scholarship as well. In fact, in She Who Is, Elizabeth Johnson writes

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, Salome, and ‘many other women’ disciples (Mk 15:41) appear strongly in the New Testament...they are the first to encounter the risen Christ, to recognize him, to be charged with the mission to tell the good news to those in hiding. This they do: ‘now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the women with them who told this to the apostles’ (Lk 24:10).

While the documents admit to the discipleship of women, it is diminished and presented as secondary to the discipleship of men. Hardly addressed in the texts is the

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43 Brown., 19.
44 Brown, 20.
45 C.D.F., 7; Pope John Paul II, 9.
fact that men and women both received the call to preach the kingdom of God. In Acts 2:17-18, for example, Peter quotes the prophet Joel, explaining the effect of the Spirit at Pentecost, saying “…I will pour out my Spirit upon your flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy…even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.” 47 In this way, Pentecost represents the importance of a divine sanction for prophetic ministry by women as well as by men.

There are numerous examples of women ministering in the same way as men, which the Vatican documents do not cite. Women were instrumental in founding churches, as seen with the story of Priscilla in Acts 18:3, 18-19. 48 This is the same Priscilla known as Prisca in 1 Cor 16:19, and in Rom 16:3-5. 49 Women had typical leadership roles, such as Phoebe, who was a deacon of the church at Cenchreae (Rom 16:1-2), or Mary and Persis, women with whom Phoebe worked (Rom 16:6, 12). 50 Two more examples of women in leadership roles are Euodia and Syntyche, who had “struggled beside [Paul] in the work of the gospel” (Phil 4:2-3). 51 Scripture states the four daughters of Phillip the evangelist were women prophets in Acts 21:9, and more women prophets are found in 1 Cor 11:5, where Paul addresses the need to cover one’s head while praying or prophesying. 52 This last verse also attests to the act of women in public worship. Most interesting is the mention of a woman apostle in Rom 16:7, who was imprisoned with Paul. 53 He refers to this person as Junia. Women were also

47 Coogan, 188-189.
48 Coogan, 220; 221.
49 Coogan, 291; 265.
50 Coogan, 265.
51 Coogan, 332.
52 Coogan, 227; 283.
53 Coogan, 265.
members of the very earliest Church communities both before Pentecost (Acts 1:14) and after (Acts 9:36).  

The implications of these verses are clear. Women often participated in activities and practices that characterized the priesthood in the early church, such as founding community churches, organizing public worship, ministering, and accepting leadership roles. Given recent biblical and historical scholarship, the belief that Jesus (1) mentioned a priesthood, and (2) called only men to its ministry, is undeniably flawed, as is the argument of the prospective tradition. According to the information in the New Testament, even within the prospective tradition, the exclusion of women from the priesthood based in “finished or completed” teaching is certainly not evident.  

The second problem with the Vatican’s argument based on the attitude of Christ is the belief that in choosing the Twelve, Jesus called only men because he wanted an all male priesthood. In fact, the documents state that Jesus called men because it “was in accordance with God’s eternal plan.”  

But who can fully know the intention of Jesus at the time he called the apostles? Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that by choosing men to be his apostles, Jesus intended to set a precedent that would forever bar women from the priesthood.  

The Vatican’s ban on women also relies on Jesus’ attitude toward his mother. Inter Insigniores explains, “Even his Mother…was not invested with the apostolic ministry.” The documents assert Jesus did not commission his mother, “who was so

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54 Coogan, 186; 203.
55 Thiel, 2.
56 Pope John Paul II, 2, 7; also C.D.F., 5, implied.
57 C.D.F., 8.
closely associated with the mystery of her Son,” to the apostolic ministry. The logic follows that if Mary, who is the most holy of women, was not called to the apostolic ministry in the past, than it is impossible for any women to be called to the apostolic ministry at any time.

This argument is one more example of the effects of an ahistorical and incomplete understanding on the part of prospective tradition. Because the institutionalized Church understands tradition as static, the attitude of Christ—as interpreted by the Church—is used to argue against the ordination of women. Yet the only fact presented by the Vatican documents that can be supported by the New Testament is that there were no women among the Twelve, and this is insufficient to justify the exclusion of women in the priesthood today.

Many theologians state there is a danger in that these teachings could unfortunately be interpreted as Jesus supporting patriarchy. One example is found in Bishop Matthiesen of Amarillo, Texas. In reference to the admission of women to the priesthood, he defers to “the authority of Christ, which always supercedes the church’s authority” and “it would be impossible to ascribe discrimination against women to the will of Christ.” Bishop Matthiesen’s statement is certainly persuasive. After all, one would be hard pressed to find an example where Jesus failed to recognize, respect, and act upon the natural dignity of women.

Thus far the analysis has shown that the ahistorical, inconsistent, and static understanding of prospective tradition used by the institutional Church is problematic because it fails to acknowledge that tradition is the product of a dynamic process that is

58 C.D.F., 8; Pope John Paul II, 8.
heavily influenced by human beings and the historical situation in which they live. It also lacks the ability to recognize new insights. Because God is always in relation with humanity, it follows that our understanding of revelation can grow and change over time. Moreover, our continuing growth of understanding of revelation is precisely why the attitude of Jesus cannot be overemphasized when deciding whether or not to admit women to the ministerial priesthood two thousand years later.  

**Third Argument: The Practice of the Apostles**

*Inter Insigniores* states, "When [Peter and the Eleven] and Paul went beyond the confines of the Jewish world...they could...have envisaged conferring ordination on women, if they had not been convinced that their duty of fidelity to the Lord on this point."  

*Inter Insigniores* also cites the fact that "in spite of the so important role played by women on the day of the Resurrection, their collaboration was not extended by Saint Paul to the official and public proclamation of the message, since this proclamation belongs exclusively to the apostolic mission." This lack of collaboration with women is because "The Apostles did the same [as Jesus] when they chose fellow workers who would succeed them in their ministry"; namely, they chose men as Jesus chose men.  

*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* continues, "included in this choice were those who, throughout

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60 The idea of continued growth of understanding of tradition is based in the conviction that the Church has possessed God's revelation to the world since the time of Christ. However, the Church's understanding of that revelation has often changed over time, and so Church teaching and practices may also change over time, accordingly. Given that it is apparent the theology of tradition has often changed, given different interpretations, it seems reasonable to suppose the theology of tradition may change again one day. Refer to footnote seventeen for a more complex understanding of continued growth of understanding.

61 *C.D.F.*, 11.

62 *C.D.F.*, 12.

63 Pope John Paul II, 7.
the time of the Church, would carry on the apostles’ mission of representing Christ the Lord and Redeemer.⁶⁴ This statement is supported by the Catechism, which states

The Lord Jesus chose men (viri) to form the college of the twelve apostles, and the apostles did the same when they chose collaborators to succeed them in their ministry… the Church recognizes herself to be bound by this choice made by the Lord himself. For this reason the ordination of women is not possible.⁶⁵

Third Critique:

Here the documents diverge from prospective tradition, as is found in the sections regarding the Church’s constant tradition and the attitude of Christ. Much like Jesus, the apostles were human and able to be influenced by their cultural and social circumstances in the same way Jesus was influenced. Patriarchy was the dominant principle of social organization at the time of the early Church (which continues today) and this undoubtedly influenced the early Church communities. Even so, there are a few examples of women deacons in the early church, and so the continual exclusion of women in ministry is called into question (Rom 16:1-2).⁶⁶ Rather than examine their model of prospective tradition, the documents mainly choose to ignore this evidence.

It is also important to remember that Peter, the eleven, and Paul, were Jewish just as Jesus was Jewish. Peter, the eleven, and Paul were Jewish Christians: they were a new sect of Judaism who recognized Jesus as the Messiah, not the first Roman Catholics.

This last statement could be seen as shocking, but as a faithful community, it is vitally

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⁶⁴ Pope John Paul II, 7.
⁶⁵ Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 394, Rule 1577.
⁶⁶ Coogan, 265.
important that we allow history to be as it was and not to place upon it our preconceived notions.

*Inter Insignores* also cites the fact that “in spite of the so important role played by women on the day of the Resurrection, their collaboration was not extended by Saint Paul to the official and public proclamation of the message, since this proclamation belongs exclusively to the apostolic mission.” 67 As in the case of Jesus, the practices and actions of Paul are taken out of the context in which he lived. If we are to follow the practice of Paul, it would be the practice of inclusion, and the practice of actively pursuing the coming kingdom of God. Both Paul and Jesus were inclusive from the beginning, which is extremely hard to dispute. When addressed from a prospective view of tradition, then, the current lack of inclusiveness in the institutionalized church is called into question: after all, if Paul and Jesus were inclusive from the beginning, and if tradition is today as it was in the beginning, then why are we not inclusive today? The kingdom of God, which is what Jesus and Paul continually preach about—not a Roman Catholic priesthood—reforms the old social order, and transforms the world so that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Gal. 3:28). 68 Therefore it makes little sense to focus on the dividing factors presented by the Vatican documents instead of the inclusive messages presented continually by Paul and Christ in the New Testament.

Even though the Catechism states that because the apostles chose men, not women, as successors in their ministry, it is impossible to ordain women as priests today, it has been illustrated in the New Testament that women were chosen throughout the time

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67 C.D.F., 12.
68 Coogan, 316.
of the early Church to carry the mission of representing Christ to the world. This alone calls the statement in the Catechism into question from a historical and hermeneutical standpoint. It is obvious that women were influential in the early church, as many women continue to be influential today. These women are fully qualified to represent Christ because, as is seen in Gn 1:27, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” 69 As Mary Catherine Hilkert beautifully explains

...[women] speak with authority. The source of this authority is the Spirit of God, ultimately the only source of authority for the church. Women are gifted with this Spirit...through their vocation as baptized persons, which makes them into prophets, priests, and leaders as part of the body of Christ 70

This authority of women is by no means superior to the authority of men in the church, but more importantly, neither is it by any means inferior. Both genders receive authority from God, through baptism, to represent the mission of Christ on earth. Is it certain, then, that just one sex has been granted a divinely ordered monopoly of the ministerial priesthood for all time?

Fourth Argument: The Permanent Value of the Attitudes of Jesus and the Apostles

It is stated, “Various arguments have been put forward in favour of a positive reply” to the question of whether or not the Church could “depart from this attitude of

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69 Coogan, 12 Hebrew Bible.
70 Elizabeth A. Johnson, Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints (New York: Continuum, 2003), 16.
Jesus and the Apostles.” 71 In the remaining parts of the fourth section, the institutionalized church puts forth its own answer to such a question.

The first concern addressed is that Jesus and the apostles were influenced by “their milieu and their times”; in response, Inter Insigniores asserts that “social and cultural conditioning did not hold back the Apostles” who excluded women in their work even “in the Greek milieu, where the same forms of discrimination did not exist.” 72 In fact, both documents negate the role of social and cultural influence altogether. They state, “it is clearly impossible to prove” that the attitude of Jesus and the Apostles “is inspired by social and cultural reasons.” 73

The second concern addressed is the “transitory character that one claims to see today in some of the prescriptions of Saint Paul concerning women.” 74 Inter Insigniores asserts that the passages of St. Paul, which are said to have such a “transitory character” “no longer have a normative value” in the way that Paul’s teaching on, for example, the prophesying of women in the assembly, does. 75

The third concern addressed is that “those who support the legitimacy of change in the matter turn to the Church’s practice in her sacramental discipline.” 76 This is largely directed at the statement before mentioned in the documents, namely that the Church “does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination.” 77 Here a conflict arises. In the past, “the Church is conscious of possessing a certain power over the sacraments, even though they were instituted by Christ”; however, when the

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72 C.D.F., 14.
73 C.D.F., 14; Pope John Paul II, 5.
74 C.D.F., 15.
75 C.D.F., 15.
76 C.D.F., 16.
77 C.D.F., 1; Pope John Paul II, 5.
sacrament is the priesthood, “the Church [does not] think she is authorized to change the gender qualifications for the priesthood.”\textsuperscript{78} To resolve the problem, \textit{Inter Insigniores} quotes Pope Pius XII, who states, “‘The Church has no power over the sacraments…over what Christ the Lord…determined should be maintained in the sacramental sign.’”\textsuperscript{79} The Church can only alter sacraments “provided that their substance remains unaltered”, which cannot be avoided if the gender qualification for the priesthood is removed.\textsuperscript{80} To support this idea, the document reiterates “Again, the priestly ministry is not just a pastoral service; it ensures the continuity of the functions entrusted by Christ to the Apostles and the continuity of powers related to those functions.”\textsuperscript{81}

In summary, the documents candidly assert that the church simply “can not accept certain changes…because she is bound by Christ’s manner of acting” which the “Church has always acknowledged as a perennial norm.”\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Inter Insigniores} concludes by stating, “This norm, based in Christ’s example, has been and is still observed because it is considered to conform to God’s plan for his Church.”\textsuperscript{83} Similarly, \textit{Ordinatio Sacerdotalis} explains, “it has to be seen as the faithful observance of a plan to be ascribed to the wisdom of the Lord of the universe.”\textsuperscript{84}

\textbf{Fourth Critique:}

The documents begin the fourth section with the question: “Could the Church today depart from this attitude of Jesus and the Apostles, which has been considered as
normative by the whole of tradition up to our own day?” One could perhaps say the Church has departed from this attitude of Jesus and the Apostles already; for even while the attitude of prospective tradition is written about, the practice of prospective tradition is ignored.

Let us now address the first concern of the Inter Insigniores, which states that “social and cultural conditioning did not hold back the Apostles” who excluded women in their work even “in the Greek milieu, where the same forms of discrimination did not exist.” 85 However, it is impossible to state that the apostles were not in some way held back by their social or cultural conditioning, because what human has not been? It is, again, unfounded and unscholarly to ignore the attitude of the apostles as linked to culture, place, and historical time. During the attempt to negate the role of social and cultural influence altogether, the documents state; “it is clearly impossible to prove” that the attitude of Jesus and the Apostles “is inspired by social and cultural reasons.” 86 However, it is possible to present a different reading of the New Testament.

When Jesus and the Apostles are studied, an obvious tie with the Jewish community is seen: all participate in the Passover, Jesus’ mission is tied to the Law of Moses, Peter and Paul differ over ritual cleanliness, even the understanding of Jesus as the Messiah and the ritual of his burial come out of a Jewish context. These men did not live isolated from their communities; rather, they interacted in their own time, place, and culture, allowing each of these variables to impact the forming of each man. To state that these men moved outside their historical situation in dealing with women is not only unfounded, but also illogical.

85 C.D.F., 14.
86 C.D.F., 14; Pope John Paul II, 5.
Next, *Inter Insigniores* states that the passages of St. Paul are said to have a "transitory character" and "no longer have a normative value" in the way that Paul’s teaching on, for example, the prophesying of women in the assembly, does. 87 Again, this goes against the attitude of prospective tradition, and is another example of inconsistency. In prospective tradition, there is no qualifier as to what has a transitory character: rather, any aspect taught by Christ or the Apostles is to be handed down, unbroken, to the present. This is an obvious example of a flawed use of prospective tradition, as well as an example of eisegesis at work.

In the third point, it is written, ""The Church has no power over the sacraments…over what Christ the Lord…determined should be maintained in the sacramental sign.""88 The Church can only alter sacraments “provided that their substance remains unaltered”, which cannot be avoided if the gender qualification for the priesthood was removed.89 To support this idea, *Inter Insigniores* reiterates, “Again, the priestly ministry is not just a pastoral service; it ensures the continuity of the functions entrusted by Christ to the Apostles and the continuity of powers related to those functions.” 90 This attention to continuity is echoed in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, which states, “The apostles did the same when they chose fellow workers who…would carry on the apostles’ mission of representing Christ the Lord and Redeemer.” 91 From a prospective model of tradition this argument is illogical, because the teaching about the priesthood, which is “maintained in the sacramental sign,” was developed by Thomas

87 C.D.F., 15.
88 C.D.F., 16.
89 C.D.F., 16.
90 C.D.F., 17.
91 Pope John Paul II, 7.
Aquinas rather than Jesus.\footnote{C.D.F., 16.} In this view, then, a valid prospective tradition is painfully lacking; after all, emphasis is being placed not on the teaching of Christ regarding a sacramental sign (as it would be difficult to find his teachings on this subject in the New Testament), but on the teachings of a medieval theologian. Also, the documents do not assert that the sacramental sign of the priesthood would be altered if the gender qualification for the priesthood was removed.\footnote{This would be almost impossible, due to the fact that a negative ramification could only be seen if a female priesthood had existed, which is something the documents are obviously not proposing.} They could not possibly offer such a statement, since the negative ramification could only been seen in something the documents assert has never existed: a female priesthood. Lastly, I am not refuting the description of the priestly ministry, that “it is not just a pastoral service; it ensures the continuity of functions entrusted by Christ to the Apostles and the continuity of powers related to those functions.”\footnote{C.D.F., 17.} Rather, what I am holding in question is whether or not women today could ensure the continuity of functions in the same manner as males do. In the documents, this question largely goes unanswered.

The final point in this section of the documents is that the Church “can not accept certain changes...because she is bound by Christ’s manner of acting...the practice of the Church therefore has a normative character.”\footnote{C.D.F., 19.} The last statement made in the fourth section of the documents is that “This norm, based in Christ’s example, has been and is still observed because it is considered to conform to ‘God’s plan for his Church.”\footnote{C.D.F., 19.} However, basing the exclusion of women from the priesthood in the example of Christ has been questioned by some, as is seen in analysis. Moreover, both documents function
under the assumption that God’s plan for the Church is fully known, which some might interpret as a misconstruing of ignoring the dynamic and ongoing nature of biblical revelation. In both the Old and New Testaments, God’s plan is dynamic, changing and open-ended, and so it would follow that our continuing understanding of revelation must mirror that.

Fifth Argument: The Ministerial Priesthood in the Light of the Mystery of Christ

In the fifth argument, Inter Insigniores presents possibly the most controversial statements of its case. It reiterates what is found in other Vatican documents, that “the bishop or priest, in the exercise of his ministry does not act in his own name, in persona propria; he represents Christ, who acts through him: ‘the priest truly acts in the place of Christ.’” 97 It follows that “It is this ability to represent Christ that St. Paul considered as characteristic of his apostolic function (2 Cor. 5:20; Gal. 4:14).” 98 This is of central importance when applied to the Eucharist, which is “the source and center of the Church’s unity.” 99 In the Eucharist,

the priest, who alone has the power to perform it, then acts not only through the effective power conferred on him by Christ, but in persona Christi, taking the role of Christ, to the point of being his very image, when he pronounces the words of consecration.” 100

Then Inter Insigniores further states “the Christian priesthood is therefore of “a sacramental nature: the priest is a sign...that must be perceptible and with the faithful

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97 C.D.F., 21.
100 C.D.F., 21, second emphasis added.
must be able to recognize with ease.” 101 The idea of symbol could be confusing, and so the document explains, quoting St. Thomas: “Sacramental signs...represent what they signify by natural resemblance.” 102 And it is within the understanding of sacramental sign that Inter Insigniores makes its most controversial claim. In order to accomplish this natural resemblance, which “must exist between Christ and his minister,” the minister must be a man. 103 “There would not be this ‘natural resemblance’ which must exist between Christ and his minister if the role was not taken by a man: in such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ. For Christ himself was and remains a man.” 104

Inter Insigniores further explains why this requirement for the priesthood exists: “the incarnation of the Word took place according to the male sex...[this] cannot be distracted from the economy of salvation: it is indeed in harmony with the entirety of God’s plan.” 105 To further support the requirement, Inter Insigniores presents the metaphor that “Christ is the bridegroom; the Church is his Bride, whom he loves.” 106 This metaphor helps to remind us “That is why we can never ignore the fact that Christ is a man...his role must be taken by a man.” 107 There is “a difference of fact on the level of functions and service” of men and women, and the metaphor aids us in a continual understanding of why the role of a priest must be taken by a man. 108

Fifth Critique:

101 C.D.F., 22.
102 C.D.F., 22.
103 C.D.F., 22.
104 C.D.F., 22 emphasis added.
105 C.D.F., 23.
In this fifth argument lies an obvious problem, and it is the primary source of criticism for the texts as a whole. The documents state that it was the “ability to represent Christ that St. Paul considered as characteristic of his apostolic function.” 109 This is a pivotal statement for two reasons: first, from the institutionalized church’s use of prospective tradition, it cements the idea that what St. Paul considered as characteristic still holds true today, and second, following from the fact that women are not currently admitted to the priesthood, this statement supports the idea that women do not represent Christ.

The documents are grounded in that “the bishop or priest, in the exercise of his ministry does not act in his own name, in persona propria; he represents Christ, who acts through him: ‘the priest truly acts in the place of Christ.’” 110 Women, therefore, cannot be priests, because Jesus was a male. According to the documents, since women have a different anatomy than Jesus, it is illogical to state that women could represent him at the Eucharist. There are several problems with such a statement.

As has been previously noted, the prospective tradition is based on the teaching of “a hand-to-hand transmission of tradition’s contents from the time of Jesus and the apostles to the present moment.” 111 But both men and women were called to discipleship in the early church, and this could possibly raise doubts about any unbroken communication regarding an all male priesthood.

Another absolute statement presented in this section of the documents is that “the priest alone has the power to perform [the Eucharist].” 112 This statement contradicts

111 Thiel, 2.
112 C.D.F., 21.
prospective tradition, for if the history of the priesthood, or the history of the Eucharist, is studied, it is obvious that “...about the turn of the century [ca. 100 A.D.] (or a little earlier) two roles that once may have been separate had been joined; the role of the presbyter-bishop and the role of the celebrant of the Eucharist.” In early Christian communities, “The structure of the Eucharist, with the centrality of the Sabbath meal, points to the origin of Christian worship within the private sphere of the household”; this ‘private sphere’ for celebration was crucial to the celebration of the Eucharist at least until the middle of the third century. The importance of such household celebrations has obviously not been passed down to today’s community, as it would be if prospective tradition was practiced.

Another part of the Eucharist’s dynamic history is the question of who should receive it, and when the receiving should occur. During a majority of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was a movement in Europe advocating infrequent receiving of the Eucharist, as it was too holy to be consumed so often. However, a shift away from this attitude occurred when Pope Pius X “lowered the age for receiving one’s first communion from twelve or thirteen to seven or eight” in 1910. The concept of age was hardly addressed at the time of “Christ and the Apostles” as a qualification to receive the Eucharist, and neither was the idea that the Eucharist was too holy to be consumed often. These inconsistencies make it difficult to believe what prospective tradition would teach: just as the tradition of the priesthood “witnessed to the Church’s desire to conform to the model left her by the Lord” and “has enjoyed peaceful and

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113 Brown, 42.
115 McCarthy, 214.
116 McCarthy, 214.
universal acceptance,” the Eucharist, too, has conformed to the model left by Christ and has not been challenged or changed. However, if this is proven flawed, and discrepancies of prospective tradition are found regarding the Eucharist, could one say they might be found regarding the ministerial priesthood?

Still more discrepancies are found in the prospective tradition applied to the documents. If the purpose of prospective tradition is to act in a manner based in tradition established at the time of Jesus and the Apostles, why then, would the institutionalized church now place emphasis on the interpretation of ‘symbol’ formed by Saint Thomas, who lived from 1225 until 1274? If prospective tradition were actually practiced, and emphasis placed in “hand-to-hand transmission of tradition’s contents from the time of Jesus and the apostles to the present moment,” the stress would instead be on the full humanity of Jesus, as many theologians “have demonstrated through historical studies that ancient Christian traditions never stressed the maleness of Jesus.” Indeed, “it was the humanity, not the maleness, of Jesus that constitutes the heart of Christianity.” If emphasis was not placed on the importance of Jesus’ sex in the past, it seems illogical for a prospective tradition to place such emphasis on Jesus’ sex today.

Concerns regarding the ‘symbol’ of St. Aquinas are not only directed at the inconsistency of the teaching of a prospective model, but also at the academic value of Aquinas’ ‘symbol’ when applied to the priesthood. Inter Insigniores quotes Aquinas as stating, “Sacramental signs represent what they signify by natural resemblance.” In this way, a priest must be male to represent Jesus who was male. However, the natural

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117 C.D.F., 3; 2.
120 C.D.F., 22.
resemblance necessary in the Eucharist truly centers on a priest symbolizing Jesus the Christ; this same Christ includes and transcends all male and female anatomical distinctions.

If it is necessary to have the natural resemblance written about in *Inter Insigniores* to symbolize Christ and perform the Eucharistic celebration, it is obvious that other variables not met by a priest would, according to the document, negate the effectiveness of the sacramental sign as well. Could not the argument be made that to truly have a natural resemblance to Jesus, the minister must not only be male, but also between the ages of thirty and thirty-three, Jewish, with dark skin, and dark hair? *Inter Insigniores* states that this is not so, because “the difference of sex exercises an important influence, much deeper than, for example, ethnic differences: the latter do not affect the human person as intimately as the difference of sex.”  

121 The inconsistency and the selectivity of prospective tradition within the document further undermines the document’s teachings, and calls into question the very use of prospective tradition.

This idea of a “natural resemblance” is indeed a slippery slope; after all, what else is negated when the idea of natural resemblance is absent in a Mass? I have attended a Eucharistic celebration where the white wine was transubstantiated to the Blood of Christ. Am I to believe the transubstantiation did not occur because the color of blood is not white, as the color of the wine was? If the necessity of natural resemblance is adhered to, then the answer must be yes; however, I am unwilling to make such an unnecessary leap.

An even greater problem arises in respect to the humanity of women. If men are the only humans who are able to take on the role of Christ, “to the point of being his very
image” the question then becomes, not ‘can women be priests?’ but rather, “Are women created in the image and likeness of God?”¹²² This question also raises issues of women’s salvation. In She Who Is, Elizabeth Johnson states:

women’s physical embodiment becomes a prison that shuts them off from God, except as mediated through the christic male... if maleness is essential for the christic role, then women are cut out of the loop of salvation, for female sexuality is not taken on by the Word made flesh. If maleness is constitutive for the incarnation and redemption, female humanity is not assumed and therefore not saved ¹²³

Such an attitude is clearly not present in the actions or teachings of Jesus, and it would be impossible to assert that the prospective tradition used here is accurately following a “hand-to-hand transmission of tradition’s contents from the time of Jesus and the apostles to the present moment.”¹²⁴ Especially absent in the teachings of Jesus is the argument of Inter Insigniores; i.e., that women are somehow lesser human beings because of their gender. Jesus was inclusive, and honored the dignity in each person created in God’s image, whether a man or a woman. The exclusive and undignified statements found in this section of Inter Insigniores can hardly be attributed to the will of God, as imparted to humanity at the time of Jesus and the Apostles, and passed on, unbroken, to the current Roman Catholic community. If the attitude and teachings of Jesus are even possibly misrepresented in prospective tradition, the institutionalized Church might be seen by some to give divine sanction to sexism and discrimination. In a

¹²² LaCugna, 247.
¹²³ Johnson, She Who Is, 153.
¹²⁴ Thiel, 2.
1990 letter addressed to the United States Bishops, Rosemary Radford Ruether articulates
the commonly held frustration with the current Magisterium:

You call on the world to repent of sexism and to give to women that full equality of
personhood, which is their God-given nature. Yet, [you] reaffirm every aspect of
the patriarchal system that is the basis of sexism. Dear bishops, you embarrass us.
You insult our intelligence...finally, and most incredibly, you claim to affirm the
equality of women with men in the image of God, yet you deny to women equality
in Christ, who is, for Christians, the veritable image of God.125

Here, again, prospective tradition could be seen as inconsistent and damaged: if the
teachings and attitudes of Jesus had truly been passed down, unbroken, the statement that
women do not symbolize Christ would never have been made in the document. Inter
Insigniores may be correct in that I might fail to symbolize Christ; however, if I fail, let it
be the fault of my own, and not the fault of my sex.

**Sixth Argument: The Ministerial Priesthood Illustrated by the Mystery of the Church**

The final argument given in the Inter Insigniores explains attempts the all male
priesthood through the mystery of divine revelation. The document states,
problems of sacramental theology, especially when they concern the ministerial
priesthood, as is the case here, cannot be solved except in the light of Revelation.
The human sciences, however valuable their contribution in their own domain,
cannot suffice here, for they cannot grasp the realities of faith: the properly

125 McCarthy, 441.
supernatural content of these realities is beyond their competence.\textsuperscript{126}

To support this understanding of the separation of the Church from the world, the document claims, “the Church is a society different from other societies, original in her nature and structures”; as such, it “is not a simple government...It is not granted by people’s spontaneous choice.”\textsuperscript{127} This statement supports the supposition that since the priesthood ensures God’s choice, “one cannot see how it is possible to propose the admission of women to the priesthood in virtue of the equality of rights of the human person.”\textsuperscript{128} Even Galatians 3:28, written by St. Paul is qualified in this light, for he was writing about the lack “of distinction between men and women. But this passage does not concern ministries.”\textsuperscript{129}

Perhaps one of the most firm reasons for sustaining an all male priesthood is made in this last section, which states that although “some women feel that they have a vocation to the priesthood...[this] still does not suffice for a genuine vocation...the priesthood is a particular ministry of which the Church has received the charge and control, authentication by the Church is indispensable here and is a constitutive part of the vocation.”\textsuperscript{130} The document emphasizes that “The priestly office cannot become the goal of social advancement...it must not be forgotten that the priesthood does not form part of the rights of the individual, but stems from the economy of the mystery of Christ and the church.”\textsuperscript{131} This section clearly supports one of the first statements addressed in this paper, which is that “the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly

\textsuperscript{126} C.D.F., 29.
\textsuperscript{127} C.D.F., 30.
\textsuperscript{128} C.D.F., 31.
\textsuperscript{129} C.D.F., 31.
\textsuperscript{130} C.D.F., 32.
\textsuperscript{131} C.D.F., 34.
ordination on women."  

Ordinatio Sacerdotalis takes this understanding even a step further. John Paul II expressly states, "I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the faithful."  

Sixth Critique:

Responding to John Paul II requires a closer analysis of his statement. Again, he states that, "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the faithful." These words have been the source of much debate as to whether or not it was possible for the discussion regarding the ordination of women to even occur, because some take the pope’s statement to be infallible. The reasoning for the claim of infallibility is found in a

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133 Pope John Paul II, 12.

134 Also necessary at the beginning of this critique is a clarification regarding my obedience to the magisterium. Obedience to the magisterium is the norm for Roman Catholics, and so I am subject to obedience in the same manner any Roman Catholics would be. Timothy G. McCarthy provides a wonderful context in which obedience to the magisterium is explained. He states in The Catholic Tradition: The Church in the Twentieth Century, "there is a major difference between infallible and noninfallible teaching, [and so] it is wrong to expect the same kind of uncritical and unqualified obedience for noninfallible teachings as is expected for infallible teachings. Canon 752 says official magisterial texts do not require an assent of faith in the area of noninfallible teaching, but, rather, a religiosum obsequium of intellect and will. The English translation reads ‘a religious respect of intellect and will’ " (128). To more fully explain this religiosum obsequium, McCarthy cites Theologian Bernard Hāring, who, "believes the respect expected has two dimensions. First, out of religious loyalty a believer will honestly and sincerely endeavor to understand and appropriate the teachings. Second, again out of religious loyalty, a believer will ‘examine the teachings critically and, should the situation arise, assert those reservations which seem necessary without rebellion against authority’ (128). It is important for me to stress here that this thesis in no way rejects such a notion of obedience to the magisterium, or such an idea of religiosum obsequium. The status of Ordinatio Sacerdotalis as infallible is greatly debated, and so my approach is grounded in the submission of the will outlined in the construct of religiosum obsequium. I have held fast to both my religious loyalty and to my examination of the teachings, and in this way have been obedient to the magisterium.

135 Pope John Paul II, 12, emphasis added.
statement issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on November 18, 1995. The document declared two things:

that the doctrine excluding the ordination of women to the priesthood pertains to the deposit of faith and that it has been infallibly taught by the ordinary and universal magisterium. To say that something 'pertains to the deposit of faith' means that it is a truth revealed to us by God.\(^{136}\)

The proposal that the current structure of the priesthood is a truth revealed to us by God has been called into question throughout this paper. This skepticism is supported by Canon 750 of the Code of Canon Law, which states, "when a doctrine is proposed as divinely revealed by the ordinary and universal magisterium, this is 'manifested by the common adherence of Christ's faithful.'"\(^{137}\) A common adherence to the exclusive, all male priesthood, is obviously absent. However, most important to this discussion is the second part of the statement made by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, concerning the statement's infallibility. A deeper understanding of infallibility is needed as the context for such an important discussion, in the same way that a deeper understanding of tradition is needed to be the context for the discussion of women as priests in general. The context for infallibility is found in the Code of Canon Law, in which it is written, "No doctrine is understood to be infallibly defined unless it is clearly established as such."\(^{138}\) Now the question becomes whether or not this 'clear establishment' has occurred.

The status of infallibility regarding the pope's statement is called into serious question for many reasons, the first of which is that it is not the pope himself, but rather

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\(^{137}\) Sullivan, par. 6.

\(^{138}\) Sullivan, par. 6, (Canon 749).
the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, claiming infallibility. Francis A. Sullivan states, "the statement of the C.D.F. to this effect is not infallible, because, even published with papal approval, it remains a statement of the congregation, to which the Pope cannot communicate his prerogative of infallibility." Sullivan's article also gives three criteria that can help in the discernment of what is and what is not infallible. These are: "consultation with all the bishops, the universal and constant consensus of Catholic theologians and the common adherence of the faithful." Sullivan continues, "the C.D.F. has not invoked any of these criteria in support of its assertion that the doctrine excluding women from the priesthood has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal magisterium." It appears that a continued discussion of the admission of women to the priesthood is a viable option. With that in mind, the remaining points in the sixth argument can be addressed.

The documents state that the question of the admission of women to the priesthood "cannot be solved except in the light of Revelation. The human sciences...cannot suffice here, for they do not and cannot grasp the realities of faith." When coupled with the claim that "the Church is a society different from other societies," it is clear that the documents are closed to the idea of constructive criticism or influence from outside entities; according to prospective tradition, the Church has no use for them. However, the Second Vatican Council clearly challenges this view.

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139 Sullivan, 6.
140 Sullivan, 6.
141 Sullivan, 6.
142 C.D.F., 29.
143 C.D.F., 30.
The Second Vatican Council had four explicit goals, one being to "adapt Church observances to the requirements of the times."¹⁴⁴ In fact, "The immediate goal was to modernize the church and to involve it in the concerns of the world."¹⁴⁵ This modernization of the Church was described by "the Italian word aggiornamento, meaning an updating. Aggiornamento became the guiding principle of Vatican II."¹⁴⁶ This idea of updating meant, in practical terms, "the church had to change in order to meet the needs of the times, that is, the changes taking place outside itself."¹⁴⁷ The exclusionary vision held by the current institutionalized Church directly conflicts with the vision held by the institutionalized Church less than fifty years ago. It is illogical to present the suggestion that now, less than fifty years later, this idea of meeting the world should be ignored, so that the world is discredited as a possible vessel of the Holy Spirit and of a deeper understanding of revelation. All of this points again to the fact that a prospective model of tradition is inadequate, and does not practically function within the current structure of Church. If a prospective model of tradition were actualized when dealing with the world, the Church’s actions would be based on the understanding that Jesus and the Twelve met

¹⁴⁴ McCarthy, 58.
¹⁴⁵ McCarthy, 58.
¹⁴⁶ McCarthy, 59.
¹⁴⁷ McCarthy, 59. Another component of the theology of tradition espoused at the Second Vatican Council is found in Dei Verbum. This document, promulgated November 18, 1965, encompassed the new ecumenical and biblical tone of the council’s understanding of revelation. In this document an awareness of the need to “search out the intention of the sacred writers” by way of form criticism, is shown. Dei Verbum acknowledges our need to become aware of the historical context and different genres of the various books of the Bible. While still conceding points to Trent, Vatican I, and the apologetic orientation of previous Church documents, Dei Verbum overall is an inspiration to those who are concerned with developing and interpreting anew the notion of revelation. Most pertinent to this thesis is the understanding that revelation is no longer understood here simply as the communication of knowledge, but as a process, involving events as well as words, by which humans are invited into an ever-deeper relationship with God. (Dulles, Revelation and the Quest for Unity, 86). Entire footnote taken from Mystery and Promise: A Theology of Revelation by John F. Haught, found at http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/research.dll/showchapter?chapter_id=1795 homepage http://www.religion-online.org/.
the world they were in, interacted with it, and engaged in a dialogue. We see, yet again, that the idea of prospective tradition is being preached without being practiced.

Another instance when the action of prospective tradition is found lacking in *Inter Insigniores* is seen when discussing the issue of vocation. The document states, “It is sometimes said and written in books and periodicals that some women feel that they have a vocation to the priesthood. Such an attraction, however noble and understandable, still does not suffice for a genuine vocation.” It explains the reasoning for this based on the fact that “since the priesthood is a particular ministry of which the Church has received the charge and the control, authentication by the Church is indispensable here and is a constitutive part of the vocation.” The most obvious contradiction lies in the assertion that the Church has “the charge and the control” over the priesthood, whereas in the introduction to *Inter Insigniores*, it is recalled that “the Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to the priestly ordination.” Clearly there is an inconsistency in these two statements. However, more important to address is the issue of vocation.

From a prospective tradition, the documents should agree with the original ministry structure handed down by Christ and the Apostles. It would seem that all believers and all baptized would be allowed to act on their shared commission to preach the Gospel and become leaders of the faith. However, the structure of ministry from the time of Christ has obviously changed today, in that there are now distinctions within both ministry, and the institutionalized church, which validates vocation. Again, even the

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149 C.D.F., 33.
prospective tradition championed by the church is ignored, so that the refusal to admit women may be defended. We are told women cannot truly be called to the vocation of the priesthood because the church does not acknowledge such a call; however, this was obviously not the norm at the time of Christ and the Apostles. Today, such a requirement is impossible to meet, especially when the very church that must validate the call is unwilling to admit that such a call could ever occur. The use of prospective tradition throughout the texts has been called into question, and this is simply one more example.

Part Two: Retrospective Tradition

Throughout all six Vatican points addressed in the thesis, prospective tradition has been found to be ahistoric, static, somewhat inconsistent, and detrimental to an ongoing understanding of revelation. What then is to be done? Obviously a different conception of tradition is necessary. John Thiel presents one in his retrospective model. Contrary to the prospective model of tradition, the retrospective conception measures continuity “by envisaging tradition from the actual limitations of the present moment and ‘looking back’ to the Christian past to configure traditional continuity.” 151 This retrospective model is a more valid understanding of traditional continuity because it places “its regard for the past realistically, and by remembering that tradition is no more finished than the history in which it unfolds.” 152 A retrospective model allows for “the regional acts of faith as

151 Thiel, 6. Contrary to the understanding of tradition which understands continuity solely as a hand to hand transmission of tradition’s contents from the time of Jesus and the apostles to the present, the contemporary understanding of tradition manifests the historical nuances of a fully revealed truth and demonstrates how there has been change even within the continuity, as is seen in the model of retrospective tradition.

152 Thiel, 7. An important aspect of the retrospective model is that it too, follows religiosum obsequium. Thiel states “this proposed theory…will be faithful to a Catholic understanding of authoritative tradition
these acts of faith look back to the past to find occasions for continuity in the beliefs and practices of the previous generation." 153 It is aware that for a culture to actively participate in determining what is deemed valid and internalized, tradition must exist in a historical reality. The retrospective model allows tradition to be “not an uncreated reality but rather one fully enmeshed in time and culture, the relative substance of historicity.”154 In respect to the question of the ordination of women, retrospective tradition can have a measure of balance. Thiel writes, “The appearance of the new does not discard that coherence [of the past] but redefines it now in light of the new, enriching and extending the order of plot in ways that could not have been anticipated before.” 155 He continues, “tradition requires faith in the artistry of the author, though in this case a divine author with an infinite talent to lead believers to an ever-renewed appreciation for a continuity not vitiated but strengthened by tradition’s unanticipated twists and turns.”156 It is for this reason that retrospective tradition should be the preferred approach to tradition. In contrast to prospective tradition, it does not place limitations on the nature and action of God, and there is no reductionism of God’s presence in the world. It also bridges the past tradition with the current community through belief and practice, while embracing the hermeneutical and historical contexts. An historical consciousness, grounded in an existential worldview, is present in retrospective tradition; whereas prospective tradition, grounded in abstract essences, lacks a historical consciousness. Retrospective tradition thus fuses innovation and tradition together, providing a balance between the new and the old and allowing for ongoing revelation in which we can all participate.

153 Thiel, 8.
154 Thiel, 13.
155 Thiel, 17.
156 Thiel, 18.
Part Three: A Theoretical Question

What would be the positive aspects and contributions to the Church if women were ordained to the priesthood?

In this section, we will ask if the Roman Catholic Church were to allow women in the priesthood, what would some of the effects be? As a twenty two year old, female, American Catholic, my feelings toward the current Church are nothing if not conflicted. This community is where I find God and my spirituality, but it is also where I find blatant sexism. I am told I am created in the image of God at the same time that I am told I do not symbolize Christ. This internal struggle is articulated by quoting Renée M. Lareau, another Catholic young woman: “My love of the church abounds, as do my frustrations with it. In general, my relationship with the church is characterized by love and aversion, joy and anger, quiet complacence and fierce determination.” 157 One example of the source of these tensions is obviously found in the question of admitting women to the priesthood. How could these tensions be resolved? One possibility is if the criteria for the priesthood were to be changed, based on the model of retrospective tradition. Of course, in order to do this, “psychological fears and historical barriers [would] need to be overcome.” 158 Once this was realized, a renewal in our community of faith could begin. A shift of importance could occur, from the physical to the spiritual, and from exclusion to inclusion. The requirement to be male could be abolished, and in order for this to occur, women would have to be recognized as symbols of God, just as their male counterparts are. As Tobin states, “All women ask for is that they be recognized as the

full human persons they are, and treated accordingly. This recognition would bring a new dimension to the priesthood.

It is also necessary to make the Church teachings credible in the context of modernity and post-modernity, within a retrospective model of tradition. This would call for our faith community to be open to the work of the Spirit, and to our deeper understanding of God’s revelation in a broken world. This growing understanding of revelation is the very thing that allows for the questioning and revising of our faith, even regarding the priesthood. Tobin correctly states, “The Spirit of God is not bound”; and once this is admitted, the meaning of the priesthood can be explored in the context of the twenty first century. With current social and scientific critiques at our disposal, it would seem beneficial to use them so that our understanding of tradition and innovation may continue to grow.

In reality, the priesthood can no longer be based on the biology of Jesus; instead, the priesthood should be based in the message that Jesus preached. This change would still allow for the priesthood to be seen as a vocation; what would be different in my proposal of priesthood is the criteria for the recognition of this call. As the criteria for the priesthood shifts away from biological requirements, it allows the priesthood to be defined by qualities necessary for ministry. In my proposal, he qualities would place less of an emphasis on being male, and more of an emphasis on being human. These criteria would include: a close and meaningful relationship with God, an accepting nature, an open counsel, and a respectful, inclusive behavior. Priests should be compassionate, humble leaders of their communities, always guiding and listening, challenging their

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159 Tobin, 22.
160 Tobin, 28.
communities to push past social norms into the radical nature of the Gospel message. Priests are called to be spiritual leaders of communities, both nurturing and challenging, possessing a listening ear and a prophetic voice, mediating between traditions and innovations.

A priest would be humbly aware of his or her shortcomings, participating in a dialogue with the community he or she leads, and dealing with people in everyday life. Each priest would have a desire for a life of service, feel love and compassion for others, and possess a basic human goodness. It is important to stress that none of these requirements are gender specific, and none should be. The priesthood would become a ministry in which women could flourish as much as men, and could enrich communities with the unique female perspective they possess, in the same manner men continually bless their communities with today. The result of such a proposal could deconstruct centuries of sexism and patriarchy, and begin to restore the broken body of Christ on earth.

Pope John Paul II’s present teaching in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* states, “the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.” However, a theoretical question might be asked. While the Church has no authority now, is it possible that sometime in the future, given the advancement in biblical and historical studies, given the new information gained from the retrospective tradition (especially since the Second Vatican Council), might there arise new conditions and new understanding through theological insights which would provide the Church with a basis for acquiring that authority? Would a future Pope then consider ordaining women to the priesthood?

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161 Pope John Paul II, 12.
Bibliography


