

For the 20th anniversary of the installation of John Paul II as Pope
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ABC radio National Religion Report 21/10/98; recorded 21/10/98

As national convener of Ordination of Catholic Women, an organisation committed to the ordination of women into a renewed priestly ministry, I find little to applaud in the long and complex papacy of Pope John Paul II who has resolutely resisted all demands for the equal participation of women in the catholic church.

This pope proclaims the dignity of women while excluding them from decision-making forums. In his twenty years as pope, he's made what he sees as definitive statements on women which limit their participation in the church — yet he won't engage in any conversation with real women about his conclusions.

He proclaims that women are equal in dignity to men but different from and complementary to them. When I hear pronouncements based on notions of gender complementarity (with its associated biological determinism and outmoded anthropology of gender) I hear alarm bells ringing. Historically gender complementary has been invoked whenever social theories propounding the equality of women and men seem to be gaining ground.

On the basis of his anthropology and his understanding of scripture, the Pope has declared that the church has no authority whatsoever to ordain women because Christ established an all-male priesthood. In declaring this, he's ignored his own biblical scholars and theologians and their counter-views, and simply restated his position over and over again, with increasing force. No scholarly discussion has been allowed.

But arguments from scripture have failed to persuade many catholics: the question refuses to go away and people around the world continue to call for women's ordination. So now the argument used is quietly shifting: from New Testament traditions of The Twelve to the murky world of secondary truths. Now we're told that the church's lack of authority to ordain women is a secondary truth necessary for upholding fundamental beliefs — without any explanation as to how ordained women would threaten the Trinity. And still there's to be no discussion.

This pope's often applauded for his support of civil rights and freedom. He seems, however, to follow a Metternich policy of liberalism abroad and suppression within. In place of reason and open discussion, we see the use of dictatorial power and demands for obedience. What's more, in this climate of fear, acceptance of the papal position on the ordination of women has become the touchstone of orthodoxy. The just demands of women have become an arena in which questions of power and authority are being contested.

What this papacy has failed to justify theologically, it now enforces legally. Lacking convincing arguments, this imperial-style papacy has resorted to force: silencing and excluding anyone who dares to question. Bishops, priests, theologians, writers, women and men, have all suffered. His 1989 Profession of Faith is now incorporated into canon law — so that appropriate punishments may be more readily applied. In a struggling and fragmented world, we're given stones instead of bread.

It's reached the terrible position where a member of the executive of Ordination of Catholic Women (OCW) has been told by her parish priest, Bishop Geoffrey Mayne, that she'll no longer be given communion in the parish. [This, when we proclaim a God who says (Proverbs) She 'has laid her table' and calls us all to 'Come and eat my bread and drink the wine I have prepared'.] [sentence cut for broadcast.]

It seems the pope is fearful of what twentieth century women think, say and do. But he can't stop our thinking, saying, doing. Feminist theology is bringing new life to our understanding of scripture and to the meaning of church. It's producing new wine, which needs new wine-skins of church structures and ways of being church. But Pope John Paul's response seems to be stricter enforcement of old ways.

Sadly, whatever good he may have done, as a woman I cannot rejoice in this papacy.