



Most Rev. Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap
Archbishop of Denver

Pastoral Statement

Denver bishops clarify status of schismatic group

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In recent weeks, a group describing itself as the Ecumenical Catholic Communion held a ceremony in Longmont to "ordain" several women as "Catholic priests." This ceremony, which was not a valid sacrament, is not recognized by the Catholic Church. But it has raised questions about the status of this group and groups like it, and about the Church's teaching on the sacrament of holy orders.

The Church recalls that although Jesus had many disciples, both men and women, he chose as his apostles only men. Because of this, the Church has taught consistently since the time of Christ that she has the authority to ordain only men to the diaconate, presbyterate and episcopate. This teaching reflects the fundamental Christian belief that although men and women have equal dignity, and are equally loved by God, they have different gifts to offer to the Church and the world.

John Paul II reminded us that Mary, "the Mother of God and the Mother of Church" was not a priest, but she is even more vital to the life of the Church than St. Peter or the Apostles. What makes a great saint, he taught, is not whether one is ordained, but whether one lives a life of love. "The greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven," John Paul said, "are not the ministers but the saints."

Although women cannot be ordained, they are obviously essential to the Church. In fact, many of the greatest saints and holy persons in the history of the Church have been women, and they have served the Lord in very different ways. Joan of Arc, Kateri Tekakwitha, Therese of Liseux, and Gianna Molla are a few of the many examples of strong, faith-filled women who gave their lives to the service of God. They are, without ever having been ordained, pillars of the Christian family.

This principle of Catholic doctrine is sometimes hard to understand in a culture skeptical of faith; a culture that sees any distinctions between people or vocations as somehow prejudicial. But Christianity is both a comfort and challenge. When we accept what is comforting without accepting what challenges us, we stop striving for holiness. When we dispute what we do not understand, instead of prayerfully and earnestly seeking truth, we stop seeking Christ. And when we decide that we can privately discern the teaching of Christ without the guidance of the Church and her experience, we separate ourselves from the community of Christ's faithful people.

Full communion with the Church involves a communion of faith, governance, and the sacraments. We believe the teachings of Jesus Christ in communion. We worship and celebrate the sacraments in communion. And we are guided, in communion, by the successors of the apostles, the bishops of the Church, who are called by the Holy Spirit and confirmed by the Church to teach the faith which Christ has given us. As the early Christian scholar, bishop and saint Irenaeus taught, the bishop is the anchor and guarantor of the Church. Outside unity with the local bishop and the bishop of Rome, there is no "Catholic Church."

Many groups claim to be Catholic. Many attempt to borrow their credibility from the Church Jesus founded. But in simulating the form of Catholic life, and selectively editing the substance of Catholic belief, they are dishonest with themselves and—even more importantly—they are dishonest with others.

+Most Rev. Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.
Archbishop of Denver

+Most Rev. James D. Conley
Auxiliary Bishop of Denver