

What is right?

My conscience or the Church?

Dear **Father Kerper:** I became very upset when I read that the Church has excommunicated a woman who had herself ordained as a priest. Why is this woman being singled out when other people, even priests, have done worse things? One person, writing in a local newspaper, said she was excommunicated for following her conscience. He cited the words of Cardinal Newman, who is on the way to sainthood, “Conscience first; the Pope second.” How can anyone defend excommunicating a good woman who wants to serve the Lord?

Many Catholics share your concern about what appears to be unfairness, discrimination against women, and the Church’s violation of conscience. By raising this matter, you display a commendable passion for justice. However, the quest for justice always requires clarity about the situation. The thought and life of Blessed John Henry Newman, whose famous quote you shared, offer valuable guidance here.

Let’s begin with conscience. Cardinal Newman did indeed write: “I shall drink — to the Pope, if you please — still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards.” These words appear at the very end of Newman’s long letter to the Duke of Norfolk written in 1870.

Newman firmly asserted that Catholics have no obligation to follow the Pope’s direction on matters beyond the realm of doctrine and morality. For example, Newman said that if the Pope ever mandated that religious communities must establish lotteries, a priest who truly believed that gambling is wrong must disobey the order. Why? Because papal directives about fundraising techniques are not free from error.

For Newman, conscience is not the same as one’s personal opinions about essential Catholic beliefs. Indeed, in his 1870 letter, he warned against “counterfeit” forms of conscience that “boast of being above all religions and to be the impartial critic of each of them.” Instead, he offered this definition: “[Conscience] is a

messenger from [God], who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by His representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ.”

For a Catholic, conscience and essential Church teaching should operate together. As such, the conscience of a Catholic can never require a person to do what is wrong, contrary to the faith, or impossible. On the matter of priestly ordination, no one — whether man or woman — can ever claim that his or her conscience absolutely requires ordination, which is no one’s right. By contrast, conscience would require a man to refuse ordination if he sincerely believed he had no vocation. A bishop would violate a man’s conscience by commanding ordination.

In short, Newman’s thought reduced to a bumper sticker should read: “Conscience first; the Pope second — in everything that’s not his proper business.” When the Pope, in communion with Catholic bishops everywhere, simply reasserts established teaching about the priesthood, he minds his “proper business.”

Now, let’s consider the excommunication of “ordained women.” Excommunication does not necessarily imply that a person has sinned. Rather excommunication occurs when a person acts or believes in ways that directly contradict the Church’s own self-understanding and structures.

As to ordination, anyone — regardless of gender — who attempts to receive Holy Orders, whether validly or not, from anyone other than a Catholic bishop in full communion with the Bishop of Rome incurs excommunication. In recent times, many more men than women have been excommunicated for unauthorized ordinations; hence the key issue is not gender discrimination.

Excommunication in these cases is not primarily a punishment but a way to ensure that Catholic people know who is — and who is not — a Roman Catholic priest. Permit me to use an analogy from the market place.

If Toyota began to put Ford emblems on their cars and sold them as Fords, they still wouldn’t be Fords. If such a thing happened, Ford would be horribly remiss if it allowed Toyotas to be passed off as genuine Fords.

Through excommunication the Church removes its “brand” from everyone — male and female — who circumvents the standard process for validating God’s call to ordained ministry. Without this discipline, all sorts of people could claim that God had “called” them to the priesthood. No one would be able to sort out Roman Catholic priests from “independent Catholic” priests, a true contradiction of terms.

Now, let’s turn to the matter of sincere people who can’t be ordained in the Catholic Church: women because of the Church’s teaching

that only men can be ordained, and men who want to combine marriage with ordination, something blocked by canon law. How does a person follow his or her conscience?

Let's return to Cardinal Newman. For many years he experienced agonizing tension between his conscience and his "birthright" denomination, the Church of England. After long and faithful service as a devoted Anglican minister and scholar, he eventually admitted that his understanding of the Church had evolved from the Anglican to Roman Catholic version. His tortured conscience forced him to conclude that he could no longer hold pastoral office in the Anglican Church because he had become fully Roman Catholic in theology and spirituality.

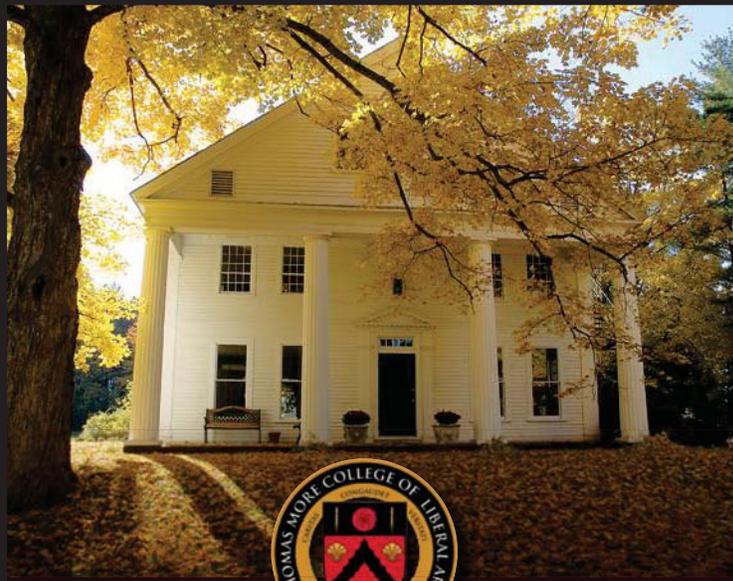
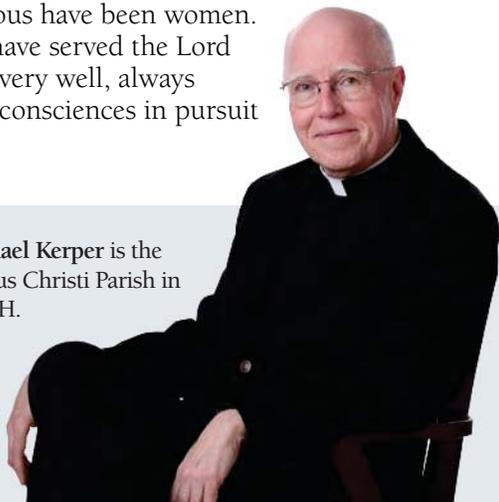
Being a man of impeccable integrity, Newman believed it was impossible to cling to his Anglican pulpit and parsonage, all the while pleading that his conscience had dictated that he preach and teach Roman Catholicism. He left the Church of England and became a Roman Catholic, a courageous move that cost him dearly. Among other things, he lost pastoral employment, the right to teach in the university, and many cherished friends.

Newman clearly understood that the "doctrinal boundaries" of Catholicism are not infinitely elastic, especially teachings and practices that the Church firmly believes reflect the will of Christ. This is the root of the Catholic position about the ordination of women.

In 1995, Pope John Paul II put it this way: "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 Church's faithful." Here, John Paul II did not express his own personal opinion. Rather his statement validated centuries of universal belief and practice, not only among Catholics but also among the Orthodox Churches.

The fixation on priestly ordination often blinds us to the diverse forms of ministry within the Catholic Church. Currently, hundreds of devoted, skilled, and creative women serve in full-time ministry in our Diocese. And through the centuries, the vast majority of vowed religious have been women. These women have served the Lord and his people very well, always following their consciences in pursuit of the possible.

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