

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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STEP BY STEP

It's not all going to happen at once. In terms of tone and emphasis, things are moving so rapidly with Pope Francis that it is hard to keep up. With newsworthy statements, gestures and/or events every day, this superstar Pope continues to get headlines.

The novelty is wearing off but the pundits, columnists, and reporters are going beyond daily stories and they are now analyzing, predicting and supposing. It is exciting and promising. Stay tuned.

We progressives are delighted, of course. Just one year ago, no one even dreamed we would have a Pope and a church like we are currently experiencing. And with new Francis-made Cardinals coming soon, the possibility for long term Vatican II reform becomes even more realistic.

But (there is always a But, isn't there?) doctrinal change is another matter. I argue that the change in tone and emphasis, the living testimony of Francis, his compassion, style, and infectious love is substantive change, not superficial, but the core of the gospel.

On the other hand, what do we do with centuries of teaching on specific topics? Surround them with love? Yes and that is what is happening now. But when the teaching itself is problematic, what do we do? Ordination of women, for example.

I do not believe that women's ordination is a litmus test for Francis, although it appears that some other progressives do take this position. I do not subscribe to the "ordination of women or nothing significant has happened" approach.

I have said often in these Chats that I support and promote women's ordination. In my opinion, the most likely scenario for this change will be a step by step progression, not a full scale, immediate transformation of the policy.

Here are the steps I see:

1. The ordination to the priesthood of married men will come first. There is obvious and widespread historical precedence for a married clergy and obligatory celibacy is a clear cultural issue. Current married permanent deacons are likely first step

candidates for a married clergy. Since theological and pastoral formation is practically in place for these deacons, the transition to a pastoral priesthood can be smooth and quick. Practical issues like salary, living arrangements, etc. will be determined and implemented.

This first step need not be limited to current deacons. Qualified married men could be identified, trained and ordained.

2. My second step could actually be implemented along side step 1. Some parishes are currently being led by Parish Life Coordinators - deacons, religious sisters, or laypersons, male and female, who lead a Catholic faith community. There is even a provision for these PLCs in canon law, and there have been decades of positive experience with this model of parish life. Promoting and expanding this model of parish leadership through to their ordination to priesthood is a natural progression. This development would include the ordination of women who, for all practical purposes, have already been pastoral leaders for many years.
3. Increased roles for women in positions of leadership in all levels of the church. While there are women in many key positions right now, they often report to a priest. It is time priests report to some of them. Ordination does not confer leadership. Priests celebrate sacraments but that does not mean that they are qualified to assume other positions of leadership. They can, and some should, have female bosses. We now assume that priesthood means positional authority which extends to all areas of parish life. That assumption is a fatal flaw. An ordained liturgical celebrant could report to an unordained, qualified lay or religious pastor, male or female.
4. The training and ordination of women will follow developments in steps 1 through 3. While these steps generate practical experience and experimental adjustments, theologians and bishops need to deal with the academic basis for ordaining women. They need to spell out the theological, cultural, doctrinal, scriptural and historical foundations for including women in ordination. In the recent past, they couldn't even talk about these issues. Francis needs to open the doors to these discussions. Once that happens, I am confident a solid, positive basis will be established for the ordination of women to priesthood. Implementing steps 1-3 will provide the pastoral experience and readiness for a smooth transition to women priests.

One caution: some women can be as clerical as some men, ordained or not. Avoid clericalism everywhere. Having clericalized women as priests only gets us anatomically different tyrants. That's not progress. That's stupid.

But any movement in any of these areas is a movement in the direction of women's ordination. So, let's get moving, even if it is step by step.