In recent decades, one of the most recurring debates within and outside the Church has been the possibility of ordaining women as priests. In a society increasingly shaped by political, sociological, or power-equality categories, many people ask: **why does the Catholic Church maintain that the priesthood is reserved to men?**

To respond to this question, the Church published a key document in 1976: **Inter insigniores**, a declaration from the **Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith** approved by **Paul VI**.

Far from being an ideological text or a cultural reaction, this document is **a profoundly theological reflection** explaining why the Church **does not consider herself authorized by Christ to ordain women to the priesthood**.

Understanding *Inter insigniores* is not merely about understanding a disciplinary rule. It means entering into the **mystery of the priesthood, the symbolism of the sacraments, and fidelity to the will of Christ**.

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1. The Historical Context: When the Question Emerged Forcefully

During the years following the **Second Vatican Council**, many cultural changes shook the Western world. Among them was the movement advocating equal rights between men and women. In that context, some Christian communities began ordaining women as pastors or priests.

For example:

- the **Anglican Communion**
- several Protestant denominations.

Many Catholics began to ask:
Why does the Catholic Church not do the same?

Faced with this question, the Holy See decided to respond with doctrinal clarity through *Inter insigniores*.

But the document makes something fundamental clear from the beginning:

> ***This is not a matter of sociological discrimination, but of fidelity to the will of Christ.***

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2. The Biblical Foundation: Christ Chose the Twelve

The first argument presented by *Inter insigniores* is **historical and biblical**.

Jesus had many female disciples who were deeply close to Him:

- **Mary Magdalene**
- **Martha of Bethany**
- **Mary of Bethany**
- and above all **Mary, Mother of Jesus**

However, when He instituted the apostolic group — the foundation of the priesthood — **He chose only men**.

The Gospel recounts:

> *“He went up the mountain and called to Him those whom He desired, and they came to Him. And He appointed twelve so that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach.”*
> *(Mark 3:13–14)*

These Twelve apostles included:

- **Peter the Apostle**
- **John the Apostle**
- **James the Great**
- and the other apostles.

What is important is that **Jesus did not act under cultural constraints**.

Proof of this is that **He broke many social norms of His time**:

- He spoke publicly with the Samaritan woman
- He allowed women to be among His disciples
- He permitted them to accompany Him in His mission.

If He had wished to institute women priests, **nothing would have prevented Him**.

But He did not do so.

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3. The Priesthood Is Not Power: It Is a Sacramental Sign

Here we arrive at one of the most profound theological points.

The priest acts **“in persona Christi,”** that is, **in the person of Christ**.

This means that in the sacraments — especially in the Eucharist — the priest sacramentally represents Christ.

When he celebrates Mass, he says:

> *“This is **my body**.”*

He does not say *“This is the body of Christ,”* but **“my body,”** because **Christ acts through him**.

Christ is presented in Scripture as:

- the **Bridegroom**
- while the Church is **the Bride**.

The Apostle **Saint Paul the Apostle** explains it in this way:

> *“Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her.” (Ephesians 5:25)*

This **nuptial and sacramental symbolism** is fundamental.

The priest represents **Christ the Bridegroom who gives Himself to His Bride, the Church**.

For this reason, the sacramental sign requires **a male representation**.

This is not a question of dignity, but of **sacramental signification**.

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4. The Dignity of Women in the Church

A common mistake is to think that this doctrine implies inferiority.

But the Church affirms exactly the opposite.

The greatest human creature is not a priest.

It is a woman.

It is **Mary, Mother of Jesus**.

She:

- was not a priestess

- was not an apostle
- yet she is **Queen of heaven and earth**.

This reveals something essential:

Holiness does not depend on priesthood.

Many of the greatest saints of the Church were women:

- **Teresa of Ávila**
- **Catherine of Siena**
- **Thérèse of Lisieux**

In fact, **Catherine of Siena** was declared a **Doctor of the Church**.

That means: **a woman teaching theology to the entire universal Church**.

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5. The Continuity of Tradition

Another key point of *Inter insigniores* is the **constant Tradition** of the Church.

For two thousand years:

- no apostolic Church
- neither East nor West

ordained women as priests.

Not even the ancient separated Churches such as:

- the **Eastern Orthodox Church**
- the **Coptic Orthodox Church**

This shows something essential:

this is not a Latin custom, but a **universal apostolic tradition**.

6. The Definitive Confirmation of the Magisterium

Years later, this teaching was definitively confirmed by **John Paul II** in **Ordinatio Sacerdotalis** (1994).

In that document he declared:

> *“The Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women.”*

He did not simply say that **the Church does not do it**, but that **the Church does not have the authority to do it**.

In other words:

it is not a discipline that could change.

It is a matter of **fidelity to Christ**.

7. The True Feminine Genius in the Church

Interestingly, when the Church speaks about the role of women, it does so in deeply positive terms.

John Paul II himself spoke of the **“feminine genius.”**

The Church deeply needs the feminine presence in:

- the family

- education
- charity
- evangelization
- consecrated life.

Many of the greatest spiritual transformations in Christian history were initiated by women.

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8. A Spiritual Application for Today

In a culture obsessed with power, the Christian message is revolutionary.

Greatness in the Church **does not depend on position**.

Jesus said:

> *“Whoever wants to be first among you must be your servant.” (Matthew 20:27)*

The priesthood is not a privilege.

It is a **sacrificial service**.

And holiness — the true goal of every Christian — **is open to everyone**.

Men and women alike.

The truly important question is not:

“What position do I hold?”

But rather:

“Am I responding to God’s call?”

9. A Pastoral Reflection for Our Time

Today more than ever we need to understand the priesthood **from its sacramental and spiritual dimension**, not through ideological categories.

The Church does not exclude women from the priesthood out of contempt.

Rather, she believes **she has no authority to modify what Christ instituted**.

This requires humility.

But also faith.

Because the Church is not a human enterprise.

She is the Body of Christ.

Conclusion: Fidelity Before Popularity

The message of *Inter insigniores* may be difficult to understand in today’s world.

But it contains a profound teaching:

the Church does not invent the sacraments; she receives them from Christ.

Her mission is not to adapt them to every era, but **to guard them faithfully**.

At its deepest level, the question of women’s ordination is not a matter of equality.

It is a matter of **fidelity to the mystery that Christ entrusted to His Church**.

And that mystery continues to invite every Christian — man or woman — to what truly matters most:

holiness.

As **Thérèse of Lisieux** once said:

> *“In the heart of the Church, I will be love.”*

And within that heart, **each of us has an irreplaceable place**.