

# Theology on Tap: On Schisms

**Wounds to unity CCC 817** In fact, "in this one and only Church of God from its very beginnings there arose certain rifts, which the Apostle strongly censures as damnable. But in subsequent centuries much more serious dissensions appeared and large communities became separated from full communion with the Catholic Church — for which, often enough, men of both sides were to blame." The ruptures that wound the unity of Christ's Body — here we must distinguish heresy, apostasy, and schism — do not occur without human sin: Where there are sins, there are also divisions, schisms, heresies, and disputes. Where there is virtue, however, there also are harmony and unity, from which arise the one heart and one soul of all believers.

**CCC 2089** *Incredulity* is the neglect of revealed truth or the willful refusal to assent to it. "*Heresy* is the obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and catholic faith, or it is likewise an obstinate doubt concerning the same; *apostasy* is the total repudiation of the Christian faith; *schism* is the refusal of submission to the Roman Pontiff or of communion with the members of the Church subject to him." <sup>11</sup>

**Canon 750.** §1 Those things are to be believed by divine and catholic faith which are contained in the word of God as it has been written down or handed down by tradition, that is, in the single deposit of faith entrusted to the Church, and which are at the same time proposed as divinely revealed either by the solemn magisterium of the Church, or by its ordinary and universal magisterium, which is manifested by the common adherence of Christ's faithful under the guidance of the sacred magisterium. All are therefore bound to shun any contrary doctrines.

§2. The faithful are also required to accept and hold each and every one of the teachings that are definitively proposed by the Church's magisterium regarding faith or morals, which are required to safeguard the deposit of the faith reverently and to expound it faithfully. Anyone who denies that these propositions are to be held definitively is therefore opposed to the Church's teaching. [revised wording according to m.p. Ad tuendam fidem, 18.V.1998]

**Canon 751.** Heresy is the obstinate denial or doubt, after baptism, of a truth which must be believed by divine and catholic faith. Apostasy is the total repudiation of the christian faith. Schism is the withdrawal of submission to the Supreme Pontiff or from communion with the members of the Church subject to him.

**Commentary on Canon 751:** The canon refers to "post-baptismal" events, and presumably this means after Catholic baptism or after reception into the church. The obstinate denial or doubt which defines heresy implies both the passage of time and a process of challenge or dialogue. Heresy refers only to the doubt or denial of these things which must be believed with divine and Catholic faith, ie, contained on divine revelation and proposed as such by the church's teaching authority. It does not apply to a rejection or denial of lesser doctrines, much less theological interpretations or disciplinary legislation. Apostasy implies more than simply withdrawing from the Christian faith, ie, more than a distancing, separation, or abandonment. Similarly, schism is a rejection, an adamant refusal to submit to the pope or to remain in communion.

## Schisms and Sects

Heretics did not always know they were heretics until Christian authorities defined doctrine in the 4th - 5th centuries C.E. In the interim, core heretical ideas arose that reappeared occasionally until the Middle Ages, beginning with the notion that only a chosen few had the special and full knowledge necessary for salvation (*gnosis*). **Gnostics** believed they were purer than others. Some held that the material world needed to be rejected, leading to the heresy of **docetism**, which claimed that Jesus, being pure divinity, only appeared to be human (*docere*, "to seem") since matter would have tainted him. This idea is closely related to **dualism**, held by **Manichees** who contended there was a good God who created spirit and a bad God who created matter, which had to be rejected for salvation. Dualism reappeared in the 12th century at the heart of the **Albigensian** or **Cathari** heretical movement, a fairly widespread medieval group and essentially a parallel church in France that was subject to official church investigation and even armed resistance.

A major theological heresy called **Arianism** emerged in the early 4th-century thought of Arius, a priest of Alexandria, who taught that Jesus was fully human but not fully divine. From this root, other related heresies emerged. Adoptionism held that the Father adopted the human Jesus as God's Son and raised him nearly to divinity. **Modal monarchianism** contended that God was always one, but never three--in turn, Father and then Son and then Holy Spirit. Others held that Jesus was created by the Father and therefore not co-eternal and co-equal to the Father, which Arius captured in his statement about Jesus, "There was a time when he was not."

These debates were settled by the first general council, convened by Constantine at Nicaea in 325, where Athanasius refuted the Arian question as to how the Father and Son are equal by replying, "Like the sight of two eyes." Nicaea's creed stated that Jesus is "begotten, not made" and "one in being (*homoousios*) with the Father." Despite condemnation, Arianism

persisted in dwindling strength for centuries, especially in northern Europe, spawning other heresies such as monothelitism, which taught that Jesus had only one will, fusing humanity and divinity; **Nestorianism**, which contended that Mary was the mother of the human Jesus but not the mother of God (*Theotokos*); and **monophysitism**, which held that Jesus' divine nature overcame his human nature. The Church's first four general councils (Nicaea I in 325, Constantinople I in 381, Ephesus in 431, Chalcedon in 451) set the creed and declared all other statements heretical.

**The first major schism split the Greek east and the Latin west**, largely over matters of papal authority and liturgical differences. The Latin west held that the primacy of the bishop, stemming from apostolic succession back to Peter, also meant supremacy over all other bishops, including the four other major patriarchates (Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Constantinople). The other patriarchs rejected this statement of supremacy, contending that the five held the Church's executive authority together and carried out decisions made in a collegial general council.

There were also differences in discipline (married or celibate clergy), liturgy (leavened or unleavened bread), and doctrine (whether the Spirit proceeded from the Father alone or from the Father and Son, the latter described by the Latin word *filioque*). Such differences, especially concerning jurisdiction, bubbled for centuries until the unfortunate moment in 1054 when east and west excommunicated the other—an excommunication mutually lifted in 1965 by Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I.

**The second major schism was the Great Western Schism** (1378-1417) when three rival papacies (complete with three colleges of cardinals) competed for power. From 1378 to 1409, there was one pope each in Rome and Avignon. Although there had been antipopes before, this was the first time in history that the same college of cardinals gathered in conclave elected one man in 1378 and then, months later, repudiated their choice and chose another. The split was compounded in 1409 when a council at Pisa designed to resolve the split only made it worse with the addition of a third claimant. The Schism was resolved at the Council of Constance, convened in 1414.

**The third major schism (Protestant Reformation)** --a word that is itself contentious given one's position as a Catholic or Protestant--dated from the papal excommunication of Martin Luther in 1520. Soon after, there were not only Lutherans, but Calvinists and other Protestant churches throughout Europe and then the rest of the world, which split the unified Latin west for the first time in a millennium and a half. Since Vatican II (1962-1965), there have been serious efforts at ecumenical dialogue with important steps forward, such as the signing of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation in 1999. At the same time, Vatican statements such as *Dominus Iesus* (2000) and a 2007 statement clarifying certain parts of it, have been seen as controversial, given Rome's assertion that Protestant groups should not technically be called churches, let alone sister churches on an equal footing with Rome.

## **Pope Francis and Schism by Fr. Thomas G. Weinandy, OFM, Cap.**

### **The Catholic Thing, Tuesday, October 8, 2019**

The Church, in her long history, has never been confronted with the situation like the one in which she now finds herself. Pope Francis recently spoke of a possible schism within the Church, a schism that does not frighten him. We have had many schisms in the past, he says, and there will be schisms in the future. So, there is nothing to fear in the present. However, it is the nature of the present possible schism that is new, and this unprecedented new schism *is* frightening.

One cannot help but think that Francis is referring to members of the Church in the United States. Francis receives, from America, his most theologically challenging and pastorally concerned criticism, which centers on a questionable remaking of the faith and of the Church. Such censure, it is believed by Francis's cohort, originates from within a conservative intellectual elite who are politically motivated, and many of whom are wealthy.

Francis thinks that they are unwilling to change, and so refuse to accept the new work of the Spirit in our day. Ultimately, one discerns that he believes his critics are psychologically and emotionally impaired, and so must be dealt with gently (though that gentleness is yet to be experienced by those who fall under his vindictive abuse). He himself has called those who oppose him many insulting names.

What Francis does not realize (and his close associates fail to grasp) is that the overwhelming majority of his American critics would never initiate a schism. They recognize that he is the pope and thus the successor of Peter, and that to remain within the Catholic Church is to remain faithful to the pope, even if it entails being critical of the pope in one's faithfulness to him.

Some may wish that an actual schism will take place in America in order to get rid of the obdurate conservative element and so demonstrate that they were not really Catholic all along. But that is not going to happen, because those

critical bishops, priests, theologians, commentators, and laity (more laity than Francis will admit) know that what they believe and uphold is in accord with Scripture, the Church councils, the ever-living magisterium, and the saints.

As has been often noted, Pope Francis and his cohort never engage in theological dialogue, despite their constant claim that such dialogue is necessary. The reason is that they know they cannot win on that front. Thus, they are forced to resort to name-calling, psychological intimidation, and sheer will-to-power.

Now, as many commentators have already pointed out, the German church is more likely to go into schism. The German bishops are proposing a two-year “binding” synod that, if what is proposed is enacted, would introduce beliefs and practices contrary to the universal tradition of the Church.

I believe, however, that such a German schism will not formally happen either, for two reasons. First, many within the German hierarchy know that by becoming schismatic they would lose their Catholic voice and identity. This they cannot afford. They need to be in fellowship with Pope Francis, for he is the very one who has fostered a notion of synodality that they are now attempting to implement. He, therefore, is their ultimate protector.

Second, while Pope Francis may stop them from doing something egregiously contrary to the Church’s teaching, he will allow them to do things that are ambiguously contrary, for such ambiguous teaching and pastoral practice would be in accord with Francis’ own. It is in this that the Church finds herself in a situation that she never expected.

It’s important to bear in mind that the German situation must be viewed within a broader context: the theological ambiguity within *Amoris Laetitia*; the not so subtle advancing of the homosexual agenda; the “re-foundation” of the (Roman) John Paul II Institute on Marriage and Family, i.e., the undermining of the Church’s consistent teaching on moral and sacramental absolutes, especially with regard to the indissolubility of marriage, homosexuality, contraception, and abortion.

Similarly, there is the Abu Dhabi statement, which directly contradicts the will of the Father and so undermines the primacy of Jesus Christ his Son as the definitive Lord and universal Savior.

Moreover, the present Amazon Synod is teeming with participants sympathetic to and supportive of all of the above. One must likewise take into account the many theologically dubious cardinals, bishops, priests, and theologians whom Francis supports and promotes to high ecclesial positions.

With all of this in mind, we perceive a situation, ever-growing in intensity, in which on the one hand, a majority of the world’s faithful – clergy and laity alike – are loyal and faithful to the pope, for he is their pontiff, while critical of his pontificate, and, on the other hand, a large contingent of the world’s faithful – clergy and laity alike – enthusiastically support Francis precisely because he allows and fosters their ambiguous teaching and ecclesial practice.

What the Church will end up with, then, is a pope who is the pope of the Catholic Church and, simultaneously, the *de facto* leader, for all practical purposes, of a schismatic church. Because he is the head of both, the appearance of one church remains, while in fact there are two.

The only phrase that I can find to describe this situation is “internal papal schism,” for the pope, even as pope, will effectively be the leader of a segment of the Church that through its doctrine, moral teaching, and ecclesial structure, is for all practical purposes schismatic. This is the real schism that is in our midst and must be faced, but I do not believe Pope Francis is in any way afraid of this schism. As long as he is in control, he will, I fear, welcome it, for he sees the schismatic element as the new “paradigm” for the future Church.

Thus, in fear and trembling, we need to pray that Jesus, as the head of His body, the Church, will deliver us from this trial. Then again, he may want us to endure it, for it may be that only by enduring it can the Church be freed from all the sin and corruption that now lies within her, and be made holy and pure.

On a more hopeful note, I believe it will be the laity who bring about the needed purification. Pope Francis has himself stated that this is the age of the laity. Lay people see themselves as helpless, having no ecclesial power. Yet if the laity raise their voices, they will be heard.

More specifically, I believe it will depend mostly on faithful and courageous Catholic women. They are the living icons of the Church, the bride of Christ, and they, in union with Mary, the Mother of God and the Mother of the Church, will birth anew, in the Holy Spirit, a holy Body of Christ.

# Pastoral Letter from Bishop Strickland, August 2023

My Dear Sons and Daughters in Christ:

May the love and grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be upon you always!

In this time of great turmoil in the Church and in the world, I must speak to you from a father's heart in order to warn you of the evils that threaten us, and to assure you of the joy and hope that we have always in our Lord Jesus Christ. The evil and false message that has invaded the Church, Christ's Bride, is that Jesus is only one among many, and that it is not necessary for His message to be shared with all humanity. This idea must be shunned and refuted at every turn. We must share the joyful good news that Jesus is our only Lord, and that He desires that all humanity for all time may embrace eternal life in Him.

Once we understand that Jesus Christ, God's Divine Son, is the fullness of revelation and the fulfillment of the Father's plan of salvation for all humanity for all time, and we embrace this with all our hearts, then we can address the other errors that plague our Church and our world which have been brought about by a departure from Truth.

In St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, he writes: "I am amazed that you are so quickly forsaking the one who called you by {the} grace {of Christ} for a different gospel {not that there is another}. But there are some who are disturbing you and wish to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach {to you} a gospel other than the one that we preached to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, and now I say again, if anyone preaches to you a gospel other than the one that you received, let that one be accursed!" (Gal 1:6-9)

As your spiritual father, I feel it is important to reiterate the following basic truths that have always been understood by the Church from time immemorial, and to emphasize that the Church exists not to redefine matters of faith, but to safeguard the Deposit of Faith as it has been handed down to us from Our Lord Himself through the apostles and the saints and martyrs. Again, hearkening back to St. Paul's warning to the Galatians, any attempts to pervert the true Gospel message must be categorically rejected as injurious to the Bride of Christ and her individual members.

1. Christ established One Church—the Catholic Church—and, therefore, only the Catholic Church provides the fullness of Christ's truth and the authentic path to His salvation for all of us.
2. The Eucharist and all the sacraments are divinely instituted, not developed by man. The Eucharist is truly Christ's Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, and to receive Him in Communion unworthily (i.e. in a state of grave, unrepentant sin) is a devastating sacrilege for the individual and for the Church. (1 Cor 11:27-29)
3. The Sacrament of Matrimony is instituted by God. Through Natural Law, God has established marriage as between one man and one woman faithful to each other for life and open to children. Humanity has no right or true ability to redefine marriage.
4. Every human person is created in the image and likeness of God, male or female, and all people should be helped to discover their true identities as children of God, and not supported in a disordered attempt to reject their undeniable biological and God-given identity.
5. Sexual activity outside marriage is always gravely sinful and cannot be condoned, blessed, or deemed permissible by any authority inside the Church.
6. The belief that all men and women will be saved regardless of how they live their lives (a concept commonly referred to as universalism) is false and is dangerous, as it contradicts what Jesus tells us repeatedly in the Gospel. Jesus says we must "deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him." (Matt 16:24) He has given us the way, through His grace, to victory over sin and death through repentance and sacramental confession. It is essential that we embrace the joy and hope, as well as the freedom, that come from repentance and humbly confessing our sins. Through repentance and sacramental confession, every battle with temptation and sin can be a small victory that leads us to embrace the great victory that Christ has won for us.
7. In order to follow Jesus Christ, we must willingly choose to take up our cross instead of attempting to avoid the cross and suffering that Our Lord offers to each of us individually in our daily lives. The mystery of redemptive suffering—i.e. suffering that Our Lord allows us to experience and accept in this world and then offer back to Him in union with His suffering—humbles us, purifies us, and draws us deeper into the joy of a life lived in Christ. That is not to say that we must enjoy or seek out suffering, but if we are united to Christ, as we experience our daily sufferings we can find the hope and joy that exist amidst the suffering and persevere to the end in all our suffering. (cf. 2 Tim 4:6-8)

In the weeks and months ahead, many of these truths will be examined as part of the Synod on Synodality. We must hold fast to these truths and be wary of any attempts to present an alternative to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or to push for a faith that speaks of dialogue and brotherhood, while attempting to remove the fatherhood of God. When we seek to innovate upon what God in His great mercy has given us, we find ourselves upon treacherous ground. The surest footing we can find is to remain firmly upon the perennial teachings of the faith.

Regrettably, it may be that some will label as schismatics those who disagree with the changes being proposed. Be assured, however, that no one who remains firmly upon the plumb line of our Catholic faith is a schismatic. We must remain unabashedly and truly Catholic, regardless of what may be brought forth. We must be aware also that it is not leaving the Church to stand firm against these proposed changes. As St. Peter said, "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (Jn 6:68) Therefore, standing firm does not mean we are seeking to leave the Church. Instead, those who would propose changes to that which cannot be changed seek to commandeer Christ's Church, and they are indeed the true schismatics.

I urge you, my sons and daughters in Christ, that now is the time to make sure you stand firmly upon the Catholic faith of the ages. We were all created to seek the Way, the Truth and the Life, and in this modern age of confusion, the true path is the one that is illuminated by the light of Jesus Christ, for Truth has a face and indeed it is His face. Be assured that He will not abandon His Bride.

I remain your humble father and servant,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joe Strickland", with a cross symbol to the left.

Most Reverend Joseph E. Strickland  
Bishop of Tyler

# Pastoral Letter from Bishop Strickland, September 2023

My Dear Sons and Daughters in Christ:

I write to you today to discuss more fully the first basic truth that I spoke of in my first pastoral letter: “Christ established One Church—the Catholic Church—and, therefore, only the Catholic Church provides the fullness of Christ’s truth and the authentic path to His salvation for all of us.”

To begin, I must state clearly and emphatically this fundamental truth—Jesus Christ is the only path to everlasting life; no other path to salvation can be found! As Our Lord Himself tells us: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” (Jn 14:6). In order that we might participate in that promise of everlasting life, Our Lord in His great mercy established the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. As we read in the Gospel of Matthew, Christ said: “And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt 16:18-19). The foundation and divine head of the Church is Jesus Christ; however, this passage makes it clear that Jesus is promising to establish a visible Church upon the earth with a visible head, Peter, to whom He will entrust a unique mission and a specific authority.

The Catholic Church IS the body of Christ, and He is inseparable from His body. The Church’s understanding of Christ’s words in Matthew has deepened throughout the ages, but in accordance with Sacred Tradition handed down from Christ to the Apostles (cf. 2 Thess 2:15), and then preserved and protected by the Church Fathers and saints and martyrs until today, it has always been understood and proclaimed that the Catholic Church is the single, divinely-instituted Church that Christ established for the salvation of souls. All that the Church is, as the mystical body of Christ, flows from the truth that it was, and is, divinely constituted by Christ, and her basic elements—which include the sacred Deposit of Faith—cannot be altered by men because it does not belong to men; the Church belongs to Christ!

St. Cyril of Jerusalem stated in A.D. 350: “The Church is called catholic then because it extends over all the world, from one end of the earth to the other; and because it teaches universally and completely the doctrines that ought to come to men’s knowledge, concerning things both visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; and because it brings into subjection to godliness the whole race of mankind, governors and governed, learned and unlearned; and because it universally treats and heals the whole class of sins that are committed by soul or body, and possesses in itself every form of virtue that is named, both in deeds and words, and in every spiritual gift.”

Christ therefore established His Church for all people, for all time, for the salvation of all. There is no salvation apart from Christ and His One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church; this is an infallible teaching of the Church. However, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “This affirmation is not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and His Church.” As Catholics, we are lovingly and joyfully bound to the Church and to the seven sacraments instituted by Christ. These are essential for our salvation. Some may ask, however: “What about those outside the Church? What about those who have never heard of Christ? Can they be saved?” For those who are not united to Christ through His Church and through the grace of the sacraments, we simply pray for them and entrust them to God. Although we must never be presumptuous of God’s grace, we recognize that God is sovereign, and if in His mercy He would choose to operate in ways beyond our knowledge or understanding, He has full authority to operate however He chooses because He is not bound by anything other than His own perfect nature.

We ourselves must cling tightly to the Church and the sacraments as He gave them to us, but we must also pray always for souls outside the Church, that God offers His grace to those souls in ways unknown and unseen to us. However, I want to emphasize this point—if God would choose to offer grace beyond the normal sacramental means, we recognize that this grace would always still flow to every soul from Christ and through His Church in a mystical way. Therefore, anyone receiving and accepting God’s grace would never be saved through any other path or church or religion; there is One Savior, One Redeemer, for all mankind, and He established One Church for the salvation of souls.

God desires the salvation of all, but He does not force salvation upon any of us; it requires our cooperation and free assent to His grace. He calls each one of us to participate in His plan of salvation not only for ourselves, but for the world; this is the Great Commission: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” (Matt 28:19-20).

We live in an age of great interconnectedness where people across the globe can share and learn with each other as never before in human history. This is a great blessing in many respects as it opens the possibility of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in ways not before possible. True ecumenism, however, is an open invitation to all people to experience and embrace the fullness of Christ and the Christian life which can be found only in the Catholic Church. This path, although difficult at times, is the only sure path to true everlasting love, grace, and life with God. It is false charity to tell people that regardless of what path they are on, it is God’s Will that they stay where they are because this does not call

on people to embrace the one true path instituted by God for the salvation of souls. Therefore, the Church has a sacred obligation, borne of love, to evangelize all people.

Another topic that I want to discuss because it will reportedly be a topic of discussion at the upcoming Synod on Synodality is the divinely-instituted structure of the Church as it applies to ordination of women. As Sacred Scripture tells us, Christ ordained only men as apostles. Sacred Tradition and the Ordinary Magisterium of the Church have affirmed throughout the ages that the Church has no authority whatsoever to ordain women to the priesthood. This cannot be changed because Christ instituted a male priesthood in order to image Himself as the bridegroom with the Church as His bride. As St. John Paul II solemnly stated in his apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*: “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.”

It is imperative to state, though, that Christ would never want a “lesser” role for women than He wants for men. Women have made and continue to make indispensable contributions in the history and life of the Church. From the greatest and most perfect of God’s creation in all of history, Our Blessed Mother, the Queen of Heaven and Earth; to some of the greatest saints and Doctors of the Church; to our holy and faithful women in religious orders and convents; to the countless women who have and continue to impart the faith to their families and communities; Christ instituted His Church in a way that calls for women to have “more” of a role in Him than could ever be found in the world. However, as God did not call men to be mothers, God did not call women to be fathers, and to be sacramentally ordained as a minister for Christ in His Church, Our Lord calls for men to be spiritual fathers and bridegrooms to His bride, The Church. This role can only be filled by one properly ordered to this role.

For those who would inquire about the potential for female deacons in the Catholic Church, I would offer this: Scripture tells us that from the earliest days of the Church, women served as faithful servants (Greek: diakonos) of the members of the Church. (cf. Rom 16:1). Historians and scholars tell us that women served in many important roles of service in the early Church, including acts of charity for the poor, caring for the sick, preparing other women for baptism, etc. However, we see in the Acts of the Apostles that there is another type of servant (diakonos) called specifically by the apostles and set apart from other servants in the Church; the apostles laid hands on these particular servants, and these servants then received a sacramental ordination to fulfill their unique role. Scripture tells us that the apostles said, “Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, who we appoint to this task.” (Acts 6:3). And then, “They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them.” (Acts 6:6). Although many (men and women) have faithfully served the Church as servants/diakonos throughout history, the sacramental ordination to the diaconate—as one of the three degrees of the sacrament of Holy Orders (deacon, priest, bishop)—has always been reserved for baptized males alone. All three degrees act as instruments of Christ in persona Christi Capitis, (in the person of Christ as the Head), but with distinct functions for each office. Because sacramentally ordained deacons share in the apostolic ministry with priests and bishops, the Church has decreed that they must also be men, as were the apostles Jesus chose.

The Canons of the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) state in reference to women who have been granted a certain status of service: “We refer to deaconesses who have been granted this status, for they do not receive any imposition of hands, so that they are in all respects to be numbered among the laity.” (Canon No. 19).

In conclusion, I want to state that although the Church is holy because of her Founder and her divine origin, she is also made up of sinful members who are called constantly to repentance and conversion. However, there is a Church Triumphant in heaven that exists perfectly in her fullness in Christ in heaven where the heavenly marriage feast is eternally celebrated with God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are eternally worshipped and adored. The choirs of angels, the Immaculate Virgin Mary, and all the saints eternally cry “Holy, Holy, Holy” before the throne of God.

It is important that we, as the Church Militant on earth, carry this truth and hope in our hearts as we strive to align ourselves and every aspect of the Church on this earth with her heavenly reality. Because of sin, both personal and communal, the Church Militant on earth falls short of the Church Triumphant in heaven, but it is our mission to strive always for holiness and by the grace of God to persevere until the end so that we might also join with the Church Triumphant. Part of this striving on earth consists in engaging in the spiritual battle that is taking place around us daily as many attempt to chip away or destroy altogether the Deposit of Faith.

My dear sons and daughters, be assured that angels surround us in this battle, and saints—especially Our Holy and Blessed Mother—offer their heavenly assistance as we seek the eternal prize Our Lord has won for us.

Remaining your humble father and servant,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joe Strickland", with a cross symbol to the left.

Most Reverend Joseph E. Strickland  
Bishop of Tyler, Texas