

**DIVIDED ANTHROPOLOGY: AN ONTOLOGICAL LOOK
AT THE VATICAN'S REJECTION OF
WOMEN'S ORDINATION**

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In recent decades, the Roman Catholic community has wrestled with the possibility of ordaining women into the ministerial priesthood. The question has not gone away, despite the fact that church authorities have repeatedly spoken with a definitive “no.” This article critically examines that official “no,” seeking to better understand the ontology of the Roman Catholic priesthood and anthropology as found in the arguments against women’s ordination. This article seeks not to defend the Catholic position, nor to promote any one position regarding women in Christian ministry. Instead, I hope by this inquiry to examine the ontological underpinnings of the Roman Catholic conceptions of priesthood and, thereby, enrich the discussion on the topic of ordination and the many issues connected to it.

This research began as an effort to better understand the ontology of the Roman Catholic priesthood, but, in unknotting the arguments and lines of logic written against women’s ordination, it became clear that a unique anthropology was also being uncovered. It appears that the magisterium¹ has constructed a divided anthropology wherein men and women have different ontological essences. Such a startling idea has deep implications for the anthropological doctrine and for the theology of the atonement. The lesson is that caution must be exercised when making arguments for doctrinal positions, for they have a far reach and usually unforeseen corollaries. This particular study showcases the notion that theology influences practice and practice influences theology in important ways.

To give context to the research, this article begins with a brief historical sketch of the major milestones of the modern debate regarding the admission of women into the ordained priesthood. Then, the explanatory arguments of the church against women’s ordination are described and analyzed. Finally, the philosophical and theological implications of such arguments will be discussed.

A Historical Sketch of the Debate

The ordination of women as priests was an issue in the Christian church from earliest times when a few sects in the first centuries had female priests. This practice was straightforwardly rejected by the church fathers.² The modern

¹The magisterium is the teaching office of the Roman Catholic Church.

²Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Declaration ‘Inter Insigniores’ Regarding the Question of the Admission of Women to Ministerial Priesthood,” in *From “Inter Insigniores” to “Ordinatio Sacerdotalis”*: Documents and Commentaries (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), 25. This book will henceforth be abbreviated in the footnotes as *CDF*.

question—lively, prolific, and still hotly contested—began to foment in the years surrounding the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). In the decades since, several Christian denominations have ordained women to be priests or pastors, contributing to the feeling of many lay people that, in refusing to ordain women, the church is moving away from ecumenical dialogue and away from relevance to contemporary culture.

The magisterium has shaped the debate with a number of important documents that it requested, wrote, or endorsed. In 1976, the Pontifical Biblical Commission released its report on the role of women in the Bible, a study commissioned to inform the larger debate of the role of women in the modern church. The conclusion of the study was that the question regarding the ordination of women to the priestly ministry could not be definitively answered from the NT, in large part because the modern priestly role is itself “somewhat foreign” to the Bible.³ In light of these findings that the Bible did not present sufficient grounds for keeping women out of the priesthood, subsequent documents that rejected the priestly ordination of women as impossible emphasized that the Bible alone could not settle the matter: Scripture must be interpreted with tradition.⁴ Therefore, the clearer testimony of Irenaeus, Cyprian, Augustine, and especially Aquinas are given priority.

In October of that same year, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, under Pope Paul VI, published the declaration *Inter Insigniores*. This document states that the church “does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination”⁵ and then defends this position. It acknowledges the contribution (even the “apostolic commitment”) of women, but maintains that historically neither the example of Jesus nor the practice of the apostles permits women’s ordination. It then goes on to develop the argument theologically, arguing from points of ecclesiology and sacramental ontology. When *Inter Insigniores* was published, a number of articles from respected Roman Catholic theologians were also published in *L’Osservatore Romano*⁶ and later included by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as endorsed commentary when they published *Inter Insigniores* as a collection in book form.⁷

³“Report of the Pontifical Biblical Commission,” no. 4, in *The Papal “No”: A Comprehensive Guide to the Vatican’s Rejection of Women’s Ordination*, ed. Deborah Halter (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 177.

⁴“Introduction,” in *CDF*, 12. In rebutting the argument that the ambiguous biblical evidence should not prevent women’s ordination, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger makes this very point about the insufficiency of Scripture, quoting Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum* (no. 9): “Thus it comes about that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence.”

⁵“*Inter Insigniores*,” in *CDF*, 25.

⁶*L’Osservatore Romano* is the semiofficial newspaper of the Vatican. The works republished in *CDF* were taken from the English edition of the newspaper.

⁷The book form is the collection here referred to as *CDF*. These supplementary

The next major official document to be published was *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, issued by John Paul II in 1994. This letter is fairly brief, basically summarizing arguments that had already been set forth in closing the priesthood to women. The main intent of the letter was to remove “all doubt” regarding the matter and to close the conversation with finality. He wrote: “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.”⁸

That this admonition by John Paul II was not successful in stopping discussions on the ordination of women is evidenced by the subsequent efforts made by the Vatican to quell the unrest. In 1995, the pope wrote his “Letter to Women,” which served as an apology for the church’s role in oppressing women and also as a reaffirmation of the “divinely mandated role differences for men and women in the church.”⁹ That same year, the Vatican issued “*Responsum ad Dubium Regarding Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*.” This short document served as a medium whereby the Vatican officially confirmed that the male-only priesthood was the definitive teaching of the church and was a teaching that required “definitive assent, since, founded on the written word of God and from the beginning constantly preserved and applied in the tradition of the Church, it has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal magisterium.”¹⁰ It was made clear that the doctrine of a male-only priesthood was “to be held always, everywhere, and by all, as belonging to the deposit of faith.”¹¹

However, that did not keep parachurch organizations such as Women’s Ordination Worldwide from continuing to advocate for a change in the church’s position. In 1998, canon law was amended to provide for punishment for those who reject the clear and definitive teachings of the magisterium or the Pontiff.¹² Even so, in June 2002, a Catholic priest in Europe ordained seven women. In July, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith responded with a warning that if the women did not acknowledge the invalidity of their ordination and publicly ask for forgiveness, they would be excommunicated.¹³ In August, the threat was fulfilled and the decree of their excommunication was issued.¹⁴

articles are quoted in this paper as endorsed arguments, and the articles are here referenced from the book, not with the original newspaper publication details.

⁸John Paul II, “Apostolic Letter ‘*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*,’” in *CDF*, 191.

⁹Halter, 243.

¹⁰Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Reply to the ‘*Dubium*’ Concerning the Doctrine Contained in the Apostolic Letter ‘*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*,’” in *CDF*, 197.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²John Paul II, “Apostolic Letter *Motu Proprio ‘Ad Tuendam Fidem’*” (<vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_30061998_ad-tuendam-fidem_en.html>) (accessed 1 May 2014).

¹³Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Warning Regarding the Attempted Priestly Ordination of Some Catholic Women,” in Halter, 235.

¹⁴Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Decree of Excommunication

Even currently, women's ordination is not a settled issue in the Catholic Church, though the magisterium has attempted to make it one. People continue to challenge the male-only priesthood, despite the fact that John Paul II's proclamation was meant to quiet such opposition. Let it be clear, then, that the ideas against women's ordination into the Catholic priesthood that are examined here, while not held universally, are held authoritatively by the church. The ideas set forth for criticism below are those of popes, official curia, and endorsed theologians. Diversity of opinion remains on this issue, but I seek to trace and critique the ideas officially set forth by the church.

The Foreground Argument

The simple foreground argument of the church against women's ordination into the priesthood is that the church does not have the authority to ordain women as priests for very fundamental reasons. These reasons include the example recorded in the sacred scriptures of Christ choosing his apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his church.¹⁵

In short, because Jesus did not do it, the church has never done it, and the church teaches that it cannot do it, therefore the church cannot do it. To those who would object that the practice of never having ordained women before is not a sufficient argument that it should not be done at all, the church has a deeper level of argumentation based on the sacramental nature of the priesthood.

The Ontological Argument

The deeper, more subtle reasoning against women's ordination is complex because to understand it one must understand sacramental theology, moderate realism, and ontology. These theological-philosophical considerations intertwine to produce an argument that is consistently told and retold by the official bodies of the church. Put simply, men have an ontic capability to receive ministerial ordination and women do not. This conclusion is nowhere stated so forthrightly by the church, but nonetheless it is the underlying concept behind the rejection of women's ordination. Briefly stated below are the main lines of reasoning used to reach such a conclusion.

Much rests on the sacramental nature of the priesthood. In the sacramental theology of Roman Catholicism, the priest is an icon of Christ and ministerial ordination is an ontological transformation, that is, a change in a person's very being. Therefore, it is necessary that the priest be able to represent (re-present) Christ and to be ontologically changed so as to act in the person of Christ (*in persona Christi*).

Regarding the Attempted Priestly Ordination of Some Catholic Women," in Halter, 236.

¹⁵John Paul II, "Apostolic Letter 'Ordinatio Sacerdotalis'" in *CDF*, 185.

Furthermore, in this theology the sacraments are symbolic, and as symbols they have some features that are part of the sacramental substance (i.e., they must remain unchanged) and other features that can be adapted as seen fit. The church contends that the male sex of Christ is part of the unalterable substance of the sacrament. Therefore, it is necessary that the priest be able to represent Christ's maleness.

Additionally, by order of creation and as interpreted from the nuptial metaphor of Scripture, male and female persons are *essentially* different—that is, not merely biologically different, but different in essence, in nature, in soul, in being. The phenomenological differences between the two sexes are indicative of ontological differences. Out of these profound and distinct identities come natural, designed gender roles. The significant point is this: the female body's inability to resemble Christ's male body is indicative of woman's inability to represent Christ and, therefore, her inability to receive the character of ordination and so also her inability to act *in persona Christi*.

Sacramental Priesthood and Ontological Ordination

Sacramental and Powerful

Because the priestly ministry is sacramental, the priest has a unique role in the transmission of grace to the people of God. He is, in himself, a channel for the transmission of grace¹⁶ and, as with all sacraments, the priesthood is the "visible form of an invisible grace" (*invisibilis gratiae visibilis forma*). Priests have special power conferred upon them by Christ, and only those so endowed have the power to perform the sacrifice of Christ, the eucharist. This, of course, distinguishes the priest from other worshippers.

Furthermore, ministerial priesthood means receiving the ontological character of ordination. All those who have received the sacrament of baptism have entered into the common priesthood, but the "ministerial priesthood, on the other hand, is based on the sacramental character received in the Sacrament of Orders which configures the priest to Christ so as to enable him to act in the person of Christ, the Head, and to exercise the *potestas sacra* to offer Sacrifice and forgive sins."¹⁷ The ministerial priest has by virtue of his ordination received a configuration of character to enable him to act in the person of Christ (*in persona Christi*). This "character" is not referring to the thoughts and feelings of the priest, but rather a quality of his soul. As the Congregation for the Clergy states, "His very being, ontologically assimilated to Christ, constitutes the foundation of being ordained."¹⁸ It is clear, then, that priestly ordination is not an earthly permission to perform certain actions, but

¹⁶Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Uninterrupted Tradition of the Church," in *CDF*, 103.

¹⁷Congregation for the Clergy, "The Priest: Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community" (<clerus.org/clerus/dati/2002-12/17-999999/Ping.html>) (accessed 1 May 2014), emphasis original.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

it is an ontological change rendered in a person whereby they may act as an icon of Christ and transmit his grace to others with special power.

In Persona Christi

The church has used a variety of terms to describe how the priest is and acts in relationship to Christ: “priests acted *in persona Christi capitis* (in the role of Christ the head), *in nomine ecclesiae* (in the name of the church), and as *alter Christi* (‘other’ Christ). After Vatican II, *alter Christi* fell into disuse as the hierarchy increasingly employed the term *in persona Christi* to describe the priest’s role as acting in the person of Christ.”¹⁹ That is no insignificant title, to be sure. Indeed, to act *in persona Christi* means that ordained priests take on the persona of Christ by acting not only in Christ’s authority, but also as his icons (living symbols).

As articulated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “the bishop or the priest, in the exercise of his ministry, does not act in his own name, *in persona propria*: he represents Christ, who acts through him: ‘the priest truly acts in the place of Christ,’ as St. Cyprian already wrote in the third century.”²⁰ Furthermore, in the “supreme expression of this representation” of Christ found in the eucharist,²¹ the priest is “taking the role of Christ, to the point of being his very image, when he pronounces the words of consecration. The Christian priesthood is therefore of a sacramental nature: the priest is a sign, the supernatural effectiveness of which comes from the ordination received.”²² The ontological nature of the priesthood is clear, as is its ontological function: the priest takes on the *persona of Christ*: his “place,” his “role,” his “image,” even his “presence.”²³

In arguing for the male-only priesthood, Catholic theologian Max Thurian emphasizes the significance of a sacramental, ontological priesthood and the role of the priest as an icon of Christ. He says that those denominations that ordain women to ministry are, in contrast to Catholic theology, merely authorizing them to carry out certain functions, and are not actually ordaining them into a new state of personhood. Catholics, thus, understand priesthood as more than the carrying of credentials or the performance of certain actions. The Catholic priest is actually “a sacramental representation of Christ, the

¹⁹Halter, 17.

²⁰“Inter Insigniores” in *CDF*, 41.

²¹The administration of the sacraments—and the eucharist as the supreme sacrament—is the distinguished role of ordained priests; that is, not all of the actions associated with priesthood are exclusive to it. For example, women do have a role “in evangelization and in instructing individual converts” (“A Commentary on the Declaration,” *CDF*, 64). Nor is ordination required to baptize, teach, or exercise certain forms of ecclesiastical jurisdiction (*ibid.*, 68).

²²*Ibid.*, 41-43. Also, “the priest is thus truly a *sign* in the sacramental sense of the word” (*ibid.*, 71, emphasis original).

²³The priest is “not just the image of Christ, but his presence” (A. G. Martimort, “The Value of a Theological Formula: ‘In Persona Christi,’” in *CDF*, 114).

one high priest of the new and eternal covenant: he is a living and transparent image of Christ the priest. He is a derivation, a specific participation and an extension of Christ himself.”²⁴ Therefore, in accordance with sacramental theology, the priest must be able to represent Christ in this special way, to act as a “living and transparent image of Christ.”²⁵

Christ’s Maleness as Sacramental Substance

Sacraments as Symbols

In Roman Catholic theology, sacraments are by nature symbolic. Their purpose is to memorialize salvation events and access the grace therein; therefore, the symbols utilized in the sacraments are necessarily linked to those events.²⁶ This is why baptism is conducted with water (not orange juice), and why the eucharist uses bread and wine (not biscuits and tea). Yet, even as they memorialize, invoke, even access these events, the sacraments cannot recreate them or replicate every original detail. For example, to partake in these holy symbols one does not need to be baptized in the Jordan River, or take the eucharist reclining at a table, or be ethnically Jewish. Therefore, the church recognizes a difference between the substance of the sacrament and adaptable characteristics. The substance of the sacraments cannot be changed by the church, it is argued: “It is the Church herself that must distinguish what forms part of the ‘substance of the sacraments’ and what she can determine or modify if circumstances should so suggest.”²⁷

Catholic theology ties very closely together the natural resemblance of a sign to its referent (hence the opposition to the philosophical nominalism utilized by Protestants during the Reformation). In their view, the sign is not arbitrarily related to the thing signified, but, in fact, the sign is derived from the thing signified and so they resemble each other; this explains how the sign psychologically points to the referent. Nowhere is this relationship of resemblance between sign and referent more important than in sacramental theology. Repeatedly church theologians return to this key phrase from Thomas Aquinas: “Sacramental signs represent what they signify by natural resemblance.”²⁸

²⁴Max Thurian, “Marian Profile of Ministry Is Basis of Woman’s Ecclesial Role,” in *CDF*, 164.

²⁵This very point is controverted by some theologians who believe in the validity of the priesthood for women. For an example, see David Coffey, “Priestly Representation and Women’s Ordination,” in *Priesthood: The Hard Questions*, ed. Gerald P. Gleeson (Newton, Australia: E. J. Dwyer and the Catholic Institute of Sydney, 1993): 79-99.

²⁶“A Commentary on the Declaration,” in *CDF*, 68. No author is listed. Instead, a notation explains that it was “prepared by an expert theologian at the request of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.”

²⁷*Ibid.*, 67.

²⁸*In IV Sent.* d 25, q. 2, a. 2, and q.1 *ad* 4.

Maleness a Sacramental Substance

Importantly, Catholics consider Christ's maleness as necessary to salvation and part of the unalterable substance of the sacrament. Christ's male sex, it is argued, fulfills two important biblical metaphors: he is the new Adam and, more importantly, he is the groom of the church.²⁹ Therefore, the reasoning goes, a female Messiah could not have fulfilled the salvific requirements, and the sex of the human Christ is necessarily male. Church theologians argue that Christ's maleness is a meaningful aspect of his humanity and necessary to salvation history; therefore, it is definitely part of the substance of the sacrament, an aspect which cannot be modified regardless of the winds of secular egalitarianism.

That being so, as a living symbol of Christ, the priest must be able to represent Christ's maleness. On this point, Aquinas's axiom comes to bear: "Sacramental signs represent what they signify by natural resemblance." From this departure point, the argument is extended to sex and Christology. "The same natural resemblance is required for persons as for things" so priests must be men because only men bear this natural resemblance to Christ, who "was and remains a man."³⁰ Male bears natural resemblance to male; female does not bear natural resemblance to male. The difference in sex is exactly why women cannot fulfill the role of priest as an icon of Christ and, therefore, why they cannot legitimately be ordained. Maleness is part of the unalterable substance of the sacramental priesthood.

A female person may say the words and imitate the motions of priests, but in her femaleness she is unable to appropriately signify the substance of the sacrament, which is the person of Jesus in the male sex. Again, the ontological significance is drawn out: "It would not accord with 'natural resemblance,' with that obvious 'meaningfulness,' if the memorial of the supper were to be carried out by a woman; for it is not just the recitation involving the gestures and words of Christ, but an action, and the sign is efficacious because Christ is present in the minister who consecrates the eucharist."³¹ A woman cannot perform an efficacious eucharist because her sex renders her incapable of acting *in persona Christi*, so Christ cannot be present within her performing the sacrifice.³²

²⁹"A Commentary," in *CDF*, 74.

³⁰"Inter Insigniores," in *CDF*, 45.

³¹"A Commentary," in *CDF*, 72.

³²Martimort, 114. He states that "the priest utters Christ's words with the same efficacy as Christ. His personality is therefore effaced before the personality of Christ, whom he represents and whose voice he is: representation and voice which bring about what they signify. *In persona Christi* takes on here an extremely realistic sense." This underscores the ontological closeness between representation and presence.

Moderate Realism

Remember that the linchpin of the Catholic theology against women's ordination is this line from Aquinas: "Sacramental signs represent what they signify by natural resemblance." As Aquinas argued, women do not naturally resemble the male Christ that ordained priests must signify; therefore, they do not qualify for the priesthood. To understand why Aquinas believed that signs must naturally resemble their referents, it is necessary to summarize his philosophical position known as moderate realism.

In the scholastic debate regarding universals, Aquinas holds to a moderate realism.³³ He rejects the extreme realism that argues that the universals are *res* (things) and that "there is no essential difference between individuals, there are only accidental differences."³⁴ Such a view basically eradicates individuality. However, neither does Aquinas go so far as to embrace a nominalism that argues that the concepts used to classify things are arbitrary, only in the mind, and have no basis in reality. His moderated position is that the universals have a basis in reality, but they have no *thingness* of their own: "the true substance is the individual thing."³⁵ Therefore, the universal categories through which we perceive the world do have conceptual legitimacy, but they do not have an independent ontology; they correctly categorize things, but they are not themselves things. Basically, this means that he rejected the notion that signs are arbitrary. Instead, he believed that a sign is truly related to its referent. In this thinking, the phenomenon of a thing reflects the being of that thing.

Theologian and priest Manfred Hauke argues in this line that it is "possible to move from a precise analysis of how things stand with the body to conclusions about the life of the soul."³⁶ He concludes that "man's biological dimension is thus no objectlike material for technological manipulation, but is correlated to the core of personhood and is a mirror image of mental and spiritual life."³⁷ Hauke spends many pages compiling his observations of the outward differences between men and women, but such particulars are not the basis of his conclusions; he derives these, rather, from his view of the order of creation and a moderate realism à la Aquinas. Therefore, he must conclude that characteristics of the body reflect the characteristics of the soul. Therefore, since men and women by order of creation have different anatomies, they also have different souls.³⁸

³³Julian Marias, *History of Philosophy*, trans. Stanley Appelbaum and Clarence C. Strowbridge (Dover: New York, 1967): 134-135, 172.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 134.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶Manfred Hauke, *Women in the Priesthood? A Systematic Analysis in the Light of the Order of Creation and Redemption*, trans. David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 91.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 122.

³⁸Hauke and other theologians, though, do not venture to extend this discussion to other types of differences in physiology such as height, weight, disease, or deformity.

Sex and Gender Essentialism

A Quiet but Underlying Inequality

Aquinas's anthropology has an additional dimension, one not quoted in support of the official position against women's ordination. He did not believe in the equality of the sexes. In his view, there is an important difference between men and women that goes beyond degrees of strength³⁹ or capacity. He states that man is the image of God in a way that woman is not, and the reverse is not true. After acknowledging that "the image of God, in its principal signification, namely the intellectual nature, is found both in man and in woman,"⁴⁰ he says that in a secondary sense "the image of God is found in man, and not in woman: for man is the beginning and end of woman; as God is the beginning and end of every creature."⁴¹ Since man and woman are both rational creatures, they both bear the image of God, but since woman was taken from man, in this sense man bears a likeness to God that woman does not bear.

Further, Aquinas acknowledges truth in Aristotle's claim that "the female is a misbegotten male," but reasons that though she is defective "as regards the individual nature . . . as regards human nature in general, woman is not misbegotten, but is included in nature's intention as directed to the work of generation."⁴² That is, women are perfectly suited to fulfill their role in procreation, but any individual woman is an unfinished man.⁴³ It is clear, then, that Thomistic anthropology conceives of woman as less developed than man and less in God's likeness than man.

This is all the more interesting because at Vatican II there was a significant change in the stated position of the church. Overturning centuries of anthropological subordinationism in which women were inferior to and ruled by men, the Second Vatican Council declared that all persons

are endowed with a rational soul and are created in God's image; they have the same nature and origin and, being redeemed by Christ, they enjoy the same divine calling and destiny; there is here a basic equality between all and it must be accorded ever greater recognition.⁴⁴

³⁹Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, qu. 92, art. 1

⁴⁰Ibid., I, qu. 93, art. 4.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., I, qu. 92, art. 1.

⁴³He uses the phrase *deficiens et occasionatus*.

⁴⁴Paul VI, "Gaudium et Spes" ("Pastoral Constitution in the Church in the Modern World"), no. 29 (www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html) (accessed 29 January 2012). Interestingly, although the English translation published online by the Vatican uses the opening phrase "Since all men are endowed with a rational soul," the documents from Vatican II have been published in inclusive language. See Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (Northport, NY: Costello, 1996).

Such basic equality means that “every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s intent.”⁴⁵

While defending the male-only priesthood, the church acknowledged that this belief in gender equality was not shared by the church fathers, men who were under “the undeniable influence of prejudices unfavorable to women.”⁴⁶ These prejudices, however, “had hardly any influence on their pastoral activity, and still less on their spiritual direction.”⁴⁷ Therefore, although the church fathers’ conception of women was unfavorably prejudiced, their opposition to female priests is a trustworthy example. Likewise, whatever misconceptions of biology, sex, or gender held by Aquinas that the church formally contradicted in the 1960s, his moderate realism remains a vital element of Catholic sacramental theology and, indirectly, anthropology.

In actuality, this idea of female as an incomplete male may lay behind the teaching that, in the sacramental economy, man is able to represent both male and female, whereas woman is not capable of spiritual representation. In the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar, “woman does not represent, but is.”⁴⁸ In contrast, the male priest represents both the masculine Christ and the feminine church.⁴⁹

Sex Essentialism

The church maintains that Christ’s maleness is necessary for salvation and is, therefore, an unalterable part of the sacramental economy. Yet, some may argue that there were aspects of Christ’s humanity even more essential to the plan of salvation than his sex, such as his ethnicity. He was by necessity a Jew, the seed of Abraham, the son of David. The NT repeatedly discusses the significance of Christ’s ethnic and religious Jewish identity. Despite this, the church does not determine eligibility for the priesthood on the basis of ethnicity, but on the basis of sex.

This is because, in Catholic anthropology, ethnic differences are not essential, but sex (and gender) differences are.⁵⁰ They point out that according

⁴⁵*Gaudium et Spes*, 29.

⁴⁶“Inter Insigniores,” *CDF*, 25.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸Von Balthasar, *CDF*, 105.

⁴⁹The priest “exercises the ‘maternal authority’ of ‘Mother Church,’ obedience to which is required for salvation. Only men may exercise this maternal authority” (Halter, 160). Priests “embody ‘spiritual fatherhood’ as well as ‘maternal authority.’ Hence, priests have both male and female roles to play: male as person, female as church member. Women have nothing to represent which they are not, hence they are always only female” (*ibid.*, 161).

⁵⁰“Inter Insigniores” in *CDF*, 47. “It is indeed evident that in human beings the difference of sex exercises an important influence, much deeper than, for example, ethnic differences.”

to Genesis 1–2, humanity was designed male and female not with ethnic differentiation, but with sex differentiation. By order of creation, then, a Chinese man is essentially different from a Chinese woman, but he is essentially the same as a Norwegian man. No number of scientific studies in psychology, sociology, biology, or anthropology has altered Catholic theology on this point. Sex differences are more than mere sex differences: they are outward manifestations of designed, essential, natural, and incontrovertible gender differences.⁵¹ Balthasar represents this view when he says that the “natural sex difference is charged, *as* difference, with a supernatural emphasis.”⁵²

It is important to understand that this anthropology goes far beyond a simple recognition of the anatomical or biological differences between male and female. It claims rather that the physical differences are indicative of soul differences between men and women, girls and boys. This is the result of the moderate realism utilized by Catholic sacramental theology. Furthermore, this anthropology maintains that gender roles are fundamental, part of the order of creation, and the order of redemption (as seen in the nuptial metaphor of Scripture).

*The Nuptial Metaphor: Descriptions of
Maleness and Femaleness*

The nuptial metaphor of Scripture is of central importance to Roman Catholic ecclesiology and anthropology. The image of Christ as the groom to his bride, the Church, is theologically fundamental, central to how the Church conceives of herself. It is also the basis for Catholic understandings of women’s role in society and the Church. Catholic theologians point to the Bible’s generous use of the nuptial theme to illustrate the ideal interdependence and mutuality of the sexes in society and in the Church, wherein each gender has its proper role in accordance with its profound and differentiated identity. In this view, the nuptial metaphor illuminates the different yet equal identities and roles of men and women.

Balthasar views the Christ-Church relationship as the only way to truly understand the identities and roles of men and women: “This femininity of the Church belongs just as deeply to tradition as the attribution of the apostolic office to man.”⁵³ The keystone text for this theology is, of course, Eph 5:22-33, wherein Paul gives instructions to wives to submit to their husbands in imitation of the submission of the Church to Christ, and husbands are instructed to love their wives as Christ loves the Church.

As used by Balthasar and other Roman Catholic theologians, the metaphor of Christ relating to the Church as head over his body and groom to his bride is concretized. The Christ-Church relationship is not understood in light of

⁵¹Let the reader note the difference between the term “sex,” used to indicate biological maleness and femaleness, and “gender,” meaning expressions of masculinity and femininity and their accompanying roles.

⁵²Von Balthasar, *CDF*, 101.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 104.

husband-wife relationships, but masculinity and femininity are understood in light of the Christ-Church relationship. Significantly, the metaphor is extended past the husband-wife relationship and made normative for the man-woman relationship. As outlined above, according to the Church's teaching, Genesis 1–2 describe the order of creation that establishes essential sex differences. They maintain also that the NT counterpart, Ephesians 5, describes the order of redemption that reinforces the sex differences of creation and further describes maleness and femaleness. The male is endowed with primacy and authority; the female is characterized by passivity and reception.⁵⁴

However, contradicting most earlier thinkers, theologians of recent decades have ardently voiced their belief in the equality of men and women, saying that sex and gender differences are viewed wrongly if seen in terms of superiority and inferiority. There are, they say, no degrees of dignity that elevate men and demote women, but diversity of function. Woman is endowed with a uniquely feminine soul and that feminine nature functions best and remains happiest when living in her appropriate roles.

For example, Raimondo Spiazzi appeals to the order of creation and the difference in natures between the sexes to point out the advantages of a woman working from her strengths, so to speak.

It belongs on the contrary to the order of creation that woman should fulfill herself as a woman, certainly not in a competition of mutual oppression with man, but in harmonious and fruitful integration, based on respectful recognition of the roles particular to each. It is therefore highly desirable that in the various fields of social life in which she has her place, woman should bring that unmistakably human stamp of sensitiveness and solicitude, which is characteristic of her.⁵⁵

Spiazzi affirms that women and men bear the same image and likeness of God and that this means men and women are entirely equal. This equality, though, he remarks, does not blur the distinction between the genders. God's image "is realized in [woman] in a particular way, which differentiates woman from man," a differentiation which is "stamped by nature on both human beings."⁵⁶ Those roles fitting for feminine nature and Marian ministry are virgin, wife, and mother.⁵⁷

Connecting the Dots

On points of hermeneutics, a few features must be mentioned. In the argument as laid out above, biblical metaphors are extended and concretized. Tradition is explicitly required to reach certainty on this issue in the face of unconvincing scriptural claims. Also, the Church must embrace the viewpoint

⁵⁴Halter, 161.

⁵⁵Raimondo Spiazzi, "The Advancement of Women According to the Church," in *CDF*, 82.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Halter, 5; Thurian in *CDF*, 165.

of the church fathers and Aquinas on the point of the male-only priesthood, while ostensibly rejecting their prejudices against women.

The implications of the official argumentation for anthropology are many. Gender differences are essentialized, made part of the created order. Role differentiations remain the will of God forever. Biological differences reflect soul differences. Whereas men are independent entities, complete and able to represent both male and female, women find their very being in their relationships to men as virgins, wives, or mothers. The magisterium has inadvertently constructed an anthropology wherein men and women have different ontologies, and in which in the economy of salvation, Christ's sex is of a higher priority than his humanness.

Shared Humanness or Separate Natures?

Applied to anthropology, a moderate realism like Aquinas's dismisses the notion of a real universal "human" that exists independent of matter or manifestation. Only individual humans have substance, the concept of "human" does not. However, two individual beings (say, Mark and Miguel) do share humanness in common. The concept of humanness has a basis in reality; it has an existence; however, this is not as a *separate thing* in and of itself, but as an ingredient *of the things*. Both Mark and Miguel have humanness, but they maintain their distinct individuality. Christ himself shares also in this humanness. In this way, he is linked to Mark and Miguel.

In this view, individuals are differentiated from other members of their species by their matter. Continuing the example from above, Mark, Miguel, and Christ all share in humanness, but the physical matter possessed by each of them individuates them from one another.⁵⁸ However, Catholic anthropology has another important tenet, one much more heavily emphasized in the current debate, and one that threatens to unravel the idea of a shared humanness between the sexes: although other differences between human beings are theologically insignificant or attributable to merely environmental factors, sex differences indicate actual differences of "profound identity,"⁵⁹ of soul, of essence, of ontology. Mark, Miguel, and Christ (and all other males) are essentially different from females (say, Susan and Silvia). Roman Catholic theology insists that there is something more basic than individuated matter in the difference between Mark and Susan, and between Miguel and Silvia—a difference that originates in their natures and is manifested in their bodies.

This raises significant questions about how men and women share in one humanness. Is there one, single human nature? Or are there human natures? When constructed together, the ontological arguments against women's ordination indicate that the Roman Catholic answer is that there are two

⁵⁸Since Aquinas believed the angels did not have matter, he concluded that each angel was a species unto itself. See Marias, 135.

⁵⁹"Inter Insigniores," in *CDF*, 45.

human natures: one male, one female. If so, it can be inferred that Christ, who “was and remains a man,”⁶⁰ participated in just one of the human natures.

Christ “Our” Savior?

Here arise even stickier questions regarding the atonement. If Christ’s maleness is essential to salvation and if, as the Church claims, his maleness is equal to or greater in importance than his humanity, did Christ participate in the same humanity that females have? And in his sacrificial death, did Christ represent and atone for the sins of all humans, male and female? Perhaps not.

It could be argued that the male Christ (like all males) is “complete” and capable of representing both male and female, and so he, the Second Adam, represented in his death both women and men, boys as well as girls. Such an argument could not, however, be extended to his sympathetic high priestly ministry. According to Heb 2:14-18, Christ was made in every way like his human brothers so that he might become a faithful and merciful high priest. He may represent women in his death, but Christ cannot be a faithful and merciful, sympathetic and knowing high priest to the women of the world if he was not also made in every way like his human sisters. Have Susan and Silvia been deprived of a Savior and a high priest?

Conclusion

The official and repeated arguments against women’s ordination into the Roman Catholic priesthood illuminate issues related to the ontology of the priesthood. It has become clear that priestly ministry is sacramental, involves an ontological transformation, and means that the priest must act *in persona Christi*. All of this is required by the sacramental theology of Roman Catholicism. Extending the lines of logic embedded in sacramental theology and moderate realism, the Church has, perhaps inadvertently, constructed a divided anthropology wherein men and women have different ontological essences. The implications for the anthropological doctrine and for the theology of the atonement are serious, striking to the core of Christ’s salvific work and calling into question his efficacy as sacrifice and priest for men and women.

⁶⁰Ibid.