

REPRESENTATION OR SELF-EFFACEMENT? THE AXIOM *IN PERSONA CHRISTI* IN ST. THOMAS AND THE MAGISTERIUM

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WOMEN'S ALLEGED inability to "represent" Christ—a notion which reaches its defining application in the thesis that women are incapable of acting *in persona Christi* in the consecration of the Eucharist—constitutes the magisterium's fundamental theoretical¹ argument for restricting priestly ordination to men. In the words of *Inter insigniores*, the 1976 Declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

In actions which demand the character of ordination and in which Christ himself, the author of the Covenant, the Bridegroom and Head of the Church, is represented, exercising his ministry of salvation—which is in the highest degree the case of the Eucharist—his role (this is the original sense of the word *persona*) must be taken by a man.²

¹ This argument is presented primarily in "On the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood" (*Inter insigniores*), Declaration of Oct. 15, 1976 of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, U.S. Catholic Conference Edition with Commentary, Washington, D.C., 1977, Section 5; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (AAS) 69 (1977) 89–116. The argument does not, it should be noted, constitute the Declaration's principal reason for debarring women from the priesthood, but only serves as an argument *ex convenientia*, proposed within "the analogy of faith," to clarify the primary argument developed in Sections 1–4 on the basis of the "mind of Christ" as allegedly evident in the Church's unbroken tradition of restricting ordination to men. In other words, the Declaration employs the *in persona Christi* argument to show the theological reasonableness, what it calls "the profound fittingness," of what has already been affirmed on the basis of its reading of tradition. Now while it is true that the binding force of doctrinal affirmations does not rest on the reasonableness of the arguments used to defend and explain them, it is likewise true that the two cannot be wholly separated; a completely unintelligible doctrine is an anathema to the theologian as it is to the philosopher. This inseparability is particularly pertinent in the case at hand, since the Declaration's hierarchical reading of the expression *in persona Christi* restates, in terms of "high theology," the anthropological subordinationism that provides the inner meaning of the historical tradition which serves as the Declaration's own primary court of appeal. See note 5 below.

² *Inter insigniores*, Section 5 (AAS 69 [1977] 108–113). Except where noted, all references in the present work to the text of the Declaration are taken from this section. See also "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women" (*Mulieris dignitatem*), Apostolic Letter of Aug. 15, 1988 of Pope John Paul II (*Origins* 18 [Oct. 6, 1988] no. 17; AAS 80/2 [1988] 1653–1729, at 1715–16).

In this thesis, action "in the person of Christ" constitutes a form of the priest's "representation of Christ," indeed its highest and most perfect form. The present article challenges this view (which, moreover, is not peculiar to the Declaration, but seems to be accepted as a matter of course by its friends and foes alike³) by contending that historically the axiom *in persona Christi* bears a primarily "apophatic" rather than representational sense and is therefore not related to the sexual difference in any way. It contends further that such an "apophatic" sense emerges from the pertinent texts of St. Thomas, who virtually invented the axiom, provided these texts are read in a truly theoretical manner. My use of the term "apophatic" is admittedly unconventional. Traditionally, apophatic language designates God's transcendence either by negating the limitations inherent in creaturely being (e.g. describing God as "infinite," "uncircumscribed") or by affirming God's inaccessibility to mortal experience (e.g. speaking of the "divine darkness"), whereas I use the term in a more directly anthropological sense to designate that self-effacement of the creature before God (in this case, of the priest before Christ) which constitutes the "greater unlikeness" in every creaturely likeness to God.⁴ I believe such an analogical transfer justifiable in the present context, as helping to rouse us from

³ Joseph Komonchak, e.g., argues for the validity of female as well as male imaging of Christ ("Theological Questions on the Ordination of Women," in *Women and Catholic Priesthood: An Expanded Vision, Proceedings of the Detroit Ordination Conference*, ed. Anne Marie Gardiner, S.S.N.D. [New York: Paulist, 1976] Appendix E, 252). This view is given positive content by Elizabeth Johnson, who writes (though not directly in reference to *Inter insigniores*) that "the image of Christ lies not in sexual resemblance to Jesus as a human man, but in a resemblance to the narrative form of his life in the world, merciful and liberating by the power of the Spirit" ("La masculinité du Christ," *Concilium* 238 [Paris: Beauchesne, 1991] 153). A recent series of articles in *Worship* offers a sampling of other approaches. Mary Schaefer and Hervé Legrand argue that the priest's representation of Christ is indirect, because grounded in his immediate representation of the Church (*in persona Christi* as grounded in *in persona Ecclesiae*) (M. Schaefer, "Forum: Ordaining Women," *Worship* 63 [1989] 467–71, at 469; and H. Legrand, "Traditio perpetuo servata? The Non-Ordination of Women: Tradition or Simply an Historical Fact?" *Worship* 65 [1991] 482–508, at 503–4); while Charles Meyer explores various possible meanings of the *persona* said to be represented—the risen Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, the divine Person as such ("Forum: The Ordination of Women: Responses to Bishop Kenneth Untener," *Worship* 65 [1991] 256–62, at 261–62). See also the references cited in notes 59–61 below. A notable exception to this representationalism is offered by Bishop Kenneth Untener in his "Forum: The Ordination of Women: Can the Horizons Widen?" *Worship* 65 (1991) 50–59. It may be hoped, finally, that the ministerial-apophatic interpretation of Thomas developed in the present article is sufficient to counter Mary Schaefer's charge that Thomas was an "out and out representationalist who laid a trap for future theology" ("Forum: Ordaining Women" 468).

⁴ See DS 806—H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 33d ed. (Barcelona/New York: Herder, 1965) no. 806.

the long dogmatic slumber of a monochromatically representational view of the priesthood by bringing sharply to light the two distinct, even inverse, senses of the priest's relation to Christ—the representational and the self-effacing ministerial.

The primary focus of the proposed “deconstruction” is not, therefore, and I would emphasize this, the debate over women priests, but rather the new and I believe dangerous interpretation of the axiom that governs the magisterium's argument for the theological “fittingness” of an all-male priesthood. In this new interpretation, which is especially developed by *Inter insigniores*, the consecrating priest is viewed as representing Christ as Head of the Church (*in persona Christi* as *in persona Christi capitis*), so that the priestly act of consecrating the Eucharist emerges as an act of hierarchical power. It is the theologically dangerous nature of this conception that forces a reexamination of the original meaning of the axiom in light of St. Thomas's refined theories both of instrumental causality and sacramental signification, a re-examination that brings to light the primarily ministerial rather than hierarchical meaning of the priest's eucharistic activity and thereby of the priesthood itself as a whole. I do not mean to imply that the magisterium's interpretation of *in persona Christi* is only incidentally related to its rejection of women priests. The relation is in fact quite direct, since the hierarchical interpretation of the axiom is at bottom a restatement in sacramental terms of the traditional subordinationist argument against the ordination of women.⁵ Indeed, in my view, the ultimate theological importance of the woman priest question, beyond the more obvious issues of intraecclesial social justice and pastoral need is to serve as a catalyst for rethinking, in light of Vatican II, the nature of the priesthood, and of the Church itself, on the deepest, most transcendental level of its being.

This study is in three parts. The first part will present Thomas's ministerial-apophatic interpretation of the axiom in general. The second part will present this interpretation within the specific context of

⁵ The attempt to link “representation of Christ” in general and action *in persona Christi* in particular with Christ's maleness is a completely contemporary phenomenon, directly occasioned by the woman priest question and finding expression in the invocation, historically unprecedented in the present context, of the nuptial image. The sole argument against the ordination of women known to pre-Vatican II tradition is the subordinationist argument from woman's “state of subjection,” as in the case of Thomas; see note 90 below. This subordinationism constitutes the real meaning of the “tradition” invoked by *Inter insigniores* as witness to the “mind of Christ.” It is precisely because this real meaning can no longer be invoked that it becomes necessary to invent new arguments—in effect inaugurate a new tradition—against the ordination of women. Such a new tradition is, of course, by definition not the tradition of the last 2000 years.

the eucharistic action and the sacramental sign (*sacramentum tantum*) by which it is constituted. The third part will contrast Thomas's view with the hierarchical interpretation of the axiom that dominates *Inter insigniores*.

ST. THOMAS'S MINISTERIAL-APOPHATIC INTERPRETATION IN GENERAL

As the magisterial study by B.-D. Marliangéas has shown, Thomas invokes the *in persona Christi* axiom with a frequency, precision, and depth without parallel in his medieval predecessors and successors.⁶ Usage is concentrated in the Third Part of the *Summa theologiae*, specifically in the questions dealing with the form of the Eucharist⁷ and its minister.⁸ How does Thomas understand the phrase *in persona Christi*? In furtherance of its representationalism, *Inter insigniores* cites *ST* 3, q. 83, a. 1 ad 3: "It is to be said that for the same reason the priest also enacts the image of Christ, in whose person and by whose power he pronounces the words of consecration." This "for the same reason" refers to the preceding ad 2: "Just as the celebration of the Eucharist is a representative image of Christ's passion, so the altar is representative of his cross." We may also note *ST* 3, q. 82, a. 3 c, where Thomas argues that since Christ at the Last Supper both consecrated his body and gave it to others to eat, so it pertains to the priest, who consecrates the Eucharist "in the person of Christ," likewise to distribute it to the faithful.

That these few texts exhibit an almost Bonaventurian symbolism is all too plain. Their significance is considerably diminished, however, by their rarity in Thomas's writings and, in reference to the text actually cited by *Inter insigniores*, by the context provided by q. 83 which treats the suitability of the medieval rite of the Mass in reference to time (a. 2), place (a. 3), and concrete details (a. 4), etc. That nothing theoretically substantive should be read into such symbolism may be further inferred from the fact that Thomas, in sharp contrast to the Declaration, never correlates the maleness of the priest with the *in persona Christi* axiom. This in itself negative fact is, I think, extremely telling and directs us away from the representationalism which leads

⁶ Bernard Dominique Marliangéas, *Clés pour une théologie du ministère: In persona Christi, in persona Ecclesiae* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1978) 69–170. A complete listing of the occurrences in Thomas of the expressions *in persona Christi, in persona Ecclesiae*, and other related expressions is provided on 141–46.

⁷ *Summa theologiae* (*ST*) 3. q. 78, a. 1 c; a. 2, ad 4; a. 5 c. All translations from the *Summa* here are from *Summa Theologica, Literally Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947).

⁸ *ST* 3, q. 82, a. 1 c; a. 2, ad 2; a. 3 c; a. 5 c; a. 7 ad 3; a. 8 c.

at best a lingering existence in Thomas's thought to the strictly theoretical and doctrinal considerations which are his principal concern.

Chief among these considerations is the nature of active, causal power in terms of which Thomas defines the sacerdotal character: "Order signifies power principally; and thus character, which is a spiritual power, is placed in the definition of Order."⁹ The consecration of the Eucharist *in persona Christi* is an exercise of precisely this power: "Just as to the baptized person there is granted by Christ the power of receiving this sacrament, so upon the priest at his ordination is conferred the power of consecrating this sacrament in the person of Christ."¹⁰ But it is just this correlation with priestly power which forces us to probe the inner sense of Thomas's use of the axiom more closely. For the power to act "in the person of Christ" is, according to Thomas, strictly instrumental and ministerial in nature. On this point it is especially necessary to cite the texts themselves, for only thereby do we catch the apophatic rather than representational view of the priest's role which these texts convey, that is, the extent to which they point not to the priest's likeness to Christ, but to his *otherness from Christ*. I will cite two series of texts, the first on the instrumental-ministerial nature of sacramental character and of priestly ministry in general, the second on the instrumental nature of the priest's specific role in consecrating the Eucharist.

Texts on Sacramental Character and Ministry

Character denotes a certain spiritual power ordered to what pertains to divine worship. It is to be noted, however, that this spiritual power is instrumental, as was stated earlier regarding the power which is in the sacraments. To have a sacramental character befits the ministers of God; for a minister is a kind of instrument, as the Philosopher says.¹¹

Grace is in the soul in one way, character in another. For grace is in the soul as a certain form having being complete in itself, whereas character is in the soul as a certain instrumental power, as stated above. Now a complete form is in the subject according to the condition of the subject. And because the soul is mutable by reason of its free will, it follows that grace is in the soul in a changeable manner. But an instrumental power follows rather the condition of the agent; and therefore character is in the soul indelibly, not because of its own perfection, but because of the perfection of the priesthood of Christ, from whom the character, as a certain instrumental power, is derived.¹²

⁹ *ST Suppl.* q. 34, a. 2 ad 2.

¹⁰ *ST* 3, q. 82, a. 1 c; see also 82, a. 7 ad 3 and q. 82, a. 8 c.

¹¹ *ST* 3, q. 63, a. 2 c.

¹² *ST* 3, q. 63, a. 5 ad 1.

An effect can be produced in two ways: by way of the principal agent and by way of an instrument. In the first way, God alone produces the interior effect of the sacrament. . . . In the second way, a human being can produce the interior effect of the sacrament, insofar as that person operates as a minister. For a minister has the nature of an instrument; both apply action outwardly, but the interior effect is wrought by the power of the principal agent, which is God.¹³

The ministers of the Church operate instrumentally in the sacraments, since in a certain sense a minister has the nature of an instrument. Now as was stated above, *an instrument does not act in accordance with its own form or power, but in accordance with the power which moves it. And so whatever form or power an instrument has in addition to that which makes it an instrument, is accidental to it; for instance, that a doctor's body, which is the instrument of the soul wherein lies his medical art, be healthy or sick; or that a pipe, through which water passes, be of silver or lead.*¹⁴ [emphasis added]

Texts on the Ministerial Nature of the Priest's Role in Consecrating the Eucharist

If any priest operated by his own power, the other celebrants would be superfluous, one celebrant alone being sufficient. But because the priest does not consecrate except in the person of Christ, the many [celebrants] are one in Christ; hence it matters not whether the sacrament is consecrated by one or by many, provided the rite of the Church is preserved.¹⁵

Since these words [of consecration] are spoken in the person of Christ, they receive an instrumental power by virtue of his mandate, just as his other deeds and words have a salvific power instrumentally.¹⁶

The priest consecrates this sacrament not by his own power, but as the minister of Christ, in whose person he consecrates this sacrament. Now one does not cease to be Christ's minister by the fact that one is evil, for the Lord has good and evil ministers or servants. . . . And this pertains to the glory of Christ, who, as true God, is served not only by the good, but also by the evil, which by his providence is ordained to his glory.¹⁷

That these texts point to an apophatic rather than representational view of the priest vis-a-vis Christ is undeniable; in them the priest

¹³ ST 3, q. 64, a. 1 c.

¹⁴ ST 3, q. 64, a. 5 c.

¹⁵ ST 3, q. 82, a. 2 ad 2.

¹⁶ ST 3, q. 78, a. 4 c.

¹⁷ ST 3, q. 82, a. 5 c.

appears not as "another Christ" but as "another than Christ," one whose entire being as priest is ministerial and instrumental unto the glory of the Lord.¹⁸ Of specific importance is Thomas's express application to the sacramental order of the general metaphysical principle that "an instrument does not act in accordance with its own form or power, but in accordance with the power of the [principal agent] who moves it."¹⁹ As a result, the sacraments liken the recipient not to the ministerial instrument but to Christ.²⁰ The same teaching occurs in connection with the power of the keys²¹ and explains, among other things, why the sacraments cause grace even when they are administered by evil ministers.²²

The latter teaching is based on the further metaphysical principle that since an agent acts in accordance with its form, it is precisely a likeness of that form which it induces in the effect: *omne agens agit sibi simile*. The exercise of efficient causality thus consists in an assimilation of the patient to the form of the agent.²³ In the sacraments, it is Christ, not the minister, who exercises agency of this kind, establishing by his power a graced likeness to himself in those who receive the sacraments. A direct corollary of this is the nonlikeness of the ecclesial minister not just to the grace-effect of the sacrament but to its principal cause, Christ: "Just as between the instrument and the effect there is not required likeness according to similarity of form, but according to the proportion of the instrument to the effect, so neither [is likeness required] between the instrument and the principal agent."²⁴

In sum, Thomas's theorem of instrumental causality, when applied to the sacraments, indicates nonlikeness rather than likeness between the ecclesial minister, precisely as minister, and Christ by reason of

¹⁸ Thomas makes the same point forcibly elsewhere as well: "Now someone might think that to be God's minister is a great thing and a source of glory before men. And this would be true if without men there would be no access to God, as those who glory in being the king's ministers, apart from whom there is no access to the king. But this is not the case here, because Christ's faithful have access to God through faith, as it says in Rom. 5:2 . . . And therefore Paul adds, significantly, 'Whom you have believed,' as if to say: By faith you are already joined to God, not to men. Hence he also said in 2:5 above: 'That your faith might rest not on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.' . . . For it is God who *per se* is principal and great, the one in whom to glory. For the action is attributed not to the instrument, to which a minister is comparable, but to the principal agent" (*In 1 ad Cor.* 3.1.137).

¹⁹ *ST* 3, q. 64, a. 5 c.

²⁰ *Ibid.* ad 1.

²¹ *ST Suppl.* q. 19, a. 4 c.

²² *ST Suppl.* q. 19, a. 5 c; see also *ST* 3, q. 64, a. 5 c.

²³ See, among many other texts, *ST* 1, q. 4, a. 3 c.

²⁴ *ST Suppl.* q. 19, a. 4 ad 1.

the dissimilarity in form between the principal agent and the instrument. That this excludes in principle any representation of Christ in the sacramental minister is evident from the fact that Thomas can even invoke instrumentality to argue for the ability of women to baptize validly:

Christ is the chief baptizer. . . . Now it is written in Col. 3 that in Christ there is neither male nor female. Consequently, just as a layman can baptize, as Christ's minister, so can a woman. . . . In carnal generation, male and female cooperate according to the power of their proper nature; wherefore the female cannot be the active, but only the passive principle of generation. But in spiritual generation they do not act, either of them, by their own proper power, but only instrumentally by the power of Christ. Consequently, on the same grounds either man or woman can baptize in a case of urgency.²⁵

What is at stake in this entire, very scholastic analysis is no mere nicety of metaphysical theory but a basic theological and religious truth. This becomes clear when the notion of instrumentality is seen as a logical development of the Church's rejection of the Donatist heresy. For the Church's response to Donatist "puritanism" consisted precisely in the clear and essential separation of the sanctifying power of the sacraments (the reality of God's gift of grace) from the personal qualities, i.e. the subjective holiness or sinfulness, of the sacramental minister. The whole aim of this separation is to affirm that Christ—Christ alone and not his minister—is the effective cause of grace in the sacraments. The unambiguous affirmation of this truth demands the rejection of the priest's personal qualities as pertinent to the sanctifying power of the sacrament. On this point, Augustine's succinct and dramatic words still ring out with unsurpassed clarity: "Peter baptizes, Christ baptizes; Paul baptizes, Christ baptizes; Judas baptizes; Christ baptizes."²⁶ Here is a pure confession by the Church of Christ's lordship, to say nothing of the abiding comfort it brings to Christians; for, as Augustine asks, "What is a bad minister to you, where the Lord is good?"²⁷ But this confession of Christ's dominant role in the sacraments is impossible without a radical relativizing of the role of the priest in the sacraments: the priest is only a minister; his power is only objective. From here it is a small step to the scholastic distinction between objective charisms of ecclesial service (*gratiae gratis datae*)

²⁵ ST 3, q. 67, a. 4 c and a. 1 ad 3.

²⁶ *Tractatus 6 in Ioannem*.

²⁷ As cited by Thomas, ST 3, q. 64, a. 5 *sed contra*.

and subjective, justifying grace (*gratia gratum faciens*), to the distinction between the objective validity of the sacraments and their subjective fruitfulness, and to Thomas's refined view of the priestly power as purely instrumental in nature. Such a development codifies the distinction in kind between Christ's creative power and the purely instrumental power of his minister and thereby enables us to affirm the reality of priestly power without compromising Christ's sole and living lordship of the Church.

At the same time, Thomas does not simply equate the meaning of action *in persona Christi* with instrumental causality. A first indication of this is his virtual restriction of the axiom to the Eucharist.²⁸ There are, to be sure, a couple of references to bishops as bearing the person of Christ in the Church.²⁹ These texts, however, particularly the second, do not directly concern sacramental causality but rather the bishop's hierarchical-pastoral power, a reading of *in persona Christi* to which I will return below. Occasional citations of 2 Cor 2:10 ("in the presence [or person] of Christ"), a text which Thomas never invokes in a eucharistic context, also bear a hierarchical sense.³⁰ The axiom is also cited in general, non-eucharistic terms in *ST* 3, q. 22, a. 4 c to express the difference between the priests of the Old and New Laws. More specific is *ST* 3 q. 67, a. 6 c, where Thomas argues that the minister of baptism must be one rather than many since he takes the place (*vicem gerit*) of Christ. But all these references are ad hoc in nature and receive no theoretical elucidation from Thomas. Their marginality is confirmed by the signal fact that in reference to none of the other sacraments does Thomas invoke the expression *in persona Christi* to explain the priest's activity, not even in regard to Penance,³¹ which he otherwise links so closely to the Eucharist as an expression of priestly sacramental power.³² This exclusivity leads us to pose the question of the meaning Thomas attached to the expression *in*

²⁸ "One is confronted with an overwhelming fact when one tries to envisage in global fashion St. Thomas's use of the expression *in persona Christi*; this fact is the place where he uses it. In effect, one finds it almost exclusively in his treatment of the Eucharist. . . . There is no question that it is when treating the Eucharist—more precisely still, the consecration—that St. Thomas uses the expression by preference" (Marliangéas, *Clés pour une théologie* 97–98).

²⁹ *ST* 3, q. 72, a. 3 ad 3; 3, q. 82, a. 1 ad 4.

³⁰ E.g. *ST* 2-2. q. 88, a. 12 c; 3, q. 8, a. 6 c; 3, q. 64, a. 2 ad 3.

³¹ Though the expression does occur in *In IV Sententiarum* d. 1, q. 3, a. 1 sed contra, that text is not really an exception to this statement, since it does not employ the phrase *in persona Christi* in a theoretical sense. Thomas is merely invoking 2 Cor. 2:10, where the phrase occurs, and in particular the gloss on this text, as an *auctoritas* for the fact of the power of the keys.

³² E.g. *ST Suppl.* q. 8, a. 1 c.

persona Christi in the sharpest and most precise way possible: Does Thomas use the axiom to affirm that in consecrating the Eucharist the priest not only exercises instrumental power, as in the sacraments generally, but that, over and above this, is a representative likeness of Christ, the principal minister? The latter view, it is clear, represents the position of *Inter insigniores*: "The supreme expression of this representation is found in the altogether special form it assumes in the celebration of the Eucharist . . . the priest, who alone has the power to perform it, then *acts not only through the effective power conferred on him by Christ, but in persona Christi*, taking the role of Christ, to the point of being his very image, when he pronounces the words of consecration" (emphasis added).

To arrive at Thomas's view, we must attend to the eucharistic sign in its proximately available form, that is, as a sacramental *operation* of the priest. The rationale for this move is as follows. For Thomas, operation follows being (*operari sequitur esse*). This principle applies in two inverse directions. In the ontic order, being is prior and grounds operation; as a thing is, so it acts. In the epistemological order, however, operation is prior, since it is the source of our knowledge of that being. For we have no direct access to a thing's inner being; we know it only indirectly, insofar as that inner being is manifest outwardly in and through proportionate activity. Thus, although the priestly character is essentially interior,³³ the actualization of the power in which this character consists occurs in the priest's utterance of the words of consecration. The precise question, then, is whether the priest's utterance of these words *in persona Christi*, an act in which the priesthood reaches the highest point of its essence and meaning, involves, as claimed by *Inter insigniores*, a *representation* of Christ: "*The supreme form of this representation is found . . . in the celebration of the Eucharist . . . [in which] the priest . . . acts . . . in persona Christi . . . to the point of being his very image when he pronounces the words of consecration*" (emphasis added).

THE WORD OF CHRIST AS THE FORM OF THE EUCHARIST

The specific locus in Thomas's writings for answering this question is his analysis of the form of the Eucharist in the Third Part of the *Summa*. Thomas begins, significantly (in the *sed contra*), by identifying this form with the word of Christ: "the word of Christ confects this sacrament." Then in the corpus of the article he expounds this position at length and in so doing gives us his most detailed reflections on the meaning of the expression *in persona Christi*:

³³ *ST Suppl.* q. 34, a. 2 ad 1.

This sacrament differs from the other sacraments in two respects. First of all, in that this sacrament is accomplished by the consecration of the matter, whereas the rest are perfected in the use of already consecrated matter. Secondly, because in the other sacraments the consecration of the matter consists only in a blessing, from which the matter consecrated derives instrumentally a spiritual power, which through the priest as a living instrument can pass on to inanimate instruments. But in this sacrament the consecration of the matter consists in the miraculous change of the substance, which can be wrought only by God; hence the minister in performing this sacrament has no other act save the pronouncing of the words.

And because the form should suit the thing, the form of this sacrament differs from the forms of the other sacraments in two respects. First, because the form of the other sacraments implies the use of the matter, as for instance baptizing or signing; but the form of this sacrament implies merely the consecration of the matter, which consists in transubstantiation, as when it is said, "This is my body," or "This is the cup of my blood." Secondly, because the forms of the other sacraments are pronounced in the person of the minister, whether by way of exercising an act, as when it is said, "I baptize you," or "I confirm you," etc.; or by way of command, as when it is said in the sacrament of Order, "Receive the power," etc.; or by way of entreaty, as when in the sacrament of the Last Anointing it is said, "By this anointing and our intercession," etc. But the form of this sacrament is pronounced as if Christ were speaking in person, so that it is given to be understood that the minister does nothing in perfecting this sacrament except pronounce the words of Christ.³⁴

On one level, the nonrepresentational, apophatic thrust of this passage is remarkable. Here, the priest's utterance of the consecratory words "in the person of Christ" does not add some kind of representation of Christ to the priest's mere instrumentality, but, if anything, reduces it to the barest minimum. This is evident from the fact that in the Eucharist, by contrast with the other sacraments, there is no action like washing, anointing, or laying on of hands, which the priest must perform in addition to saying the words; it is simply and solely the saying of the words themselves which is required: "The minister does nothing in perfecting this sacrament except pronounce the words of Christ." This minimalism is the very opposite of representation. On the other hand, again in contrast to the other sacraments, the minister does not speak the words in the first person but "as from the person of Christ himself speaking." It is precisely for this reason that the priest has "nothing to do but utter the words of Christ." This radical shift in accent from the priest to Christ mirrors the unique relation of form to matter in this sacrament; for here the form does not effect a mere

³⁴ *ST* 3, q. 78, a. 1 c.

blessing of the matter by the priest acting as a "living instrument," but the transubstantiation of the matter into the body of Christ himself, a miraculous conversion the effecting of which is reserved to divine power. Though operating in the Eucharist in a sacramental manner, this power is the same as that by which God created the world,³⁵ a cardinal truth recalled by Paul VI in his encyclical on the Eucharist.³⁶ Consequently, "the words of consecration have no power except from Christ speaking them."³⁷

Here, in my judgment, we reach the real theological reason why Thomas restricts the axiom *in persona Christi* in its full, technical sense to the Eucharist, i.e. why he sees—"This is my body"—an expression of the depth and realism of Catholic sacramentalism. In the observable fact that in the Eucharist, uniquely in the sacramental order, the priest utters the form, *in persona Christi*. That reason is the real identity not between Christ and his minister, but between Christ, the true speaker of the form ("the word of Christ confects this sacrament") and the reality which, by the divine act of transubstantiation, the utterance of that form effects: the *corpus Christi verum*. Such an absolute identity between speaker and spoken, cause and effect, is precisely the Catholic doctrine on the Eucharist. And for Thomas it is, characteristically, the uniqueness of the effect, the *miraculosa conversio*, which signifies the uniqueness of the cause, "since the form should suit the thing." For, whereas in the other sacraments, as Thomas explains, the form effects only a blessing of the matter, here it results in nothing less than the real presence of Christ himself. In short, the expression *in persona Christi* in its pregnant theological sense is not first and foremost for Thomas an affirmation about the priest; it is an affirmation of the supreme and unique excellence of the Eucharist: "So great is the dignity of this sacrament that it is not confected except in the person of Christ."³⁸ The priest is but the instrument through whom Christ himself speaks here and now, with respect to the present matter, and thereby makes himself really present.

Anamnestic Nature of the Form

But this still leaves undetermined the most formal and decisive point of all: Granted *that* Christ is the chief minister of the sacrament and that it is in virtue of his almighty word that the sacrament is

³⁵ *ST* 3, q. 78, a. 2 ad 2; see also *ST* 3, q. 75, a. 4.

³⁶ *Mysterium fidei* 46, in *AAS* 57 (1965) 753-74, at 766-67.

³⁷ *ST* 3, q. 78, a. 1 ad 1; see also a. 5 c.

³⁸ *ST* 3, q. 82, a. 1 c.

confected,³⁹ *how* is this transcendent causality of Christ manifest visibly and sacramentally? In what way does the priest's utterance of the consecratory words "in the person of Christ" point *visibly* to Christ as their chief speaker? A clue to answering this question is provided by Thomas's repeated characterization of the priest's action as one of "recital": "The priest utters the words by way of recital (*recitative*) as if spoken by Christ."⁴⁰ This "recital" does not signify some kind of direct representation for Thomas, since he explains it as expressing the difference between the priest and Christ, between the Mass being celebrated in the present and the Last Supper: "The priest recites that Christ said: 'This is my body'";⁴¹ "the blessing of the consecration is perfected now by the recital of what took place then."⁴² This sense of difference is heightened by Thomas's repeated characterization of the consecratory words as spoken "from" (*ex*) rather than "in" the person of Christ.⁴³ In fact, so evident to Thomas is the difference between Christ and the priest inherent in the recitational form of the Eucharist that he sees in it an objection to the efficacy of the consecration, an objection which he meets by appealing not to priestly power but to the universal and transcendent power of Christ working "through any priest."⁴⁴

Thomas does not define the meaning of "recital" any further, but what he does say provides a basis and direction, however implicit, for interpreting *in persona Christi* in a way that is wholly instrumental, wholly nonrepresentational, and, in the first place, sacramentally verifiable. I say "in the first place," because with the notion of "recital" the sacramental sign comes to view not generally and abstractly, but concretely, in the rite of the Eucharist as it is actually celebrated. And it is precisely in this concrete form that the sign, so clearly and unmistakably that it seems impossible to miss it, expresses the dissimilarity and nonidentity of the consecrating priest with Christ.

For what do we find? In all the official prayers of the Mass in the Roman rite, the priest speaks, as Thomas himself says, *in persona Ecclesiae*,⁴⁵ praying in the name of the Church to the Father through Christ. This mode of speech is maintained as the anaphora proper begins: "We come to you, Father, in praise and thanksgiving through Jesus Christ, your Son." In the course of this commemorative thanksgiving for God's historical acts of salvation on our behalf, the priest at

³⁹ This good medieval term is still valuable as a tool for the technical analysis of the sacrament as an objective reality.

⁴⁰ *ST* 3, q. 78, a. 5 c.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *ST* 3, q. 78, a. 1 ad 1.

⁴³ *ST* 3, q. 78, a. 1 c; see also q. 78, a. 1 ad 4; q. 78, a. 4 c and a. 5 c; q. 82, a. 5 ad 3.

⁴⁴ *ST* 3 q. 78, a. 5 c.

⁴⁵ *ST* 3, q. 82, a. 7 ad 3.

length arrives at him to whom they were all ordered and in whom they find their fulfillment, and to that historical moment when, at the Last Supper, he instituted the Eucharist and gave it to his Church as a perpetual and living memorial of the New Covenant soon to be established through his death and resurrection. Precisely at this point, the priest abandons the *first person plural* and the *present tense* and recalls, in the *third person singular* and in the *past tense*, the story of the Last Supper. The subject is no longer "we," the Church gathered here and now in Christ's name. It is "he," Christ himself:

On the night he was betrayed, he took bread and gave you thanks and praise. He broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: "Take this, all of you, and eat it: this is my body which will be given up for you." When supper was ended, he took the cup. Again he gave you thanks and praise, gave the cup to his disciples and said: "Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me."

It is immediately evident that the words of Christ are uttered as a direct *quotation* introduced in the course of a historical commemoration of the *magnalia Dei* which has reached its climax in the commemoration of Christ's paschal mystery. Thus the priest, in uttering the words of Christ, utters them not as his own, but precisely as the words of another, namely, Christ, whom the very form of the words, as quotation, directly and formally signify as another. The "my" of "This is my body" is antecedently included in the "he" of "he said," so that the words formally signify: "He, Christ—not I, his minister—but he said: 'This is my body.'" Far from implying any similarity or identity between the priest and Christ, the form of the Eucharist signifies the very opposite: in the precise act of uttering the words of Christ, the priest points away from himself and indicates Christ, the principal agent. Thomas, for all the medievality of his view of history, seems to have had some dim awareness of this.

At the same time, as de la Taille points out, Thomas deemed the absolute recitation of Christ's words by the priest sufficient to consecrate the Eucharist,⁴⁶ thus denying the necessity of "a preamble putting them on the lips of Christ . . . such . . . as is found in all the Liturgies, when it is [narrated that Christ] said: 'This is my body.'"⁴⁷ It was left to Scotus, that creative critic of Thomas, to draw out the implication of the Thomist *recitat*. In a view which "seems to harmo-

⁴⁶ *ST* 3. q. 78, a. 1 ad 4.

⁴⁷ Maurice de la Taille, S.J., *The Mystery of Faith* (London/New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950) vol. 2, thesis 35, p. 448.

nize better with Thomas's principles on the causality of the sacraments," Scotus taught that "the words of the form will not produce their effect unless they are uttered in such manner as ritually to signify their effect."⁴⁸ After detailing the extensive support for Scotus's opinion in the medieval and especially postmedieval traditions, de la Taille proceeds to its positive defense, concluding with the following citation, in which Scotus directly opposes Thomas's view that the priest's interior intention suffices for the signification of the form⁴⁹ by arguing that only when uttered anamnesticly does the priestly recital of Christ's words signify them as spoken not by himself but by Christ:

The sacramental words must signify by virtue of the words (*ex vi verborum*) that which is effected by virtue of the sacrament. But by virtue of this consecration the effect is that the true Body of Christ is there; therefore the words, sufficient by their own proper virtue, must signify that the true Body of Christ is contained there. But these words: "This is my body," uttered without what goes before, do not absolutely signify this, because the pronoun "my" signifies that the body is referred to the person of the one speaking. For even though the minister may intend to speak in the person of Christ, this would not have the effect of making these words signify that the pronoun "my" would indicate the Body of Christ, and not the body of the speaker.⁵⁰

Scotus's correcting precision on the form of the Eucharist enables us to grasp the meaning of the expression *in persona Christi* in a straightforward, natural, and unstrained manner—ever the sign of developed as opposed to still undifferentiated theory. In this matter, Scotus, as de la Taille perceptively noted, was more true to Thomas's principles than was Thomas himself.

The anamnestic form in which the priest utters the words of Christ rules out formally and completely the meaning assigned to the term *persona* by the Declaration *Inter insigniores*, namely that in the Eucharist Christ's "role (this is the original sense of the word *persona*) must be taken by a man." What is intended in this statement is spelled out explicitly in the commentary appended to the Declaration:

The formula *in persona Christi* in fact suggests a meaning that brings it close to the Greek expression *mimema Christou*. The word *persona* means a part played in the ancient theatre, a part identified by a particular mask. The priest takes the part of Christ, lending him his voice and gestures.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid. 449.

⁴⁹ ST 3, q. 78, a. 1 ad 4.

⁵⁰ Report. Paris. 4, dist. 8, q. 2; de la Taille, *Mystery* 456–57.

⁵¹ U.S. Catholic Conference Commentary 32.

The analogy is thus to an actor who plays the part of Christ in an historical drama. Even *prima facie*, this dramatic analogy revives the naivete, found in some of the medieval *expositiones Missae*, which views the Mass as a kind of passion play.⁵² The essential distortion of the liturgy inherent in this view is even more strikingly evident when seen in terms of the difference between liturgical and theatrical *time*.

A historical drama represents the past as if it were present, as if it were taking place here and now, and hence depends essentially on an artistic suspension of that disbelief by which we know, for example, that we are not at Gettysburg in 1863 looking at Abraham Lincoln and hearing him deliver his immortal address, but are sitting in a theater or at home over 100 years later watching an actor, who is dressed up to look as far as possible like Lincoln, utter his words with the kind of sober intensity we suppose Lincoln to have had. And all this to remove, imaginatively and emotionally, the distance between Lincoln and us, to make us feel for a moment that "we were there," to make the past live again so that we can experience now what was experienced then.

But here is the formal point: in a historical pageant or representation, the difference between the actor or actress and the historical person whose part he or she is playing is abolished, if only in sign and imagination: Gregory Peck delivers the Gettysburg Address as if he were Lincoln himself. The historical anamnesis of the Eucharist is the diametric opposite of this. For in it the past is recalled as the past, as that act of Christ which took place then and which we recall now, and indeed in obedience to his direct command that we so recall him. The historical difference is not abolished, but consciously affirmed. That the priest quotes Christ's words is intrinsic to the anamnesis precisely as distinct from an historical representation. Actors in plays do not quote; they "take the part of." Imagine Gregory Peck, dressed up to look exactly like Lincoln—beard, high hat, and all—standing before an audience and saying: "As Abraham Lincoln once said: 'Fourscore and seven years ago . . .'" But the Church at the Eucharist consciously and thematically remembers the past and thereby affirms it as past, affirms the historical difference. The very form of the words signifies this.

To be sure, in and through this recollection of the past Christ is made really present here and now; to be sure, we as Church are able so to recollect him because there are among us priests who have received the unique power to consecrate; to be sure, we do not merely recollect

⁵² Cf. Louis Bouyer, *Rite and Man: Natural Sacredness and Christian Liturgy* (Liturgical Studies 7; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1967) 76.

what he did then but affirm him in faith as our living and present Savior. But, just as surely, the visible, sacramental sign in and through which all this takes place—and it is precisely the nature of this sign which is in question—has the form of an historical recollection in which the priest, in uttering the words of Christ by way of quotation, by that fact publicly and manifestly affirms the difference between the Last Supper and the Mass and his own nonidentity with, indeed, his radical otherness from, Christ. There is a simple corollary to this. Only a man (or an ungainly and heavily disguised woman) can play Abraham Lincoln; but anyone can quote the words of Christ. For that quoting to effect Christ's real presence requires, of course, that the one quoting be an ordained priest. But since the quoting has nothing whatsoever to do with "taking Christ's role" dramatically and in fact expressly excludes it, neither has being a man.

Sacramental theory explains what the liturgy demonstrates. For in a sacrament the external, visible sign does not illustrate, in picture-book fashion, the spiritual reality of the sacrament, but rather signifies—and effects—it in accordance with the meaning of the words which constitute the form of the sacrament: "Words belong to the sacramental form by reason of the meaning signified by them."⁵³ This meaning, moreover, is not a purely rational one, to be read "backwards" as it were to the natural sign, which is the indeterminate matter of the sacrament, but a faith meaning to be read "forward" to the supernatural reality which the sacrament effects: "As Augustine says, the word operates in the sacraments 'not because it is spoken,' i.e. not by the outward sound of the voice, 'but because it is believed' in accordance with the sense of the words which is held by faith."⁵⁴ In the case of the Eucharist, the reality is precisely the true body of Christ here and now made really present by the consecratory words spoken over the bread, the sacramental matter. These words have the power to effect the real presence of Christ because they are the words of Christ—"the word of Christ confects this sacrament"⁵⁵—words which Christ himself utters sacramentally in and through the priest acting in obedience to his historical command. That it is really Christ, acting in and through his minister, who is operative at this supreme moment of the Church's life is indicated sacramentally by the differentiation of speakers in the form as uttered: "The priest recites that Christ said: 'This is my body.'"⁵⁶ This is the great mystery of faith, *mysterium fidei*, a reality disclosed to faith alone:

⁵³ ST 3, q. 60, a. 8 ad 2.

⁵⁵ ST 3. q. 78, a. 1 *sed contra*.

⁵⁴ ST 3, q. 60, a. 7 ad 1.

⁵⁶ ST 3. q. 78, a. 5 c.

Visus, tactus, gustus, in te fallitur,
 Sed auditu solo tuto creditur;
 Credo quidquid dixit Dei Filius,
 Nihil veritatis verbo verius.⁵⁷

The formula *in persona Christi* has its true provenance in this mystery of faith and derives its whole meaning from this mystery; to see it as referring to a characteristic of the priest is essentially to misconceive it. The expression means no more, but also no less, than that the priest, by recalling, in obedience to Christ's command, the words of Christ, is the instrument of the real presence of Christ—to whom the eye of faith principally attends. This instrumentality is exercised by virtue of a power that is in the priest as not his own, a power virtually as mysterious as the effect of which it is the instrument. Action *in persona Christi* does not transcend instrumentality in the direction of some kind of mystical coincidence with Christ, but rather is instrumentality in its purest and most sublime form.

The anamnestic nature of the form of the Eucharist reveals the apophatic nature of this instrumentality. I call the anamnestic form of the Eucharist apophatic because it expresses a formal differentiation and subordination of speakers unique among the sacramental forms. For in the other sacraments, as Thomas says, the "I" of the priest ("I baptize you," "I absolve you"), though indeed instrumental of Christ, nevertheless appears as the immediate cause of the sanctifying action. But here the "I" of the priest *disappears*, or, as Marliangéas puts it, "effaces itself," and does so in that pure (?) and absolute (?) sense which is found in the Eucharist alone and which constitutes the technical sense of the phrase *in persona Christi* for Thomas.⁵⁸ It is, for Thomas

⁵⁷ From Thomas's well-known hymn for the feast of Corpus Christi, *Adoro Te devote, latens Deitas*.

⁵⁸ Especially significant is the fact that Marliangéas sees the "representation of one by another," a representation which reaches its climax in action *in persona Christi*, as bearing an apophatic rather than representational sense, and this both in Christian thought generally and in Thomas's in particular: "As far as Christian usage is concerned, the whole of our study shows, we hope, that underneath the variety of usages it is always the same basic idea that is being expressed: one person is given words (most often) which make him a 'representative.' This representative effaces himself as it were before the one whom he represents, so that it is not he but the one 'represented' who speaks and acts in person. Now this is verified par excellence in the case of the words of consecration. . . . There is no question that it is when treating the Eucharist—more precisely still, the consecration—that St. Thomas uses the expression by preference. This formula seems to him, in its technical sense at any rate, to express very precisely the act of speaking in the name of another who—and who alone—is engaged in this act, the one uttering the words effacing himself completely. Now in the sacramental system,

of course, precisely this technical sense and it alone which is pertinent in the present discussion, which concerns the *sacramentum tantum* of the Eucharist—the external, visible, sacramental sign composed of matter and form. And the point I am making is that in the formal constitution of the sign the priest's role is not representational but apophatic: in the quotation of Christ's words of institution by way of anamnesis, the "I" of the priest steps aside in order to let the "I" of Christ appear, the *persona* of the priestly narrator *gives way visibly* to the *persona* of Christ.

Epistemological Priority of the Visible Rite

Sacramental sign. Visibly. What is at issue here, we must constantly keep reminding ourselves, is precisely and only the external sign by which the Eucharist is conformed—this and neither the inner "identification" with or "configuration" to Christ entailed in the sacerdotal character, nor the real presence of Christ which this character and the power flowing from it instrumentally makes possible. Extreme methodological care is needed in sorting out these interrelated doctrines. We may not, for example, interpret the meaning of the external sign on the basis of our belief in the inner character; that is to reverse proper procedure, since, as already argued, it is from the outer that we come to understand (not believe in) the inner and not vice versa. It is in fact precisely the anamnestic nature of the external sign—and specifically of its formal, determining element, the word—that enables us to explain the inner character in a way that avoids a metaphysically naive (and, taken thematically and univocally, blasphemous) use of such terms as identification, configuration, and participation.⁵⁹

For the same reason, it is illegitimate to argue that the priest (visibly) represents Christ on the grounds that the person of Christ acts through the priest as the principal agent of the Eucharist.⁶⁰ To be the instrument through which Christ himself acts is one thing, to "represent" him visibly and externally quite another. More strongly still: the effectiveness of the priest's action as *actus Christi* is completely preserved within the horizon of instrumentality and does not require vis-

the Eucharist represents the purest case of this kind and for that reason alone merits the full application of our formula" (*Clés pour une théologie* 97–99).

⁵⁹ These terms, especially "identification," are favored by Sara Butler in several recent attempts to justify the teaching of *Inter insigniores*; see "Forum: Second Thoughts on Ordaining Women," *Worship* 63 (1989) 157–65, at 160; "Forum: Ordaining Women," *Worship* 63 (1989) 471; "Forum: The Ordination of Women: Responses to Bishop Kenneth Untener," *Worship* 65 (1991) 263–68, at 265.

⁶⁰ Sara Butler, "Forum: Ordaining Women" 472.

ible representation of any kind. And if there be any representation, this must be apparent from the words of consecration, the saying of which, as Thomas states clearly, constitutes the priest's sole activity in consecrating the Eucharist: "The priest does nothing in perfecting this sacrament except pronounce the words of Christ." If then one wishes to interpret the phrase *in persona Christi* in a representational sense, one must validate that sense from and through an analysis of the *forma verborum* and avoid indulging in doctrinal or spiritual rhetoric lacking any basis in or reference to the rite itself.⁶¹ Insertion of the nuptial image into the present discussion⁶² is a telling case in point. For while the biblical, theological, and mystical traditions certainly allow us to invoke this image (among others) as a metaphor for the ultimate goal of the Eucharist (the loving union of Christ and the Church), its use in a technical sense as the basis for assimilating the celebrating priest to Christ the Bridegroom is nothing more than an undigested Platonism which blithely bypasses the empirical reality of the liturgical celebration. This judgment may seem harsh, but it must stand, I believe, until someone is able to point out clearly and objectively exactly how, in terms of action and operation, the consecrating priest *visibly* represents Christ the Bridegroom. And in general, discussion of action *in persona Christi* would avoid many an unticketed flight to the supersensible if attention were focused from the outset on the concrete liturgical rite, analysis of which is, as far as I have seen, the feature most conspicuously absent from attempts to vindicate representationism. This absence is particularly incomprehensible in the West in light of its historical commitment to the a posteriori method and its traditional use of the careful distinctions among *sacramentum tantum*, *res et sacramentum*, and *res tantum* in articulating the dialectic between the visible and invisible in things sacramental.

To sum up: the consecrating priest is not a "visible sign" who, in "leading the community in doing what Christ commanded . . . assumes

⁶¹ An extreme form of the disassociation between sign and signified that results when one leapfrogs to the invisible over the head of the visible is provided by John R. Sheets who writes: "The eucharistic minister . . . re-presents the risen Christ with the marks of the wounds, which signify Christ in his gift-ness to us. Only one who shares the same psycho-somatic-pneumatic form of the self can re-present the risen Lord marked with the sign of his 'kenosis,' his emptying of self in order to fill us" ("Forum: The Ordination of Women," *Worship* 65 [1991] 451-61, at 457).

⁶² Although the nuptial image is at bottom a code word for subordinationism (see n. 5 above and n. 90 below), it is invoked by the magisterium under the pretext of its supposed sacramental symbolism. It is the latter aspect, which is especially stressed by Pope John Paul II in *Mulieris dignitatem* 26, that I am addressing here.

the role of Christ vis-a-vis the community.”⁶³ That is precisely what the consecrating priest is *not*. For Christ in no way appears in the consecrating priest as in a “living sign” whose action mediates his presence in a positive and perceptible way. Indeed, far from affirming such a positive representation of Christ by the priest, the expression *in persona Christi* in its technical and normative sense excludes it. For only to the extent that the priestly “I” disappears does the “I” of Christ appear as the present cause of the present action—a truth most obviously evident in a concelebrated Mass, in which many priests are instrumental of one and the same Christ, thereby reducing *ad absurdum* the sacramental application of “representation of Christ.” This apophatic “self-effacement” of the priestly speaker, this “disappearance” of the priestly “I,” is thus constitutive of the *sacramentum tantum Eucharistiae* formally and as such. And this not in spite of, but because of transubstantiation and the real presence. To Sara Butler’s statement that “holy orders is emptied of its meaning if one rejects the idea of a sacramental identification of the priest with Christ,”⁶⁴ I would therefore reply that exactly the opposite is the case. Any positive representation of Christ by the priest would, to the extent that it existed, obscure the sacramental visibility of Christ as the true and effective speaker of the consecratory words, and precisely to that extent would imply a merely symbolic rather than real presence of Christ.

This apophatic interpretation of *in persona Christi*, it may be noted, far from being esoteric, stands in profound continuity with both the New Testament correlation between apostleship and the proclamation of the word (Luke 9:2; Mark 16:15) and Vatican II’s teaching on the centrality of the word for the priestly ministry,⁶⁵ a teaching already affirmed directly of bishops by the Council of Trent.⁶⁶ This fundamentality of the word and its proclamation not only allows but compels us to view the apostle, and hence the priest, not as Christ’s *representation* but as his *representative*, whose function, like that of John the Baptist, is to make room for one greater than himself, and point away from himself to Christ, in order to bring others to Christ, to be an “ambas-

⁶³ Sara Butler, “Forum: Ordaining Women” 472.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ “Since no one can be saved who has not first believed, priests, as co-workers with their bishops, have as their primary duty the proclamation of the gospel of God to all” (*Presbyterorum ordinis* 4). All citations from Vatican II in this article are taken from *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. M. Abbott (New York: Guild, 1966).

⁶⁶ *Praecipuum episcoporum munus . . . [est] praedic [are] sanctum Iesu Christi evangelium* (Council of Trent, Sess. 5, Decr. 2, No. 9, in *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, ed. Istituto per le Scienze Religiose, Bologna [1973] 669).

sador for Christ" (2 Cor 5:20). In the summary words of Raymond Brown: "The servant of Jesus, in Paul's outlook, is merely a bridge: 'What is Apollos? What is Paul? They are servants (*diakonoi*) through whom you have believed' (1 Cor 3:5)."⁶⁷

The net result of the foregoing analyses is to shift the horizon for understanding the axiom *in persona Christi* from "representation" to ministry in general and the ministry of the word in particular. In this light let us examine in further detail the Declaration's interpretation of the axiom.

REPRESENTATION AS HIERARCHY IN THE CDF DECLARATION

In sharp contrast to the view just outlined, *Inter insigniores* interprets the apostolic proclamation in terms not of ministry but of hierarchical power, namely, that by virtue of the character of ordination the priest represents Christ's power and authority within and towards the Church as a whole. A clue that this is so is provided by the repeated characterization, in the "historical" sections 2–4, of the proclamation of the word by the apostles as "official."⁶⁸ This hierarchicalism can be specifically verified in reference to the Declaration's use of the *in persona Christi* axiom.

The essential point is that the Christ said to be represented by the priest acting *in persona Christi* is not Christ in some vague or indeterminate sense, but Christ precisely insofar as he is Head of the Church.⁶⁹ This formality is explicitly stated in the central passage of the Declaration's section 5, although its import is to some degree obscured by the plethora of dramatic and nondramatic images:

In actions which demand the character of ordination and in which Christ himself, the author of the Covenant, the Bridegroom and Head of the Church, is represented, exercising his ministry of salvation—which is in the highest degree the case of the Eucharist—his role (this is the original meaning of the word *persona*) must be taken by a man.

⁶⁷ Raymond Brown, *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections* (Paramus, N.J.: Paulist, 1970) 28.

⁶⁸ "Women . . . were the first to have the privilege of seeing the risen Lord, and it was they who were charged by Jesus to take the first paschal message to the Apostles themselves . . . in order to prepare the latter to become the official witnesses to the Resurrection" (*Inter insigniores* 2). "In spite of the so important role played by women on the day of the Resurrection, their collaboration was not extended by Saint Paul to the official and public proclamation of the message, since this proclamation belongs exclusively to the apostolic mission" (*ibid.* 3).

⁶⁹ This formality of headship for the Declaration's view of the priest's representation of Christ unmasks the "subordinationism" underlying its invocation of the nuptial image, "bridegroom" being formally defined therein not as lover but as "head" of the wife.

Completely unambiguous, however, is the Declaration's nondramatic, nonsymbolic argument for representationalism near the end of section 5. To the argument that the ordination of women might be permitted on grounds that the priest represents the Church and thus acts in the person of the Church (*in persona Ecclesiae*), the Declaration counters by subordinating this representation to the priest's primary representation of Christ as Shepherd and Head of the Church. Here, *in persona Christi* is specified as signifying *in persona Christi capitis*; Vatican II is invoked in support of this view, which is expressly identified with the meaning of the axiom in the celebration of the Eucharist:

It is true that the priest represents the Church, which is the Body of Christ. But if he does so, it is precisely because he first represents Christ himself, who is the Head and Shepherd of the Church. The Second Vatican Council used this phrase to make more precise and to complete the expression *in persona Christi*. It is in this quality that the priest presides over the Christian assembly and celebrates the Eucharistic sacrifice "in which the whole Church offers and is herself offered."

A review of the pertinent texts reveals, however, not so much the validity of the Declaration's position as its uncritical use of sources.

Three conciliar texts are referred to in the footnotes. Two of these are from *Presbyterorum ordinis* 2 and 6, the third from *Lumen gentium* 28. But while these texts admittedly add the term *capitis* to the phrase *in persona Christi*, they do not offer a new, more developed interpretation of the priest's role in the confection of the Eucharist. This is evident first of all from the fact that the eucharistic references in these texts either lack the axiom altogether or, as in *Lumen gentium* 10, cite it without the specifying *capitis*. More specifically, their addition of *capitis* to *in persona Christi* seems directly intended, when read in context, not to define the nature of the priest's sacramental role but to validate the pastoral, governing authority which the priest exercises in subordination to and in the name of the bishop: "To the degree of their authority and in the name of their bishop, priests exercise the office of Christ the Head and the Shepherd."⁷⁰ In itself, this is a perfectly valid use of the axiom, for as indicated earlier, the expression *in persona Christi* is applicable to priestly activity in *two* senses, the sacramental-eucharistic and the hierarchical-regitive. Thus Thomas:

Upon a priest, at his ordination, is conferred the power of consecrating this sacrament [the Eucharist] in the person of Christ . . . A bishop receives power to act in the person of Christ over his mystical body, that is, over the Church;

⁷⁰ *Presbyterorum ordinis* 6.

a priest does not receive this power at his consecration, though he may possess it by commission from the bishop.⁷¹

In saying that the primary sense of the conciliar *capitis* is hierarchical-regitive rather than eucharistic, I do not mean to imply either that the Council fathers made any clear distinction between the two senses of *in persona Christi* or that most, perhaps all of them, if asked, would not have agreed with the Declaration in subsuming the eucharistic under the hierarchical sense. We read, for example, that in virtue of the "sacred character . . . bishops in an eminent and visible way undertake Christ's own role as Teacher, Shepherd, and High Priest, and that they act in His person."⁷² To admit this, however, is merely to acknowledge that the Council, here as elsewhere, was still largely dependent on traditional theological thought patterns and categories, especially where no controversy was involved and where these seemed adequate for expressing the matter at hand. In other words, even on the most favorable reading of the conciliar texts in question,⁷³ it is impossible to interpret them as thematically intending a *new* interpretation of *in persona Christi* in its specifically eucharistic sense.⁷⁴

⁷¹ *ST* 3, q. 82, a. 1 c and ad 4.

⁷² *Lumen gentium* 21.

⁷³ Susan Wood, S.C.L. cites the relevant passage from *Presbyterorum ordinis* 2 as a *restatement* of traditional views on action *in persona Christi*: "This view [according to which the bishop or priest acts directly in the person of Christ] remains prominent in Vatican II's teaching" ("The Sacramentality of Episcopal Consecration," *TS* 51 [1990] 480–81).

⁷⁴ The Declaration's directly eucharistic application of the phrase *in persona Christi capitis* derives in fact not from Vatican II but from Pius XII's encyclical *Mediator Dei* (AAS 39 [1947] 521–95). The Declaration adds a footnote reference to section 93 of the encyclical (ibid. 556), though strangely omitting reference to the still stronger passage in section 84, in which the pope declares that "the priest acts for the people only because he represents Jesus Christ, Who is Head of all His members and offers Himself in their stead" (ibid. 553). And yet even these papal texts do not, when carefully considered, appreciably confirm the Declaration's position, mainly because their direct representationalism, while manifest, is neither thematically intended nor necessary to clarify the doctrinal issues with which Pius was concerned. The import of section 84, the stronger text, is evident from its purpose, which is to forestall any resurgence of the Reformers' denial of the distinction between the priesthood of orders and the "priesthood of all believers" to the point of asserting that "the people are possessed of a true priestly power, while the priest acts only in virtue of an office committed to him by the community," the eucharistic sacrifice thus becoming "a 'concelebration' in the literal meaning of that term" (section 83, ibid. 553). It is precisely to exclude these "errors long since condemned" (ibid.) that the pope, clearly breaking no new theological ground, "recalls" in section 84 the corresponding truths of traditional Catholic dogma: that the priesthood of orders is essentially distinct and not derived from the general priesthood of the baptized; and that orders confers on the priest sacerdotal powers which the laity do not possess, principally, the power to celebrate the Eucharist as the minister of Christ himself (ibid. 553–54). While a defense of these traditional Catholic truths in terms of direct repre-

The Declaration's Inversion of the Two Senses of In Persona Christi

This entire discussion rests on the fact, already indicated, that the *in persona Christi* axiom is patient not of one, but of two quite distinct applications, the eucharistic and the hierarchical-regitive. These two applications are, moreover, not merely distinct, but diverse and even inverse in nature. For while the eucharistic sense of *in persona Christi* is ministerial and apophatic, as has been argued at length, the hierarchical sense is in fact positive and "representational"—not directly, to be sure, but in that analogous sense in which human authority, e.g. that of the king, is said to "represent God in the world," namely, as the secondary cause in and through whom God governs earthly affairs.⁷⁵ It is in fact on this categorial level precisely that the language of representation has its natural and proper provenance, on this level that one may speak, analogously but without essential distortion, of bishops and priests as "sharing in the authority by which Christ Himself builds, up, sanctifies, and rules His Body."⁷⁶ It is in this sense, for example, that Thomas speaks of prelates as vicariously exercising the authority of Christ the Head,⁷⁷ thus expressing the intelligible substance, if not the verbal form, of *in persona Christi capitis*, a term he seems not to have used.⁷⁸

But if, then, the expression *in persona Christi* bears two essentially diverse senses, there inevitably arises the question of their relative order and priority. Is the apophatic normed by the representational, or the representational by the apophatic? The answer to this epistemological question depends, of course, on the relative priority of the two aspects of priestly power from which the two inverse senses of *in persona Christi* derive. Is the priest first and foremost the hierarch, among whose ruling powers the sacramental power is included? Or is the priest first of all and formally Christ's servant and instrument, whose hierarchical authority is grounded in and normed by this Christ-derived and Christ-directed service? In answering this question, we must first of all admit that Thomas regularly interprets the sacrament of orders hierarchically, i.e., in terms of "eminence of

sentationalism is no doubt inevitable within the Counter-Reformation horizon in which they are viewed by the pope, namely, the essential distinction between the clergy and the laity, such a defense becomes seriously questionable in light of Vatican II's overarching vision of a servant Church.

⁷⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *De regimine*, chaps. 9–10.

⁷⁶ *Presbyterorum ordinis* 2.

⁷⁷ *ST* 3, q. 8, a. 6 c.

⁷⁸ This may be fairly concluded, I think, from the fact that the expression is not included in Marliangéas's comprehensive index of Thomist texts containing *in persona Christi* and related terms (*Clés pour une théologie* 141–46).

rank,"⁷⁹ and "the power to rule the community and exercise public acts."⁸⁰ This said, we must add that, even apart from eucharistic considerations, Thomas conceives hierarchical power as ministerial in nature, both in its natural analogue, that is, leadership of the community, which is not despotic but a self-sacrificing service of the common good,⁸¹ and in itself, since the "eminence of rank" attached to episcopacy is subordinate to what is principal and final in the latter, namely, the service of others.⁸² This ministeriality is, moreover, ultimately eucharistic in finality, for it is to the Eucharist that the priestly power is principally and essentially ordered: "Because the principal act of the priest is to consecrate the body and blood of Christ, it is in the giving of the chalice under the determinate form of the words that the sacerdotal character is imprinted";⁸³ "It is manifest that the sacrament of order is ordained to the consecration of the Eucharist."⁸⁴ This finality is a direct corollary of the supremacy of the Eucharist itself, which is the "end and consummation of all the sacraments,"⁸⁵ since it "contains substantially the common spiritual good of the whole Church."⁸⁶ Given all this, it comes as no surprise that, faced with the question of the relative priority of the two aspects of priestly power, Thomas unhesitatingly opts for the eucharistic:

The sacrament of Order is ordered to the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is the sacrament of sacraments, as Dionysius says . . . And thus the distinction of orders is to be reckoned in relation to the Eucharist, since the power of Order is either for the consecration of the Eucharist or for some ministry which is ordered to the sacrament of the Eucharist.⁸⁷

⁷⁹ *ST Suppl.* q. 34, a. 2 ad 4; q. 39, a. 1; *ST* 2-2, q. 185, a. 1 c.

⁸⁰ *ST* 3, q. 65, a. 1.

⁸¹ *De regimine* 2.

⁸² *ST* 2-2, q. 185, a. 1 c.

⁸³ *ST Suppl.* q. 37, a. 5 c. What is significant in this argument is not Thomas's now superseded position on the *porrectio calicis* as the matter of the sacrament of order, but the Eucharist-centered view of the priesthood on which he bases his position.

⁸⁴ *ST* 3, q. 65, a. 3 c.

⁸⁵ *ST* 3, q. 63, a. 6 c.

⁸⁶ *ST* 3, q. 65, a. 3 ad 1.

⁸⁷ *ST Suppl.* q. 37, a. 2 c. It is worth noting that the sacrificial nature of the Mass does not detract from the argument developed here, for the essence of the sacrifice both as sacrifice of Christ and as sacrifice of the Church is included in the consecration itself. (1) The Eucharist as the real presence of Christ and the Mass as the "representation" of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice are (really, not formally) one and the same, since it is Christ himself in his sacrificial being that is made really present: the Mass is the "representation" of the sacrifice because it is the real presence of the sacrificed. This becomes clearer when we note that, in the strict sense, the sacrifice made present in the Mass is not the historical sacrifice of Calvary as such but Christ's eternally sacrificed (and divinely accepted) being, and the former only as eternalized in the latter. On this point, the West's historicist tendencies need a "pneumatological correction" from East-

The priest has two acts: a principal act over the true body of Christ, and a secondary act over the mystical body of Christ. Now the second act depends on the first, but the opposite does not hold. And thus some are promoted to the priesthood and entrusted with the first act only, such as religious not entrusted with the care of souls.⁸⁸

In sum, Thomas distinguishes two activities of the priesthood—the hierarchical-regitive and the sacramental-eucharistic—and subordinates the former to the latter in the order of theological dependence, since it is to the Eucharist that the whole of priestly activity is finally ordered and thus receives its ultimate specification.

When we thematize this eucharistic priority (as Thomas does not⁸⁹), the implications for our original question are clear. The representational, i.e. the hierarchical-regitive, sense of the phrase *in persona*

ern theology, for which the Christ who acts in the Eucharist is precisely the risen Christ, the heavenly Kyrios who, as the Greek Fathers put it, sends his lifegiving Spirit as fire from heaven upon the gifts to appropriate them and thereby transform them into himself. (2) In the Mass, Christ associates the Church in his eternal sacrifice, acting as High Priest of the Church's worship. This is likewise accomplished in and through the consecration insofar as Christ's eternal sacrifice is made present here and now in ecclesial-sacramental form, as offered by the Church, more precisely, by "the whole Church" acting through the priest. As Thomas puts it: "The minister acts in the person of the whole Church, whose minister he is, for in the words he utters there is expressed the intention of the Church, which suffices for the perfection of the sacrament" (*ST* 3, q. 64, a. 8 ad 2). Applying this general principle to the Mass, we may say that the Church offers Christ's sacrifice "through, with, and in Christ," insofar as the consecrating priest also serves (through his intention to do what the Church does) as the official proclaimer of the Church's faith, thereby actualizing, here and now, that graced self-surrender and cleaving to Christ by which the Church is eternally wedded to him as his Body and Bride, an actualization which, because specified by the sacrificial nature of *this* sacrament, is thereby also her specific "yes" to his sacrifice. Into this "sacrifice of the whole Church" the local congregation, led by the priest, enters in the offering that follows the consecration.

⁸⁸ *ST Suppl.* q. 36, a. 2 ad 1.

⁸⁹ Particularly problematic in this regard is Thomas's inability to think of the eucharistic and regitive powers within the formal horizon of the sacrament of orders as such. According to Thomas, the regitive power pertains primarily to the episcopacy, yet episcopacy is not part of the sacrament of orders in the strict sense, since a bishop (or even the pope; see *ST Suppl.* q. 38, a. 1 ad 3) has no greater power to consecrate the Eucharist, which is formal for the sacrament of orders, than a simple priest (*ibid.* q. 40, a. 5 c). This leaves a major discrepancy between Thomas's respective teachings on the eucharistic finality of the priesthood, detailed in the present article, and his consistently hierarchical interpretation of the sacrament of orders, in terms of which he excludes women from the possibility of priestly ordination (see next note). At the same time, this very discrepancy confirms the basic interpretation advanced in the present article, since it shows clearly that for Thomas the eucharistic sense of the expression *in persona Christi* is distinct in nature from use of the same expression in connection with the exercise of hierarchical power.

Christi is ordered to and normed by the apophatic, i.e. the ministerial, and not the other way around. For it is precisely the self-effacement of the priestly minister before Christ that constitutes the governing *ratio* of Christian ministry as a whole, thus limiting the meaning of "representation of Christ" inwardly and a priori. Apart from this fundamental self-effacement ("which is in the highest degree the case of the Eucharist"), all talk of "representation" is a sinful usurpation and self-arrogation of the power and authority of Christ, the sole Bridegroom, Head, and Shepherd of the Church.

The Thomistic implications for the ordination of women are equally clear. For Thomas excludes women from ordination not because, as *Inter insigniores* would have it, they lack a "natural resemblance to Christ," but solely because of what he, along with the entire tradition of the Church up to his time, perceived as women's state of subordination vis-a-vis men, their "state of subjection," a state deemed natural and unalterable and hence as rendering women congenitally unfit to hold the "eminence of rank" in worldly society and a fortiori in the Church,⁹⁰ in other words, on the basis of their alleged unfitness to act "in the person of Christ" in its secondary, nontechnical sense. He never bans them on the basis of ministeriality formally considered and thus, by implication, on the basis of the meaning of *in persona Christi* in its primary and normative sense. So true is this that he can even, as noted earlier, invoke ministeriality to argue for women's ability to baptize validly.

The implication of the foregoing analysis is not that women can be servants of Christ but not leaders in the Church. The implication is rather that leadership in the Church, whether for women or men, is defined not by the standards of worldly power but by service to Christ and his people. Here grace not only presupposes the naturally minis-

⁹⁰ For Thomas, a sacrament, being a sign, requires not only the reality signified (*res*), but also the natural signification of that reality (*significatio rei*). For example, because the last anointing signifies the healing of the sick, only a sick person can validly receive it. Since, then, what is signified in the sacrament of orders is a status of superiority or headship in the Church, women, being in Thomas's view naturally subject or subordinate to men, are naturally incapable of signifying (and exercising) headship and hence naturally incapable of receiving the sacrament of orders: *cum in sexu foemineo non possit significari aliqua eminentia gradus, cum mulier statum subiectionis habet, ideo non potest ordinis sacramentum suscipere* (*ST Suppl.* q. 39, a. 1 c). It is this alleged incapacity for public leadership in the natural human community—not a lack of "natural resemblance to Christ"—that Thomas has in mind when he uses the term "natural resemblance" in this context: "the sacramental signs are representative by reason of natural resemblance (*ex naturali similitudine*). Now woman is in a state of subjection by nature, which is not the case with a slave [who is in a state of subjection only *de facto*]. Hence the two cases differ" (*ibid.* q. 39, a. 2 ad 4).

terial essence of authority, but redeems it from self-serving domination and directs it to the transcendent order of holiness. In so doing, grace calls the Church away from its perennial sin of trying to wield power in the world back to its true nature as the bearer, the sacrament in this world and time, of Christ who alone is the light of the nations.

The *in persona Christi* axiom, rightly understood, reminds us of all this. For it expresses, in a brief formula, what in faith we know to be the case: that the Church is the body of Christ solely and always because of the Christ whose body she is, the Christ who, in this supreme moment in which she actualizes her being as this body, becomes present—in a way so profound and total that we can find no better word for it than “real”—as that body’s Head and living source; becomes present not by an act of the Church’s power *ad extra*, but by an act of her recollection *ad intra*, an act in which, in the person of her official minister and representative, she becomes who she is by remembering him by whom she is, and in so doing shows the world not her power but her humility, not herself but her beloved Lord and Master, not what she can do, but the great things God has done for and in her, not her own person and body, but the body and person of Christ. And in this self-abnegation and laying down of her power, she becomes most truly powerful, not as kings and princes but as living things are powerful, filled with overflowing life through him and with him and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The primary sense of the axiom *in persona Christi* for St. Thomas, its chief historical exponent, is instrumental, ministerial, nonrepresentational, and to that extent apophatic. The primary function of the priest is not to “represent” or “be like” Christ, but to serve as the instrument in and through whom Christ himself acts, an activity which reaches its defining apogee in the Eucharist, where Christ acts visibly as the principal agent through the ministry of the anamnestic priestly word. There is, however, a secondary and applied meaning of the axiom which does bear an indirectly representational sense, insofar as the priest (or more properly the bishop) leads, presides over, and governs the Church in the name of Christ. *Inter insigniores* knows only the second of these senses, thereby unwittingly placing the meaning of the priesthood as a whole within the horizon of hierarchical power. Reflection on the teaching of St. Thomas allows us to dispel this dangerous ambiguity by coming down squarely on the comprehensive priority of service: the function of hierarchy, in its deepest essence, is not to stand

vicariously as lord in the place of Christ, but to call the Church over and over again into the presence of him who alone is Lord until he comes again. And this, to add the pertinent implication, can be done as easily by a woman as by a man.⁹¹

⁹¹ I say "can" advisedly. The sole competence of an article such as this is to remove the doctrinal objection against the Church's ordination of women and thereby move the question from the doctrinal to the prudential sphere. That done, however, there arises a whole set of practical questions involved in determining not whether the Church *can* but whether it *should* ordain women and, if so, when, where, and how—questions concerning such diverse issues as ecumenical relations (especially with the Orthodox), the acceptability of women priests in different geographical and cultural areas, the effect of women priests on clerical life and on church finances, etc. These issues require examination in their own right.

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