

NOTE.

THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN: TRADITION AND MEANING

In a recent issue of this journal, I essayed a retrieval of St. Thomas's interpretation of the theological axiom that the priest, in consecrating the Eucharist, acts in the person of Christ (*in persona Christi*), arguing that Thomas assigns the axiom a primarily ministerial-apophatic rather than representational sense.¹ Although the main burden of the article was to combat the hierarchical interpretation of *in persona Christi* that dominates recent magisterial teaching, it was performed related to the question which has triggered this interpretation, namely, the question whether women may be ordained to the priesthood.

Even as my article was going to press, Pope John Paul II issued a terse reaffirmation of the traditional ban against women priests, declaring that his judgment "that the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women . . . is to be definitively held by all the church's faithful."² If the precise binding force of this declaration remains somewhat unclear, the pope clearly does not rule out scholarly discussion of the arguments on which it is based, as even Joseph Ratzinger has insisted.³ The present note is intended as a contribution to this ongoing discussion, with specific reference to the distinction, and the importance thereof, between the external fact of the Church's traditional ban on the ordination of women and the inner theological meaning of this tradition.

Contemporary statements of the magisterium on this question have argued on both fronts. First and foremost, they have argued on the basis of the Church's constant and universal tradition of reserving the apostolic ministry to men. According to the magisterium, this tradition cannot be explained by the social and cultural vagaries of human history, specifically, by the historical prejudices against women, but stems from the will and institution of Christ himself, in such wise that the Church is powerless to change it: "The Church, in fidelity to the

¹ Dennis Michael Ferrara, "Representation or Self-Effacement? The Axiom *In Persona Christi* in St. Thomas and the Magisterium," *TS* 55 (1994) 195–224.

² "Priestly Ordination" (*Ordinatio sacerdotalis*), Apostolic Letter on Ordination and Women of Pope John Paul II of May 30, 1994 (*Origins*, 24/4 [9 June 1994] 50–52).

³ Joseph Ratzinger, "La Lettre *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* confirme ce que l'Eglise a toujours vécu dans la foi" (*La Documentation Catholique* no. 2094 [3 Juillet 1994] 611–615, at 612).

example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination",⁴ "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women."⁵

There is, however, a second and complementary argument advanced by the magisterium against the ordination of women, namely, the argument from theological meaningfulness, what *Inter insigniores* calls the consonance of an all-male priesthood with God's plan of salvation,⁶ the light which this doctrine sheds, within the analogy of faith, on the mystery of Christ⁷ and the Church.⁸ Pope John Paul II himself argues along these lines. In *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, he speaks of the "appropriateness of the divine provision,"⁹ makes repeated mention of God's "plan,"¹⁰ specifically ascribes the choice of men alone to "the wisdom of the Lord of the universe",¹¹ and cites approvingly Paul VI's statement that in choosing only men Christ gave the Church a "theological anthropology" thereafter ever followed by the Church.¹² The anthropological argument had been specified in *Mulieris dignitatem*¹³ in terms of the nuptial mystery between Christ and the Church in a way that rehearses the central theoretical argument advanced in Section 5 of *Inter insigniores*, i.e. that the priest in celebrating the Eucharist represents Christ the bridegroom and acts *in persona Christi*.

Nonetheless, despite this affirmation in principle of the existence of intrinsic arguments, *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* makes no attempt to specify what these might be. In particular, the pope virtually bypasses the notion, so central to both *Inter insigniores* and *Mulieris dignitatem*, of the priest's "representation of Christ," being content with a generalized and passing reference, supported by a citation not of *Inter insigniores* but of *Lumen gentium*, to priests as "carry[ing] on the apostles' mission of representing Christ the Lord and Redeemer,"¹⁴ relying instead on a forceful appeal to the will of Christ in choosing twelve men

⁴ "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] Introduction; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 69 [1977] 98-116, at 100).

⁵ *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* no. 4.

⁶ *Inter insigniores* no. 4, end.

⁷ *Ibid.* no. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.* no. 6.

⁹ *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* no. 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* nos. 2, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.* no. 3.

¹² Paul VI, Address on the Role of Women in the Plan of Salvation, Jan. 30, 1977 (*Insegnamenti* 15 [1977] 111) as cited in *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* no. 2.

¹³ "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women" (*Mulieris dignitatem*), Apostolic Letter of Aug. 15, 1988 of Pope John Paul II (*Origins* 18/17 [6 Oct. 1988] no. 26; AAS 80/2 [1988] 1653-1729 at 1715-16).

¹⁴ *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* no. 2.

as Apostles.¹⁵ The present note addresses what I believe to be the two main points raised by this new, almost voluntaristic approach of the magisterium to the question of women's ordination: (1) the inherently intelligible character of the question itself; and (2) the actual understanding of this question in the concrete tradition of the Church.

The Intelligible Nature of the Question

In the classic teaching of St. Thomas, the act of faith, though performed under the "imperium" of the will, formally resides in the intellect, since its object is the true, the *verum*.¹⁶ It is for this reason precisely that theology, as *fides in statu scientiae*, has as its proper aim the understanding of revealed truth. Implied in this characteristically Catholic view of faith and theology is the intelligibility of revealed truth itself. Nor is this view belied by the abiding mysteriousness and supernaturalness of those truths which constitute the formal and normative objects of faith: the Trinity, the Incarnation, and our divinization through grace. However opaque our intellects in the presence of the pure refulgence of divine light—like the eyes of the bat in the presence of the sun, says Thomas—however meager and halting the insights achieved by our piecemeal forays into the infinite, open country of divine being, it remains ever true that God is truth and that our search aims at the understanding of that truth, at the meaning of what is believed.

Now if this Catholic affirmation of the intelligibility of divine truth and of our ability, though scant, to grasp that intelligibility obtains in regard to even the most strictly supernatural of mysteries, it obtains even more in regard to the question of the ordination of women. For this question formally and directly concerns a constitutive element of the natural order, viz. the division of the sexes, insofar as that division is "presupposed and perfected" in the order of grace. It pertains, then, as Pope John Paul II himself states in *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, to the divine wisdom, that wisdom which, as St. Thomas further explains, constitutes the intelligible and intelligent basis, the "first principle," of the natural order based on the "distinction of things."¹⁷ More precisely, the priesthood is a sacrament and so involves, as *Inter insigniores* insists, a natural sign,¹⁸ as do the other sacraments, e.g. washing for baptism, a meal for the Eucharist. In the case of priesthood, moreover, the sacramental sign pertains directly to the Church's public and social nature, that is, its character as a "differentiated body"

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Summa theologiae* (ST) 2-2 q. 4, a. 2 c and ad 1.

¹⁷ ST 1, q. 44, a. 3 c.

¹⁸ *Inter insigniores* nos. 4-5.

and a "supernatural society,"¹⁹ with its own immanent and permanent structures. Now the doctrine that the priest must be male expressly ties this sacramental sign to the natural differentiation of the sexes and by that very fact posits the existence of an intelligible link between the two in terms of what Paul VI, as noted above, rightly called "theological anthropology."

Correlatively, to admit that the question of women priests pertains directly to the divine *intellect* is by that very fact to admit that it does not pertain directly, and hence cannot be resolved by appeals to, the divine *will*. For while God does many things which leave us entirely baffled, the placing of women in Church and world is not one of them. We are not dealing here with an object of the divine election, not with God's choice of individuals (Abraham, Mary) or nations (Israel, the Persians) as instruments of the divine purpose, nor with God's permissive unleashing of the devil upon the innocent (Job, Christ, perhaps, at times, ourselves). Such choices are indeed inscrutable, their "meaning," as Job 38–41 makes painfully clear, lost in the mystery of the divine counsel. Faced with them we can only, if we have the heart and grace for it, repeat with St. Paul: "How deep are the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How inscrutable his judgements, how unsearchable his ways!" (Rom 11:33). But the relation between the priesthood and the natural differentiation of the sexes does not and cannot pertain to God's will in this sense, unless, of course, we wish to say that the traditional Catholic axiom on the relation between nature and grace has here, in this one instance and quite arbitrarily, been abrogated by the First Truth.

Once we grasp the inherently intelligible nature of the question of women's ordination—if God has willed to exclude women from priesthood, there must be a reason for it, one in some way meaningful to the inquiring Christian mind—we are forced to limit the import of the magisterium's appeal to the will and example of Christ. *Inter insigniores*, for example, stresses Christ's enlightened and antiprejudicial attitude to argue that his reservation of the apostolic ministry to men was consciously willed and not the product of "sociocultural conditioning."²⁰ Pope John Paul II makes the point even more strongly, emphasizing Christ's sovereign freedom in calling the Twelve,²¹ a freedom exercised in union with the Father and his eternal plan.²² However, this line of argument, which stresses the historical Jesus' transcendence of cultural conditioning, besides curiously taking its stand in the no-man's land of historical reconstruction, begs the basic and under-

¹⁹ *Ibid.* no. 6.

²¹ *Mulieris dignitatem* no. 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.* no. 2.

²² *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* no. 2.

lying issue: if Christ indeed consciously willed to restrict the apostolic ministry to men for all time, what was his *reason* for doing so? For some *reason* must be assigned to the Lord's alleged decision:²³ the subjective freedom of an act is one thing, its objective content quite another. To vindicate Christ's freedom in choosing only men thus tells us nothing whatsoever about the divinely intended reason for the alleged choice. Nor is the notion of divine vocation, which the magisterium invokes by citing texts such as Mark 3:13—"he summoned the men he himself had decided on"²⁴—pertinent in this context; for God's call, as an intervention in the historical order of grace, is addressed to individuals, to unique historical persons, not to a natural class.

The question, then, concerns not the Lord's *will* but the Lord's *mind* in this matter and, no less, the means available to us for discerning it. Here, traditional Catholics will surely find Pope John Paul II's argument from Christ's call of the Twelve unsettling; first, because the link between the scriptural texts cited by the pope and the question of women's ordination seems tenuous at best; second, because in the Catholic tradition, the privileged means for discerning the meaning of Scripture is not private interpretation (even by a pope), but interpretation by the living tradition of the Church.²⁵

The Concrete Tradition of the Church

The primary argument advanced by the contemporary magisterium against the ordination of women is the constant and universal tradition of the Church. In itself, of course, an appeal to merely factual tradition cannot be decisive, for then the distinction between authoritatively binding tradition and purely historical and changeable traditions would collapse. The magisterium itself acknowledges this by arguing that the historical tradition has its ground and authority in the will and institution of Christ. Omitted from the argument is the theological rationale for the factual tradition evidenced in tradition

²³ In Ratzinger's excellent formulation, the will of Christ is neither "positivist" nor "arbitrary," since it is precisely "the will of the *Logos* and thus a will which has a meaning" ("La Lettre *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*" 612).

²⁴ *Inter insigniores* no. 6; *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* no. 2.

²⁵ Of considerable pertinence here is the traditional teaching that the grace of the teaching office (magisterium) in no way bestows on the officeholder a special private access to the meaning of revealed truth and hence does not dispense him from taking the ordinary means—serious and objective study, wide consultation with clergy and laity, prayer—for determining the truth in difficult and disputed matters. It is, I would add, precisely by its willingness to take such ordinary means that the magisterium best exhibits fidelity to its own essential nature as a ministry of the revealed truth delivered once for all to the Apostles.

itself. How, in other words, has the theological tradition explained the Church's factual exclusion of women from the priesthood, and thus, by implication, the will and institution of Christ himself? Since it is impossible in the scope of a brief note to review all the pertinent texts, I will limit myself in what follows to the witness of medieval scholasticism.

Two features of scholasticism indicate the particular value of this focus. The first is the scholarly, compendious nature of the scholastic corpus, as evidenced, for example, in the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard and the numerous commentaries thereon, yielding at least a working presumption that we will find resumed in that corpus whatever of significance the Fathers had to say on our subject. The second point goes to the heart of the matter. For it was the unique characteristic of scholasticism, and its lasting contribution to the Church, to insist on the unity of faith and reason, to seek the intelligibility inherent in what is believed, and in so doing lay a conscious and characteristically Catholic foundation for a faith that, however transcendent its object, does not bypass the exigencies of the human mind.

Since Pope John Paul II bypasses historical witnesses in his two pronouncements on our subject, my approach here will take the form of a commentary on the appeal made to scholastic thought by *Inter insigniores*.

The Scholastic Witness

According to *Inter insigniores*, although "the Scholastic doctors, in their desire to clarify by reason the data of faith, often present arguments that modern thought would have difficulty in accepting or would even rightly reject," their refusal to admit the ordination of women was inspired by the "same conviction" of fidelity to Christ as was that of the Apostles.²⁶ This interpretation of the scholastic witness raises, as the scholastics themselves would say, questions both of fact and of meaning.

The questions of fact are two. The first concerns the frequency with which the intrinsic arguments presented by the scholastics are "faulty" and objectionable to the modern mind. According to *Inter insigniores*, this was "often" the case, although no texts are cited to explain or support this contention. The second and correlative question is whether and to what extent the scholastics, despite these "sometimes" faulty intrinsic arguments, ultimately based their rejection of women priests on the extrinsic argument, namely, fidelity to the mind

²⁶ *Inter insigniores* no. 1.

and will of Christ. Four scholastics are cited in support of this latter assertion: St. Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, Richard of Middleton, and Durandus of Saint-Pourçain. Noticeably absent from this list is the Church's Common Doctor, Thomas Aquinas.

The significance of the omission of Thomas begins to become apparent when we note that all four of the scholastics cited as affirming the extrinsic argument explain the meaningfulness thereof by way of what the Declaration calls a "faulty" intrinsic argument—a veiled reference to woman's traditionally alleged inferior status, an argument based on the priest's hierarchical role as leader of the community (*eminentia gradus*) and not on his sacramental role.²⁷ Thus Bonaventure:

Our position is this: it is due not so much to a decision by the Church as to the fact that the sacrament of Order is not for them. In this sacrament the person ordained is a sign of Christ the Mediator. He who rules bears the type of Christ the Head; thus, since a woman cannot be the head of a man, she cannot be ordained. . . . There is a perfection in regard to sanctifying grace, and this can be received equally by women and men; and there is a perfection of status in regard to a charism; and this can benefit one sex and not another, since it relates not only to what is internal, but also to what is external. Such is the perfection of Order, in which there is a conferral of power, which can be shown on multiple grounds evidently not to befit women.²⁸

Scotus presents the same argument even more forcefully. While indeed contending that the exclusion of women from orders is due neither to "a determination by the Church," nor even "a decision by the Apostle [Paul]," but "derives from Christ" who, he adds, "did not even place his mother in any grade of Order in the Church,"²⁹ Scotus argues as follows for the meaningfulness of Christ's alleged institution:

Order . . . is a certain grade of eminence over others in the Church and is for a certain act of superiority which must somehow be signified by natural eminence of condition and rank. But woman is naturally in a state of subjection in relation to man, and therefore cannot possess a rank of eminence over any man, because in reference to nature, state, and nobility, women are less noble than any man; hence, after the fall, the Lord subjected her to man's dominion and power. If then she could receive Order in the Church, she could preside and

²⁷ This point is elaborated at greater length in my article "Representation or Self-Effacement?" 216–23.

²⁸ Bonaventure, *In IV Sent.* d. 25, a. 2, q. 1, ad 1 and ad 4. Scholastic discussions of the question of women's ordination are found in commentaries on Book 4, dist. 25 of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, written around the middle of the 12th century. That the Lombard did not himself raise the question of the ordination of women indicates that the time frame in which the pertinent scholastic texts occur begins in the 13th century.

²⁹ Scotus, *In IV Sent.* d. 25, Scholion (*Opus Oxoniense*).

rule, which is against her condition. Thus, a bishop conferring orders on a woman not only does evil by transgressing the precept of Christ—he does nothing at all, nor does the woman receive anything, since she is not a matter capable of receiving this sacrament.³⁰

The same basic arguments had been rehearsed by Richard of Middleton, an earlier Franciscan doctor, who, while asserting that “Christ instituted this sacrament for conferral on men only, not women,” argues the reasonability of this institution as follows: (1) public teaching does not befit women on account of the weakness of their intellect and the mutability of their affections; and (2) woman’s state of subjection and natural inferiority make her by nature incapable of representing the eminence of rank in which one is constituted by Order.³¹

We come, finally, to Durandus of Saint-Pourçain, an independent (i.e. non-Thomist) Dominican of the early 14th century. Women, according to Durandus, are indeed barred from priestly ordination by the institution and precept of Christ, who, both at the Last Supper and in his postresurrection bestowal of the power to forgive sins, ordained only men, to the exclusion of even his mother, the holiest of women. At the same time, Christ’s will is based on a sound reason for Durandus, and what this is, is not surprising. Order, he says, places one in a rank of superiority over the nonordained, a rank which it does not befit women to have over men, since women are in a state of subjection on account of their bodily weakness and intellectual imperfection.³²

In sum, all four of the scholastics cited by *Inter insigniores* as basing the rejection of women priests on the extrinsic argument defend the reasonableness of this argument by intrinsic arguments labeled “faulty” by the Declaration itself, i.e. the commonly accepted view of women’s natural “state of subordination.” Nor does the Declaration cite any “non-faulty” intrinsic arguments by the scholastics. That this belies the implication of the Declaration’s statement that the scholastics “often” invoke intrinsic arguments—the implication, namely, that some scholastics presented intrinsic arguments that were cogent—is confirmed when we examine St. Thomas’s position on the matter.

Like Scotus, Thomas argues that the male sex is so required for the validity of orders that even if a woman were otherwise qualified her reception of the sacrament would be invalid. The reason for this is that the sacrament is a sign and hence requires not only the reality signified (*res*), but also the signification of that reality (*significatio rei*); for example, since Extreme Unction signifies the healing of the sick, only

³⁰ *Ibid.* d. 25, q. 2 (*Report. Paris.*)

³¹ Richard of Middleton, *In IV Sent.*, d. 25, art. 4, n. 1.

³² Durandus of Saint Pourçain, *In IV Sent.*, d. 25, q. 2.

a sick person can validly receive it. Now since woman's state of subjection makes it impossible for the female sex to signify any eminence of rank, women are incapable of receiving the sacrament of Order.³³ Of particular note is Thomas's exclusive reliance on the intrinsic argument, on the argument from theological meaning. Despite his explicit recognition of the fundamentality of Christ's institution of the sacraments,³⁴ Thomas foregoes the appeal to that institution made by the later scholastics cited by *Inter insigniores* and, of course, both by *Inter insigniores* itself and *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*. And the same must be said of Bonaventure, who, in the very text cited by *Inter insigniores* itself (see above), makes no appeal to Christ's institution.

This brings us to the second question of fact raised by the Declaration's interpretation of scholasticism: the extent to which the scholastic authors based their rejection of women's ordination on fidelity to the mind and will of Christ. According to *Inter insigniores*, the appeal to the institution of Christ is normative for the *entire* scholastic period: "The same conviction . . . animates medieval theology."³⁵ The texts reviewed above, however, reveal two distinct groups of scholastics with two distinct approaches: a first group, represented by Thomas and Bonaventure, which relies solely on the intrinsic argument; a second group, represented by Scotus, Richard of Middleton, and Durandus, which employs both intrinsic and extrinsic arguments. There is, moreover, a plausible historical reason for this difference: the caesura in scholastic thought brought about by the condemnations of 1277.

As is well known, the rapid introduction of Aristotle into Christian intellectual life in the 13th century brought sharp and not-altogether-uncalled-for criticism from traditionalist quarters. This criticism gathered force in response to what Josef Pieper has called the "dynamic rationalism" that began to emerge at the University of Paris around 1265 under the aegis of Siger of Brabant, whose Averroist reading of Aristotle provided the basis for what later came to be known as the "double truth" theory. The matter came to a climax in 1277, when the bishops of Paris and Canterbury, in whose respective jurisdictions lay the universities of Paris and Oxford, the intellectual centers of Christendom, condemned, virtually simultaneously and seemingly in pre-arranged concert, a variety of propositions (many of them Thomist) allegedly derived from pagan philosophy and inimical to the faith.³⁶ Of

³³ *ST* Suppl. q. 39, a. 1 c.

³⁴ *ST* 3 q. 64, a. 2 ad 1.

³⁵ *Inter insigniores* no. 1.

³⁶ My account of the condemnations of 1277 and their significance is based primarily on Josef Pieper, *Scholasticism: Personalities and Problems in Medieval Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956) 118–51, whose sources include Gilson's *History of Christian*

specific importance is that underlying many of these propositions (in their condemned form, at any rate) was a subjection of faith to reason or, more precisely, a restriction of divine activity to what is rationally possible and even necessary. Gilson speaks in this connection of "Greek necessitarianism": the "Aristotelian identification of reality, intelligibility, and necessity, not only in things, but first and above all in God."³⁷ The condemnations had a profound and chilling effect on Christian intellectual life. The free play of ideas was checked, and the University of Paris paralyzed for half a century. Gilson even thinks that in certain cases one can tell simply by examining a teaching whether it was conceived before or after 1277.³⁸

The anti-intellectual milieu created by the condemnations, a climate in which reason became suspect by faith, makes historically intelligible, if admittedly it does not demonstrate, the relative emphasis placed on the extrinsic argument against women priests—the argument from Christ's institution—by Richard of Middleton (who came to Paris in 1278), Scotus, and Durandus in contrast to the simple intrinsicism of Thomas and Bonaventure. At the same time, the post-1277 emphasis on the extrinsic argument is only relative: all five of the scholastics in question defend the reasonableness of the Church's refusal to ordain women with the same "faulty" intrinsic argument from women's "natural inferiority." Nor does the marginality of two of the Declaration's four witnesses enhance the credibility of its interpretation of the scholastic period.³⁹

To sum up, the Declaration's assessment of the scholastics is at best highly misleading and at worst erroneous on both of the matters pertinent to the present discussion. First, a review of the Declaration's own witnesses points to the conclusion that the scholastics do not offer "faulty" intrinsic arguments merely "often," but always: no other intrinsic argument appears to be forthcoming. Second, the appeal to Christ's institution is not a constant but a late phenomenon within scholasticism, unknown to its two greatest and most typical exponents and quite plausible in the anti-intellectual milieu obtaining after 1277.

Philosophy in the Middle Ages and van Steenberghe's *The Thirteenth Century*. For a generally confirming view, see James Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Work* (New York: Doubleday, 1974) 331–50.

³⁷ As cited by Pieper, *Scholasticism* 138. Similarly, Weisheipl writes that "The main thrust of the Parisian condemnation was to preserve the omnipotence of God" (*Friar Thomas* 339).

³⁸ See Pieper, *Scholasticism* 127, 144.

³⁹ So arcane did I find the references to Richard of Middleton and Durandus of Saint Pourçain that I had to go outside the Washington, D.C. area to find copies of their works.

If the direct effect of the Declaration's skewed interpretation is to emphasize the importance of the extrinsic argument far beyond what is historically warranted, its ultimate effect is so to *separate* the extrinsic and intrinsic arguments as to propose the former in an historical and intellectual vacuum. Specifically telling in this regard is the Declaration's "scissors and paste" approach to the scholastic material, its citation of textual snippets on the extrinsic argument to the exclusion of the intrinsic arguments, often present in those very same texts. This studied separation of fact and meaning is unmistakably clear in the official commentary on *Inter insigniores*:

As for the theologians, the following are some significant texts: Saint Bonaventure: "Our position is this: it is due not so much to a decision by the Church as to the fact that the sacrament of Order is not for them. In this sacrament the person ordained is a sign of Christ the Mediator." John Duns Scotus: "It must not be considered to have been determined by the Church. It comes from Christ. The Church would not have presumed to deprive the female sex, for no fault of its own, of an act that might licitly have pertained to it." Durandus of Saint-Pourçain: . . . "the male sex is of necessity for the sacrament. The principal cause of this is Christ's institution. . . . Christ ordained only men . . . not even his Mother. . . . It must therefore be held that women cannot be ordained because of Christ's institution."⁴⁰

The separation is heightened by the Declaration's treatment of St. Thomas, who as noted above, knows only the "faulty" intrinsic argument. *Inter insigniores* deals with this embarrassing truth about the Church's Common Doctor in two ways: first by excluding Thomas in its rehearsal in Section 1 of the scholastic witnesses to the extrinsic argument; second, by its citation, in the notorious "natural resemblance" passage of Section 5, of Thomas's intrinsic argument in a form so completely bowdlerized as to be virtually indistinguishable from Bonaventure's symbolic argument that the ordained person is "a sign of Christ the Mediator."

Citing Thomas, Section 5 argues that "the sacraments represent what they signify by natural resemblance" and hence that the priest must be male, "for otherwise there would not be this 'natural resemblance' which must exist between Christ and his minister." What Thomas himself meant by "natural resemblance" is clear. In response to the objection that slaves, being, like women, in a state of subjection, are likewise barred from orders, Thomas writes: "The sacramental signs are representative by reason of natural resemblance. Now woman is in a state of subjection by nature, which is not the case with

⁴⁰ U.S. Catholic Conference Commentary 23

a slave. Hence the two cases differ.”⁴¹ This argument merely specifies the preceding argument from sacramental signification. Just as a healthy person cannot receive the sacrament of the sick, so woman, who is in a state of subjection vis-a-vis man, cannot receive the sacrament of order, which signifies a position of eminence in the ecclesial community, a position within the ruling hierarchy. And while this argument from a “state of subjection” is true for Thomas of both slaves and women, it is true of them differently: for a slave is in subjection only factually and hence is capable of being freed, whereas women is in a state of subjection by nature and hence irreparably. It hardly seems necessary to add that none of this has to do in any way, shape, or form with a “natural resemblance” to Christ himself.

Conclusion

The contemporary magisterium rejects the possibility of ordaining women on two bases: tradition and theology, external fact and intrinsic meaning. Of these, the appeal to tradition is primary and normative, only, however, insofar as this tradition is seen as reflecting the will and institution of Christ, thereby reducing the arguments from theological meaning to secondary importance, an emphasis which reaches its apogee in *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, the recent apostolic letter of Pope John Paul II. I have argued that this approach is incommensurate with the nature of the doctrine in question, with the traditional practice of Catholic theology, and with the historical facts themselves.

It is incommensurate with the doctrine, because the doctrine involves the structural relation between nature and grace and hence has its ultimate formal basis not in the divine will, and hence not in the will of Christ, but in the divine intellect, what Pope John Paul II himself calls “the wisdom of the Lord of the universe.”

It is incommensurate with the traditional practice of Catholic theology, which, even in regard to the highest and most mysterious of revealed truths—the Trinity, the Incarnation, and our divinization in grace—has consistently aimed at understanding divine truth, at moving beyond mere fact, even divine fact, to the intelligibility of the fact, to the meaningfulness of what is believed.

It is incommensurate with the historical facts of tradition, insofar as the tradition makes only sporadic appeals to Christ’s institution and always joins this appeal, where it occurs, with an intrinsic argument showing the meaningfulness of this institution.

⁴¹ *ST* Suppl. q. 39, a. 2 ad 4.

Finally, the theological tradition prior to Vatican II knows only one intrinsic argument against the ordination of women: the "faulty" argument from women's inferior status, an argument linked, as I have said, to the priest's hierarchical rather than sacramental role. While the present note has limited its argument on this point to the scholastic era, a review of the patristic texts cited by *Inter insigniores* will reveal the argument to be valid more universally.⁴² Particularly unknown prior to Vatican II are attempts, as in both *Inter insigniores* and *Mulieris dignitatem*, to justify the maleness of the priest via the notion of "representation" of Christ, whether by way of nuptial imagery or, more technically, by invoking the *in persona Christi* axiom. And the same must be said, I believe, of attempts to justify the maleness of the priest by appealing to the normativeness of Christ's call of the Twelve. Ironically, such arguments represent what the magisterium itself might call a novelty: far from restating the older theological tradition, they inaugurate as it were a new tradition.

The critically tenable conclusion of all this is not that the magisterium's position on the ordination of women is wrong. The critically tenable conclusion is that unless the magisterium wishes to inculcate a form of fideism on this question, it will have to explain its position, and the mind of Christ himself, with reasons other than have appeared in the tradition of the Church thus far. Any such rationale, as has been noted, will have to address the central theological issue: the alleged link between the sexual difference and the nature of the priesthood,⁴³ a link which comes to intelligible expression in the essential functions

⁴² For a fuller examination of the patristic literature, van der Meer's pioneering study remains indispensable (Haye van der Meer, S.J., *Women Priests in the Catholic Church? A Theological-Historical Investigation*, trans. Arlene and Leonard Swidler [Philadelphia: Temple University, 1973]); chap. 3 provides a critical review of many of the patristic authors cited by *Inter insigniores*. Even a cursory reading of van der Meer reveals the essential sameness, if not downright repetitiousness, of the views expressed on our subject throughout the patristic era, as well as the validity of the author's summary remark that underlying the various views is "the conviction that women cannot have any leadership role" (106).

⁴³ In the end, the question of women's ordination turns on the question of theological anthropology, as implied by both Paul VI (see note 12 above) and John Paul II himself (see notes 9–11 and 13 above). It is, for example, only in terms of the anthropology of the sexes that the argument from Christ's will in calling the Twelve, which plays such a central role in *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, can take on theological meaningfulness. And here it is of note that Ratzinger, who places repeated emphasis on the significance of this call ("La Lettre *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*" 611, 612, 613), makes no attempt whatever to interpret this significance anthropologically, even while implying that it is precisely the anthropological reasons that make it meaningful rather than arbitrary (612).

and operations of the priesthood,⁴⁴ traditionally summed up as the threefold "office entrusted by Christ to his apostles of teaching, sanctifying, and governing the faithful."⁴⁵ However faithful to the magisterium, then, theologians may strive to be, they must, precisely as theologians, continue to ask: What is it in these priestly functions that requires that they be exercised by a man? What, that forbids them from being exercised by a woman?

Washington, D.C.

DENNIS MICHAEL FERRARA

⁴⁴ Ratzinger rightly rejects a "purely functional" and "pragmatic" view of the priesthood, insisting on its "Christological criterion," namely, the priest's self-renouncing service of and obedience to Christ, who was himself the archetype of service, washing the feet of the disciples and preaching not his own word but that of the Father ("La Lettre *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*" 614). However, not only does Ratzinger make no attempt to think this Christological criterion in terms of the duality of the sexes, his argument actually reinforces the apophatic-ministerial interpretation of the priesthood which I developed in my article on *in persona Christi*, and which concluded that precisely because of its ministerial essence, the priesthood transcends the sexual difference.

⁴⁵ *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* no. 1. In this opening sentence, Pope John Paul II himself invites us to think the relation between priesthood and the distinction of the sexes "functionally" or, as the scholastics would say, in terms of those fundamental operations that actuate and express the inner essence of priesthood.

MISSING PAST ISSUES OF THEOLOGICAL STUDIES?

*We have many back issues available to help you
complete your set. Order from:*

THEOLOGICAL STUDIES, INC.
Georgetown University
37th and O. Streets, N.W.
Washington, DC 20057, USA

Each issue prepaid:
In the U.S.: \$6.00 In the U.K.: £6 Elsewhere \$8.00*

* Payable by international money order or by check in U.S. dollars drawn
on a bank in the U.S.A.