

Responding to False Ideas About Ordination

Part 1: Female Priests

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Women, like men, are called to be holy, conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. At the same time, a woman can no more be ordained as Christian clergy than a man can become pregnant. Both serving as a priest and giving birth to God's little images are holy and essential, but they are not interchangeable. Each has a distinct ontology, a *special nature* of its own.

One part of the specific calling of the priesthood is that a priest serves as an icon of Jesus. His role involves being and acting *in persona Christi*, "in the Person of Christ" (language from 2 Cor. 2:10). He is vested in such a way as to reflect this. He speaks from this position and role. It is this sort of public proclamation that is in view in St. Paul's statement, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet" (1 Tim. 2:12). This is not *all* forms of speaking, but those where the speaking is *in persona Christi*. The Pauline Epistles show that women *were* speaking, with divine approval, as prophetesses. But about the ordained Offices Our Lord says, "He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me" (Lk. 10:16. Cf. John 20:21-23; Matt. 16:19). When the priest speaks the *Verba*, the Words consecrating the bread and wine and confecting the Eucharist, it is not the priest's own body and blood on the altar, but that of God incarnate. Jesus speaks through the mouth of the priest. This is one reason behind the Lord's prohibition of a woman speaking in a way designed to manifest His Presence.

Jesus as Bridegroom is represented by qualified men. Most men are excluded, too, on grounds of criteria in the Scriptures. The Church, collectively, is His Bride. A woman functioning as Bridegroom is disordered.

None of this has anything to do with the intrinsic worthiness, holiness, value, or capability of women. Numerous holy women throughout church history fill the ranks of saints of every type and description (and the most highly honored of all the saints is the Blessed Virgin Mary, Lk. 1:28, 42-43). Women who have the qualifications may, for example, be deaconesses, monastics, and theologians. **Deaconess** duties today cover a wide form of services, but originally were [A] "to go into the houses of the heathen where there are believing women, and to visit those who are sick, and to minister to them in that of which they have need, and to bathe those who have begun to

recover from sickness" (*Didascalia Apostolorum*, 16) and [B] to anoint with holy oil women being baptized, since those baptized in the early Church had a full body anointing with oil before entering the water. For modesty's sake a deaconess anointed women behind a screen. The *Didascalia*. says: "When women go down into the water, those who go down into the water ought to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing; and where there is no woman at hand, especially a deaconess, he who baptizes must of necessity anoint her who is being baptized. But where there is a woman, especially a deaconess, it is not fitting that women should be seen by men." Another early text, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, gives similar details. Also, there was the office of **widow**, though not *all* widows were part of this official group. For discussion of this consecrated office, see 1 Tim. 5:3-12; Titus 2:3-5; and then Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis* 9; Hermas, *Shepherd* 1:2; Chrysostom's Homily 31; and the ninth canon of Hippolytus. Such texts mention this order of ecclesiastical widows, at least sixty years old, who ministered to widows and orphans. Their experiential knowledge of the trials of the bereaved uniquely qualified them for such an office and for general supervision of their sex. Finally, there are **consecrated virgins** (dedicated to remaining so and serving the community in various ways).

Women have also been **teachers** of various kinds, including official theologians and even "Doctors of the Church" (Sts. Teresa of Ávila, Catherine of Siena, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Hildegard of Bingen). There have been **prophetesses**, both in the Old Testament (Abigail, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Sarah, Huldah, and Esther) and in the New Testament, (Anna in Luke 2 and Philip's four daughters in Acts 21:9), and **Judges** (or other civil rulers, like queens). Only roles as the icon of Jesus, or the Father and Holy Spirit (bishops and deacons) aren't possible.

None of the historic Churches ordain women. The reasons have nothing to do with the level of intelligence, spiritual capacity, or leadership skills of women, but rather with the acceptance of the Scriptures in their original sense, and the understanding of some roles as icons of Christ, the Bridegroom, Who relates to His Bride, the Church. Mary, the *Theotokos*, is an icon of the Church. The Church is "Mary written in large letters," and Mary is "the Church in miniature" (see Revelation 11-12, where "the Woman clothed with the sun" is *both* Mary and the Church). The Church cannot exist without holy women, but if we try to represent the Bridegroom by a woman, no matter how holy or intelligent she is, we take a serious step into errors which eventually corrode the Incarnation, ecclesiology, and the whole Faith.