

A Guide To My Essays About Women's Ordination



Several years ago now, my colleague the Rev. Dr. Martha Giltinan asked me to write some essays on women's ordination. I originally declined for the following reasons: (1) I am a man, and I thought that a woman should make this argument. (2) I am a lay person, and I thought that these essays should be written by someone who was ordained; (3) Women's ordination is not my main areas of theological interest. I have other projects I would rather pursue. (4) I wanted to encourage Martha to write more on this topic since it concerned her directly.

Martha responded by pointing out that I was the one who had the theological background in church history and systematic theology that she did not; she was not going to quit bugging me until I wrote something. I finally gave in, and began writing what I thought would be a short series of essays. It has taken me three years, and this series has turned into my second longest writing project (after my dissertation). Unfortunately, Martha became ill shortly after I began and did not live to see me finish this project.

The essays are now basically written, and the following outline provides a guide to the forest.

I dedicate these essays first to my dear friend the Rev. Dr. Martha Giltinan, a woman who lived out her vocation as a priest, who ministered to and was loved by literally thousands of people. No one who knew Martha was ever the same afterwards.

In addition, I dedicate these essays to the countless women students I have had the privilege of teaching in my time at Trinity School for Ministry. May these essays encourage you to follow your vocation, whether lay or ordained.

Introductory Essays

[1. Concerning the Ordination of Women: Preliminaries](#)

In the introduction to the series, I explain why I decided to write this series of essays on women's ordination. I identify three basic kinds of arguments against women's ordination: (1) Pragmatic non-theological arguments; (2) Protestant arguments based on authority of men over women and prohibitions against women leading or teaching men; (3) Catholic arguments based on sacramental theology: women can exercise authority and they can teach, but they cannot celebrate the sacraments because they do not resemble the male Jesus Christ.

[2. Non-theological Arguments Against the Ordination of Women](#)

Some objections to the ordination of women are not strictly theological, but are rather pragmatic *ad hoc* responses, for example: The ordination of women is part of a liberal secularist agenda; the ordination of women is no different from ordaining practicing homosexuals; no one has a "right" to be ordained.

[3. Concerning Women's Ordination: The Argument "From Tradition" is not the "Traditional" Argument](#)

The argument against the ordination of women based on an appeal to the “historic tradition” of the church fails insofar as it rejects the historic reason why women were not ordained. In this essay, I document the historic traditional argument against the ordination of women. The current arguments against women’s ordination – both Protestant and Catholic – are actually *new* arguments. In that sense, they are just as much innovations against tradition as is the argument in favor of women’s ordination.

Protestant Arguments

4. [Concerning Women’s Ordination: Hierarchy and Hermeneutics](#)

“Complementarianism” is the Protestant argument against the ordination of women based on a hierarchical understanding of the relationship between the sexes. Women cannot be ordained because women cannot preach, teach, or exercise authority over men. In this essay, I introduce some of the hermeneutical concerns that need to be addressed in discussing biblical texts that have been important to the issue of women’s ordination.

5. [Concerning Women’s Ordination: Beginning with Genesis](#)

What does the Old Testament teach about the equality of men and women? In this essay, I examine the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2, arguing that the theological basis for a non-hierarchical mutuality between men and women (egalitarianism) is found in the Genesis account of the creation of man and woman. I also examine the historical socio-economic causes of sexual inequality in ancient culture; modern gender role equality is an inevitable consequence of industrialization, but also poses challenges to a Christian theology of marriage and sexuality.

6. [Concerning Women’s Ordination: Disciples of Jesus](#)

Jesus’ relationship with his women disciples is crucial for

the church's contemporary understanding of the relationship between men and women. The notion of "Christological subversion" shows how Jesus challenged the honor culture of the ancient Mediterranean world. Jesus' call to servanthood discipleship is a reversal of the dominating hierarchical relationships introduced by the fall into sin, and a return to the mutuality intended by God in creation.

7. [Concerning Women's Ordination: Mutual Submission](#)

What does the apostle Paul teach about marriage and mutual subordination between husbands and wives in Ephesians 5? Paul's "cruciform" spirituality is the key to understanding how he transformed ancient Mediterranean "household codes" to teach a radically different Christian understanding of marriage.

8. [Concerning Women's Ordination: Women in Worship and "Headship"](#)

Paul's discussion of "head covering" and "headship" in 1 Corinthians 11 has been central to "complementarian" arguments for the subordination of women to men in worship. Was Paul actually teaching a hierarchical understanding of the relationship between men and women? Did "head" mean authority in Paul's world? I argue that there is nothing in Paul's discussion of worship in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 to suggest that he is advocating a subordination of women to men, or that would restrict the role of women in the worshiping assembly.

9. [Concerning Women's Ordination: Speaking and Teaching](#)

Two passages – 1 Cor. 14:34b-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 – are the "last resort" to which Protestant complementarians appeal to restrict women from teaching or speaking in the church. In this essay, I argue that Paul was not making a "timeless" injunction but was addressing particular problems in local settings.

Catholic Arguments

10. [Concerning Women's Ordination: A Presbyteria is not a "Priestess" \(Part 1: Old Testament Priesthood\)](#)

The argument against women "priestesses" objects to a position that nobody holds. Ordained Christian women would not be "priestesses," and the concern about "priestesses" is based on a modern mythology about ancient female "priestesses" who never existed. I also look at the Old Testament priesthood and the likely reason that there were no women Levitical priests in the OT period.

11. [Concerning Women's Ordination: Women's Ordination and the Priesthood of Christ \(Biblical and Patristic Background\)](#)

This essay examines the biblical and historical background to the notion of sacramental priesthood. What is the modern Catholic liturgical and sacramental objection to the ordination of women and when did it first appear? What is the relationship between the priesthood of Jesus Christ and the priesthood of ordained clergy? When and why did clergy first become designated as "priests"? What implications might that have for the modern Catholic objection to the ordination of women?

12. [Concerning Women's Ordination: Women's Ordination and the Priesthood of Christ \(in persona Christi\)](#)

In this essay, I address the definitive modern (and definitely not traditional) Catholic argument against the ordination of women – that woman cannot be ordained because the eucharistic minister acts "in the person of Christ" (*in persona Christi*), and so must be a male in order to resemble a male Christ.

13. [Concerning Women's Ordination: The Argument From Symbolism Part 1 \(God, Christ, Apostles\)](#)

Although officially rejected by the hierarchy of the Roman

Catholic Church, a secondary argument based on the symbolism of sexuality is often appealed to by Catholic opponents of women's ordination: That God is portrayed as male in the Bible, that Christ was male, and that the apostles were all males confirms the normativity of a male-female symbolism. In this essay, I address the theological implications of the masculine portrayal of God in the Bible, of Jesus Christ as a male human being, of the apostles as males.

14. [Concerning Women's Ordination: The Argument From Symbolism \(Part 2: Transcendence, Immanence and Sexual Typology\)](#)

This essay concludes the discussion of Catholic (not only Roman Catholic, but also Orthodox and Anglo-Catholic) arguments against women's ordination based on symbolism by addressing binary contrasts between the masculine as transcendent, external and active, and the female as immanent, internal, and receptive, with a corrective based on trinitarian personalism. Transcendence and immanent are not characteristics of male and female gender, but of all persons.

The Ministry of Women in the New Testament

15. [Concerning Women's Ordination: Women's Ministry in the New Testament \(Office\)](#)

Did women exercise ministerial office in the New Testament church?

16. [Concerning Women's Ordination: Women's Ministry in the New Testament \(Bishops, Presbyters, Deacons\) or a Presbytera is not a "Priestess" \(Part 2\)](#)

How does the New Testament address the question of female bishops or presbyters? What are the contemporary hermeneutical implications of what the New Testament says about women in office?

Conclusion

17. [Conclusion](#)

I present a quick summary and critique of the Protestant and Catholic arguments against women's ordination, and provide a positive argument for a non-gendered account of ordination to church office.

Supplementary Essays

[Objections to My Essays on Women's Ordination](#)

Just what it says. This was in response to a blog post that criticized my very first essay on "Preliminaries."

[I Get Mail: Concerning Women's Ordination and Church Tradition](#)

This is in response to a blog post comment to my claim that the historical reasons for opposition to women's ordination were based on assumptions of ontological inferiority. The writer claimed to have examined the tradition to prove that I was wrong. I was grateful that he appealed to Epiphanius (whom he called Emphiphanius); this prompted me to revise my original essay "The Argument from Tradition is not the Traditional Argument" to include a discussion of Epiphanius. And, yes, Epiphanius also says that women are inferior.

[I Don't Get Mail or Anticipatory Responses to My In Persona Christi Argument](#)

This is actually in response to some criticisms that were made on a blog post a number of years ago in which a number of Catholic (including Orthodox and Anglo-Catholic) writers responded triumphantly to a few remarks I made on another blog concerning the modern Roman Catholic opposition to the ordination of women based on the necessity of a male priest to resemble a male Christ. I eventually expanded those few remarks in my essay "Women's Ordination and the Priesthood of Christ (In Persona Christi)." Assuming, however, that some may raise the same kinds of objections again, here is my

response.