

Concerning Women's Ordination: What about Bonaventure?

In a comment on the essay by myself and Bishop Grant LeMarquand, "Women in Holy Orders," someone named Stanislaw referred me to an essay by Sarah Coakley, entitled "In Persona Christi": Gender, Priesthood and the Nuptial Metaphor":

"I was wondering what would you make of Bonaventure's argument that the priest must be male. Sarah Coakley in her "In Persona Christi. Gender, Priesthood and the Nuptial Metaphor" paper (p. 149, pdf available [here](#);) refers to this argument when she discusses Sarah Butler's approach."

My response was too long to put in a comment.

Stanislaw,

I apologize that it has taken me so long to get back to you. Your comment came in the midst of end of the semester paper grading.



Thank you for bringing my attention to this essay by Sarah Coakley as well as the debate between Dennis Ferrar and Sara

Butler. I had not been aware of either the Coakley essay or the debate. However, I do own a copy of Sara Butler's *The Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Teaching of the Church* (Hillebrand Books, 2007), which I consider to be the definitive defense of what I have called the "new" Roman Catholic argument against the ordination of women. Butler makes one reference to Bonaventure in this book, which I had marked, but missed when I went back to write what became the chapter in my book on the topic of the representative role of Christ as acting *in persona Christi*. Her entire discussion is only a paragraph, which is likely why I missed it on a second reading.

Butler writes:

"The Scholastic theologians explained the impossibility of admitting women to the priesthood on the basis of sacramental signification, but *they did not relate this explicitly to the representation of Christ as a male*. In fact, *Saint Thomas did not do so*" (my emphasis). The reference to Bonaventure comes in two sentences at the end of the paragraph, followed by a quotation:

The declaration follows instead Saint Bonaventure, who argued that priestly ordination is reserved to men because only a man can be the sign of Christ, who is male. According to Bonaventure,

"In this sacrament the ordained person is the sign of Christ the Mediator; since the Mediator belongs only to the male sex, he can only be represented by the male sex; therefore, the capacity for receiving Orders belongs only to males who alone can represent him by nature and, having received the character, can effectively bear the sign [of Christ]." (pp. 81-82)

That is the sole reference to Bonaventure's position in the entire book. However, the footnote citation is revealing. I

quote it in full: “St. Bonaventure, In IV sent. d. 25, a.2, q.1, conclusion. Any appeal to Bonaventure must be a ‘critical retrieval,’ because his line of argument is not free of ideas *prejudicial to women* (my emphasis). Bonaventure also notes the objection that a woman cannot be advanced to the episcopate because she is not ‘the bridegroom of the Church.’” (note, p. 82)

A passage in the Vatican Declaration *Inter Insigniores* states:

The same conviction [that women cannot be ordained] animates medieval theology⁹, even if the Scholastic doctors, in their desire to clarify by reason the data of faith, often present arguments on this point that modern thought would have difficulty in admitting, or would even rightly reject. Since that period and up till our own time, it can be said that the question has not been raised again for the practice has enjoyed peaceful and universal acceptance.

Footnote 9 to the above in *Inter Insigniores* cites the Bonaventure reference, although no explicit references appear to Bonaventure’s position anywhere in the document.

So I apologize for not having previously noted the Bonaventure citation, but beg the excuse that it is only a footnote in *Inter Insigniores*, and Butler allows it only a paragraph in her book.

A few brief observations follow.

1) I had stated in “Women in Holy Orders” (I wrote this part):

In light of the above, three things should be noted about traditional opposition to the ordination of women: (1) The opposition is grounded in an ontological incapacity: women can not be ordained because they are considered to be less intelligent than men, emotionally unstable, and subject to temptation; (2) This restriction was not only a restriction

against women's ordination, but against any activity in which women would have had authority over men. In accordance with traditional pre-industrial divisions of labor, the roles of women were confined to the domestic sphere, while men worked in the public sphere; (3) Opposition was rooted primarily in issues of competence, and of lack of authority following from lack of competence, not sacramental theology. There are no traditional arguments against the ordination of women based on the inability of women to represent a male Christ when presiding at the Eucharist.

In light of this single citation from Bonaventure, I willingly concede that the last sentence was too strong. There is a single paragraph in Bonaventure's *Commentary on the Sentences* that claims that women cannot be ordained because of an inability to represent a male Christ. At the same time, it needs to be emphasized that this seems to be a single paragraph in the entire history of Western theology prior to the modern period. *Inter Insigniores* itself mentions Bonaventure only in a footnote, and even Butler mentions him only in a single paragraph. (If there are other authors who make the same claim, Butler does not cite them, which I find significant.)

It would be misleading then to suggest that this single paragraph represents the "tradition" of the church. I would rather say (as I wrote of Luther's own position concerning the equality of women before the fall into sin) that Bonaventure seems to be a single exception to an entire tradition. Bonaventure may have anticipated a position that would be adopted as the definitive Roman Catholic position several hundred years later in the twentieth century, but this single quotation would seem to be a kind of single lonely outlier of things to come.

2) As my citations show, there is a single historic reason for opposition to women's ordination in the history of the church

rooted in ontological equality. Although one has to read carefully to notice it, this is acknowledged (rather grudgingly) both by Butler and by *Inter Insigniores*. Butler states that the “Scholastic theologians . . . did not all relate this [impossibility of ordaining women] to the representation of Christ as a male” (81). Elsewhere she writes concerning Aquinas’s position: “Many Catholic theologians relied on the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas. . . . Because the contemporary magisterium has abandoned the view that women are unilaterally subject to men, it obviously does not supply this as the reason women cannot be priests” (47). And, as is clear from above, *Inter Insigniores* itself states that the “Scholastic doctors . . . present arguments . . .” that we would “rightly reject.”

3) Even the single citation from Bonaventure himself is only partially helpful for the Roman Catholic position because, in the end, Bonaventure still affirms the traditional reason. As Butler acknowledges in her footnote, any appeal to Bonaventure must be a “critical retrieval,” because he is “not free of ideas prejudicial to women.”

Butler’s appeal to Bonaventure here is similar to her appeal to the earlier Epiphanius of Salamis., whom she cites as “arguably the most important piece of patristic testimony” (61-63). Like Bonaventure, however, Epiphanius is of mixed value. Butler does not mention that Epiphanius states: “Women are unstable, prone to error, and mean-spirited.”

4) What about the Sarah Coakley essay? Coakley rightly points to a certain incoherence in Butler’s position:

Butler has to admit a certain defeat where the limit of Thomas’s arguments are concerned . . . [S]he has to acknowledge her modern disavowal of the faulty biological argument that finally undergirds Thomas’s rejection of the ordination of women; women are not naturally subordinate to men Butler helpfully clarifies that there is an

apparent sleight of hand in Inter Insigniores in suggesting – albeit briefly – that it is Thomas who makes the argument for the necessary likeness to Christ in the priest’s male visage. On the contrary, . . . the fittingness of the male representation in Thomas resides in the man’s supposed natural superiority tout court . . . not in his physiological impression; it is a strand in Bonaventure’s sacramental theology that is being drawn upon here. (149)

Indeed, but as noted above, Butler acknowledges in a footnote that Bonaventure also affirms male “natural superiority.”

In the rest of the essay, Coakley refers to the influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s symbolic theology of male and female that has come to buttress some recent Roman Catholic developments. (I have addressed this elsewhere.) However, Balthasar’s symbolic gender theology is not helpful for Butler because she insists that “The Magisterium’s Judgment Is Not Based on a Theory of Christian Anthropology” (Butler, 46).

In the rest of the essay, Coakley argues that women can be ordained because the priest acts both *in persona ecclesiae* (in the person of the church) as well as *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ). The same claim has been made by the Roman Catholic theologian Edward J. Kilmartin, S.J., as well as Orthodox theologians Kallistos Ware and Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, and I have followed them. Coakley goes on to argue for a “proto-erotic” theology of the Eucharist, and what seems to be a kind of gender fluidity for the celebrant. This seems to be an anticipation of the argument in her books *God, Sexuality, and the Self* and *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God*, which I confess that I do not find helpful. I agree with Jewish writer Tikva Frymer-Kensky that one of the distinctives of the biblical doctrine of God is that God is not eroticized.

Coakley also agrees with the Roman Catholic doctrine of

priesthood that “the crucial role of the priest [is] as *medius* between the divine and the human” (152). But, again, this strikes me as wrong-headed. It is the distinctive role of Jesus Christ (the Word Incarnate) to be the sole mediator between God and humanity. Ordained clergy do not have such a mediatory role; the priest is not an *alter Christus*. Rather, the function of the priest is one of abnegation. As representative of the church (acting *in persona ecclesiae*), the ordained presbyter points away from him or herself and his or her own capabilities to the finished work of Christ, who alone is the one mediator between God and humanity.