

I Don't Get Mail or Anticipatory Responses to My In Persona Christi Argument

The following is a response to some (not recent) criticisms of my argument against the "Catholic" position that women cannot be ordained because only a male priest can represent Christ. To get to my actual response, you'll need to read past the list of argumentative propositions.



In the most recent [post](#) in my series on women's ordination, I addressed the definitive *new* Catholic argument against women's ordination, which can be summarized as follows:

If

(a) the priest represents Christ in celebrating the eucharist (acts *in persona Christi*),

then

(b) the priest must be male

because

(c) Jesus Christ is male

and

(d) only a male priest can represent a male Christ.

Or, conversely

(di) a woman priest cannot represent a male Christ.

However

(ai) the priest does represent Christ in celebrating the eucharist (acts *in persona Christi*);

Therefore

(dii) a woman cannot be a priest.

Note that in order for the argument to work, each one of the above propositions must be true. However:

If

(a) it is not the case that a priest *exclusively or necessarily* represents Christ in celebrating the eucharist

or

(d) it is not the case that only a male priest can represent Jesus Christ

because

(c) what is important in representing Christ is something besides his masculinity;

then

(dii) it does not follow that a woman cannot be a priest.

My response to the new Catholic argument can be summarized as follows:

(a) the priest does not necessarily or at least exclusively represent Christ in celebrating the eucharist

because

(ai) on the Eastern model (which has increasingly been adopted in recent ecumenical discussion and revised eucharistic rites), the priest represents the church and so acts *in persona ecclesiae*.

However if

(ai) the priest represents the church

then either

(b) the priest must be female

because

(c) as the bride of Christ, the church is feminine

and

(d) only a female priest can represent the female bride of Christ;

Or, conversely

(di) a male priest cannot represent a female church.

Alternatively, if

(di) it is possible for a male priest to represent the female bride of Christ

then

(dii) it must be equally possible for a female priest to represent a male Christ

because

(ci) what is important about representing either Christ or the church must be something besides the sexual identity of the priest

or else

(di) is false.

Or, if sexual identity is still crucial, then

(diii) both men and women should be ordained

because,

(div) insofar as the priest represents both Christ and the church, men best represent the male Christ and women best represent the female bride of Christ.

As the argument stands, it is valid. The only way to refute it is to deny one of the premises; so, if it is the case that only a male priest can represent a male Christ, then, it follows just as inevitably that only a female priest can represent a female church. Conversely, if it is possible for a male priest to represent a female church, then it follows just as inevitably that it is possible for a female priest to represent a male Christ. What would not be logically consistent would be to argue that (1) only a male priest can represent a male Christ because *there must be a gender correspondence between represented and representer*; nonetheless, (2) a male priest can also represent a female bride of Christ even though the priest is *not* female, (and (1) should imply that a male priest should not be able to represent a female church because there is no gender correspondence between represented and representer); (3) nonetheless, a female priest cannot represent a male Christ, again, because she is *not* male (no gender correspondence); but (4) neither can a female priest represent the female bride of Christ *even though* she is a female (and a female priest should be able to represent a female church because there *is* gender correspondence between represented and representer).

Once grant that the priest represents the [female] church (acts *in persona ecclesiae*), either exclusively, or in

addition to representing the [male] Christ (the priest acts both *in persona Christi* and *in persona ecclesiae*), and the argument from gender necessarily collapses. One cannot have it both ways. If a female priest *cannot* represent a male Christ, then a male priest *cannot* represent a female church. If a male priest *can* represent a female church, then a female priest *can* represent a male Christ. If a male priest can represent a male Christ, then a female priest can represent a female bride of Christ. If it is necessary to have male priests to represent a male Christ, then it should be just as necessary to have female priests to represent a female church.

I presented this argument in a condensed form a number of years ago, as a side comment on an internet blog discussion. I was not aware that the argument was immediately pounced on and created an intense internet discussion on [another blog](#). As the respondent stated: "An entire forum of learned theologians have answered one person's questions . . ." (Certainly what I wrote must have touched a nerve!) However, since I was not informed about the discussion I obviously could not respond. I only found out about the discussion recently. As this discussion has already been [linked](#) to recently as the definitive response to my argument, I would imagine that these counter-arguments might appear again. What follows is therefore my response to actual objections that have been raised to my argument. What strikes me most about the counter-arguments is that they consistently fail to address the actual argument I raised. (I have arranged the responses in a more or less logical order rather than the actual order on the blog).

The first response is to deny (ai):

1) *Nowhere in the tradition that I'm aware of is the priest said to act "in persona ecclesiae." To say that he does shows already that we have lost the full sense of persona – we have turned it into a functional role, or a legalism. . . . The priest does not act in persona ecclesiae, because he does not represent, iconically, in his personal and therefore sexed*

humanity, the figure of the Bride of Christ, the mystical body which is the Church. He speaks pro ecclesia, on behalf of the Church, as a delegate or ambassador of the church appealing to the Father on her behalf.

The above is simply mistaken, as I document in my [essay](#). The historic Eastern understanding is that the priest does indeed represent the church. As Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware writes: "In the medieval West, as in most Roman Catholic thinking today, the priest is understood as acting *in persona Christi*. [When the priest says the words of institution,] he speaks these words as if he were himself Christ; or rather, at this moment Christ himself is understood to be speaking these words through the priest." In contrast, in the Byzantine rite, throughout the eucharistic prayer, "the celebrant speaks not *in persona Christi* but *in persona ecclesiae*, as the representative not of Christ, but of the Church."

Indeed, my [earlier essay](#) shows that the patristic church seems to have understood the priest to be acting only *in persona ecclesiae*. Thomas Aquinas seems to have been the first to have formulated the understanding that, when he recites the words of institution, the priest is acting *in persona Christi*. The Eastern position that the priest acts *in persona ecclesiae* is the historic position, and the Western *in persona Christi* is actually the innovation. Moreover, the argument that the priest represents Christ in his "sexed humanity," is an even more recent innovation – appearing no earlier than Paul VI's *Inter Insigniores*. Aquinas certainly did not say that! It is, in fact, this new argument first appearing in opposition to the ordination of women, that has sexualized the role of the priest by insisting that in celebrating *in persona Christi*, the priest "represents, iconically, the priest in his personal and therefore sexed humanity." If the Orthodox never did this in reference to the church as the bride of Christ, it is because no one ever did this – whether in the East or the West! It is the modern argument in opposition to the

ordination of women that has, for the first time, claimed that the priest represents Christ in his "sexed humanity."

And, of course, if the notion that the priest acts *in persona ecclesiae*, makes the priest's role "functional," a "legalism," then (as Edward Kilmartin argues) the notion that the priest acts *in persona Christi* turns the priest's role into that of enacting a drama, of playing the part of Jesus at the last supper. Of course, neither of these is what actually happens in the eucharistic prayer, which is a prayer, not a drama, addressed by the priest to the Father, as a representative of, or on behalf of the church (*in persona ecclesiae*).

One writer thinks that the solution is to quibble over dates, and to challenge the notion of a "moment of consecration":

2) *The Eastern Christian argument that the epiclesis is the decisive moment of consecration is relatively new, dating to the counter-reformation, and represents nothing except a reflexive mirroring of the Latin position regarding the Institution the Orthodox Church. Modern liturgical theology has recovered the patristic view that the entire anaphora is a consecratory prayer, in which it is impossible to point to a single consecratory moment (in fact, the oldest liturgies lack either an explicit Institution, or an explicit Epiclesis, or both).*

Actually, as I show in my essay, the disagreement seems to have arisen first in the fourteenth century, not "dating to the counter-reformation." Moreover, it was not the Orthodox who were reflexively "mirroring . . . the Latin position," since it was the Western theologians who originally raised objections to the presence of the *epiclesis*. I am all in favor of the view that the "entire anaphora is a consecratory prayer, in which it is impossible to point to a single consecratory moment." (This is at the heart of Kilmartin's argument.) But such a concession rather takes the wind out of the argument that the priest must be male because he acts *in*

persona Christi. The *in persona Christi* argument necessarily presumes that it is when the priest recites the words of institution that he represents Christ. If we acknowledge that the "entire anaphora" is consecratory, then we also need to acknowledge (as Behr-Siegel, Ware and Kilmartin point out) that the "entire anaphora" is a prayer, that the priest prays the entire prayer as a representative of the church ("we," "us"), and thus acts *in persona ecclesiae*. But again, the church (as the bride of Christ) on whose behalf the priest addresses the prayer, is symbolically female.

Another writer thinks that the problem is solved if one views the Eastern and Western positions as complementary rather than antagonistic:

(4) The differences between Eastern and Western traditions on Eucharistic theology are matters of emphasis and are not mutually exclusive. . . . Differences over the formulation of transubstantiation notwithstanding, both systems are recognized by both East and West as valid. Furthermore, they are essentially differences of emphasis. Can not a priest function both in persona christi and in persona ecclesiae, [one at the] epiclesis and the [other at the] consecration?

Well, yes, but this rather makes than refutes my point. If a priest can function both *in persona Christi*, and *in persona ecclesiae*, then the argument that a priest must be male because only a male priest can represent Christ turns on itself. If a male priest can function *in persona ecclesiae*, thus representing the church as the [female] bride of Christ, then the argument from sexual identity collapses. If it is possible for a male priest to represent the female church, then it is equally possible for a female priest to represent a male Christ. If a male priest can function both *in persona Christi* and *in persona ecclesiae*, then a female priest can function both *in persona ecclesiae* and *in persona Christi*.

Similarly, another writer presumes that my point is to deny

that the priest represents Christ:

(5) *There are two poor assumptions that Witt makes here:*

1. *That any shift in emphasis on the part of the West from the words of institution toward epiclesis implies a shift from in persona christi toward in persona ecclesiae. While Rome's system links the two issues, the East does not.*

2. *If a shift toward an emphasis on in persona ecclesia is occurring at all officially (and I haven't seen evidence for that), it is not in any case a denial of in persona christi, as these are complementary conceptions, not mutually exclusive ones.*

However, nothing in my argument presumes a denial of the priest acting *in persona Christi*. All that is necessary for my argument is the denial that there is an inherent connection between Christ's sexuality as male and the priest's sexual identity. If (as the writer concedes) *in persona Christi* and *in persona ecclesiae* are complementary, then the same priest can represent both a male Christ and a female church. If sexual identity is definitive for one, then it must be definitive for the other; however, if it is conceded that sexual identity is not definitive for one – and this must be the case if a male priest can act *in persona ecclesiae* – then it is begging the question to assert that it must be definitive for the other. Again, if a male priest can represent both a male Christ and the church as the female bride of Christ, then certainly a female priest can represent both the church as the female bride of Christ and the male Christ. What's good for the gander is good for the goose as well.

Other arguments get further and further afield to the point where they are really addressing arguments I never made.

One writer agrees that the priest does represent both Christ and the congregation, but misses the point that the Catholic

argument rests on the specific point that the male priest represents a male Christ during the eucharistic prayer, to argue instead the *different* position that only males can represent humanity in general.

(6) [T]he reply re: women priests is simple—at times in the eucharist, the priest does indeed represent the church; he is a member of the congregation, speaking for us. But at other times, he specifically represents Christ, as Christ in the incarnation represents all of humanity, which requires that he be male. See Romans 5. Anyone, male or female, can represent Christ—but only men can represent Christ *as he represents all of humanity to the Father*. Otherwise Genesis and St Paul make no sense, and we are reduced to a gnostic conception of human nature in which sex (or gender if you prefer) is of no ultimate significance. Or to put it another way: in the eucharist, the priest stands in persona Christi totius humanitatis repraesentantis, something that encompasses both in persona Christi and in persona ecclesiae. The incarnation requires no less—otherwise Genesis 2, Romans 5 and I Cor 11 make no sense.

My initial point is conceded – the priest (when celebrating the eucharist) represents both Christ and the Church – which, of course, undoes the whole point of the *in persona Christi* argument. However, the crucial argument here turns on a matter of biblical exegesis. According to the writer, only a man can represent Christ as he “represents all of humanity to the Father,” and the appeal is made to Genesis 2, Rom. 5, and 1 Cor. 11. I have already dealt with [Genesis 2](#) and [1 Cor. 11](#) in previous essays. The writer seems to be presuming that the point of Genesis 2 and Romans 5 is that Adam represents all of humanity because he is male. As I pointed out in my essay on Genesis 2, this is a misreading of the text. The Hebrew “*ha’adam*” simply means “human being,” not “male human being.” The Hebrew word for “male human being” (‘*is*) does not even appear until the woman (‘*issa*) is introduced on the scene, and

the point of the passage is to emphasize the commonality and equality of male and female, not to emphasize the male's representation of the female. The woman is the man's equal companion (*'ezer kenegdo*), the one whose role is to be called alongside of and to be a help and be a companion for the man. Nothing in the passage suggests that the man has a representative role because of his male sexuality.

Similarly, Romans 5 says nothing about a representative function of either Adam or Christ as male. The Greek word translated "man" (v. 12, 17) in older translations is not *aner* (male human being), but *anthropos* (generic human being). *Anthropos* is used to describe both Adam and Christ. The important thing about Adam is that he was the human being (*anthropos*), who introduced sin and condemnation into the world; the important thing about Christ is that he is the human being (*anthropos*), who brought grace and justification into the world. The passage does not say that human beings sinned "in Adam" as the Vulgate mistakenly translated the passage, but that they sinned because of (*eph ho*) Adam. Again, nothing in the passage suggests that either Adam or Christ have representative roles because of their male sexuality.

As I wrote [elsewhere](#):

The argument seems to miss the point of how typology functions in Paul's writings. Paul is quite capable of using female types to make a point. So, for example, in Galatians 4, Paul uses the female figures of Hagar and Sarah as types representing the two covenants of Sinai, the old covenant ("present Jerusalem") and the new covenant ("Jerusalem above"). Nothing in the typology suggests that either Hagar or Sarah are "representative" because of their sex.

Similarly, nothing in the Adam/Christ typology suggests that Adam is "representative" because of his gender. Rather, it makes sense that in making a typological comparison pointing to Jesus Christ, Paul would have used the male figure of Adam

to pre-figure Jesus, since Jesus was himself a male. Moreover, it also makes sense to draw a parallel between Adam (whose name "Adam" means "human being") as the first human being through whom sin originated, and Jesus Christ as the new creation of God (the second Adam or human being) through whom sin is destroyed.

But it is certainly possible to use the figure of Eve in a similar way; in the second century, Irenaeus drew a similar typological parallel between Eve and the virgin Mary as the second Eve. As Eve brought sin into the world through disobedience and lack of faith, so Mary was instrumental in bringing salvation through obedience and faith.

Finally, the point of the reference to the man being "head" of the woman in 1 Corinthians 5 is neither about authority, nor representation. The point of the passage has to do with interdependence between men and women. The man is "head" in the sense that he is the "source" of the woman's origin; she came *from* the man in the Genesis story of creation. Nevertheless, men and women are interdependent now because every man is born of a woman (every man comes *from* a woman), and all human beings are dependent on God, through whom all things come.

Genesis 2, Rom 5, and 1 Cor. 11 make perfect sense without being used to beg the same question twice. A poor argument that a male priest must represent a male Christ does not become stronger by appealing to equally poor exegesis about the representative role of the male sex.

But the historic Catholic position (whether Eastern or Western) was never that Christ has a representative role because of his sexuality. As Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware has written: "What matters for [the church fathers] is not the fact that he became male (άνήρ, vir) but the fact that he became human (άνθρωπος, homo)."

The last few objections do not even pretend to address the original argument. Since I mentioned the Orthodox position, some seemed to think that no one would notice if they talked about the Orthodox instead of the argument:

(7) For the Orthodox, as a practical matter, the ordination of women is such a fundamental violation of Tradition as to end any possibility of communion.

The preface by Metropolitan Anthony Bloom (which I cite in my most recent essay) addresses this: "The Orthodox, and Roman Catholics, too, must rethink the problem of women in the light of the Scriptures. They must not make hasty statements about her being and work in the work of salvation to which God has called us to be witnesses."

Kallistos Ware writes: "What I would plead is that we Orthodox should regard the matter as essentially an open question."

(8) ...I think Witt is mistaken about the East copying the West's position of in persona Christi when in fact the Eastern position of the multi-dimensional theology of icons is at the basis of their argument that we find in the writings of many early eastern Fathers particularly St. John of Damascus. I think he's blowing smoke here!

Quoting Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware again:

"How hard it is for us Orthodox to speak with our own true voice! . . . all too often we have borrowed our theological categories from the West, sometimes using Roman Catholic arguments (especially when opposing Protestantism), and sometimes using Protestant arguments (especially when opposing Roman Catholicism). Orthodox opponents of the ordination of women have often relied, for example, on the papal statement concerning women and the priesthood *Inter Insigniores* . . . without enquiring how far the conception of priesthood assumed in this document in fact corresponds to the Orthodox understanding."

(9) Witt can go on all he wants about in persona Christi as a "western" idea, but the Orthodox have always laid great stress on the priest as the icon of Christ.

In an earlier essay, Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware did indeed write:

"The priest is an icon of Christ; and since the incarnate Christ became not only man but a male – since, furthermore, in the order of nature the roles of male and female are not interchangeable – it is necessary that the priest should be male."

But more recently:

"At this crucial moment [the *epiclesis*] as throughout the eucharistic prayer, he is not Christ's vicar or icon, but – in union with the people – he stands as a supplicant before God," and "At the most important of all priestly acts, then, the recitation of the eucharistic *anaphora*, according to the Orthodox understanding the celebrant does not serve as an icon of Christ."

Someone else thought it would be a good idea to talk about the Montanists:

(10) This is all speculation, of course, but what is not speculation, but fact, is that these "presbytides" appear to have existed only in that heartland of Montanism.

Okay, and my argument appeals to historical precedent – Montanist or otherwise – where? My argument is not that women *have* been ordained, but that there is no good reason that they should not be.

Then there's Mary:

12) Mary is a metaphor; she stands in loco ecclesiae. A priest is Christ in the eucharistic celebration as the elements are His body and blood; he (and they) are in persona Christi.

Mary does not represent, iconically, the Church, in the same way that the priest at Mass.

The above is a classic example of *petitio principii*. It is simply a statement of the historic Western Catholic position that the priest acts *in persona Christi* as if that in itself were an argument. But I have never denied that. To the contrary, my argument is based on the assumption that this is the Western position (at least since Aquinas), and I appealed to the example of the virgin Mary not once. However, regardless of what Western Catholics say about Mary, the Orthodox church historically has said that the priest does indeed act *in persona ecclesiae* – which is *not* the Western position!

Someone thought it would be a good idea to introduce an issue that I have already addressed in an essay on [“non-theological” objections to women’s ordination](#) – that exclusively male ordination is not *really* discriminatory, at least not in a bad sense:

11) But even in the calling of SOME people to the ordained ministry, we have discrimination: drawing a line between some people who are called, and some people who are not. The offense then is not the discrimination but the criterion.

In that previous essay, I wrote: “To the best of my knowledge, the prohibition against the ordination of women is the only case in which the church discriminates against a particular class of people solely because they belong to that class. Women are not discriminated against because of an incapacity. Women can preach. They can provide pastoral leadership. There is nothing either in an incapacity to inform intentions or inherent physical limitations that would prevent them from celebrating the sacraments. The presumption against women’s ordination is not then based on a moral disqualification or physical impairment. It is a discrimination against women as a class simply because they belong to the class.”

And, of course, as I document in [another essay](#), the historic reason for refusing to ordain women was indeed discriminatory in a “bad sense” – because women were inherently less intelligent, more emotional, and more subject to temptation than men. The *in persona Christi* argument is a new *ad hoc* argument to continue to justify a discrimination that can no longer be justified for the historic reasons.

There was one last attempt to make the case by using something like a theological argument, by shifting the grounds to the theology of eucharistic sacrifice:

13) Witt performs a slight of hand by making all his Eucharistic references to meal rather than to sacrifice. This is a convenient way to avoid all sacerdotal arguments against WO. The “Holy Table” is in both East and West an altar of sacrifice. . . . No, they do not merely preside (stand over) at Eucharist, but they are priests of the sacrifice of Calvary who offer this sacrifice to God. . . . Thus, we have to look at the priestly antecedents of Christ, the apostles and their successors. These would be the Levitical priesthood of the Temple.

This is indeed a *different* argument. The *in persona Christi* argument does not say that a woman cannot be a priest because women cannot offer sacrifice, but because women cannot represent a male Christ.

I have addressed issues of eucharistic sacrifice in other essays.

First, as I point out in my essay on [“priesthood and sacrifice,”](#) the church fathers say very little about eucharistic sacrifice: “What is missing from the writings of the church fathers is any detailed discussion of this relationship between Christ’s priesthood and the priesthood of the ordained clergy. There is one passage (in Cyprian) that has been appealed to as an early example of an *in persona*

Christi theology of ordained ministry, but this is almost certainly a misreading. There is no warrant in the writings of the church fathers for the claim that the church should exclude women from ordination because the priest represents Christ, and only a male can represent Christ.”

Second, Augustine brings the new item to the discussion that it is the risen Jesus Christ who is the central actor in the sacraments. It is Jesus Christ who is the priest who offers his once-and-for-all sacrifice. The ordained priest offers no sacrifice of his or her own.

Third, the church fathers, later theologians like Thomas Aquinas, and modern ecumenical discussion make clear that [the eucharistic sacrifice is not another sacrifice](#), but simply the church’s *anamnesis* and re-presentation of the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ. It is neither a repetition nor a new sacrifice. The ordained presbyter is a “priest” only in the sense that he (or she!) is pointing away from him- or herself and re-presenting Christ’s once-and-for-all sacrifice. As several of the theologians I have considered in my most recent essay insist, the priest is not “another Christ” (*alter Christi*). Moreover, as Aquinas makes clear, the *character* that makes priestly ordination possible is the *same* character that makes all worship possible; all the baptized receive this character, and *equally* share in Christ’s priesthood.

Fourth, the New Testament model for priesthood is not that of the Old Testament Levitical priesthood, but that of the epistle to the Hebrews. The Levitical priests were male, but they were also necessarily Jewish, descendents of Aaron, and had to be always ritually pure. As I have argued [elsewhere](#), Levitical priesthood would have been impossible for women primarily because of issues concerning ritual purity. However, Christ’s priesthood has effectively done away with issues concerning ritual “cleanness” and “uncleanness.” Ordained Christian ministers do not have to be male for the same reason that they are not forbidden to eat pork or shellfish.

Some complained that my argument was “novel.”

13) *Witt has invented a novelty with his idea of in persona ecclesiae. There is nothing about this in the Tradition, and even so there would be no reason to connect it to the modern (equal and opposite reaction) of making the Epiiclesis the central part of the Liturgy.*

The bad news for William Witt is that the old argument still holds.

Well, yes. My argument is necessarily novel because I am addressing a *new* argument against the ordination of women. No one argued that a woman could not be ordained because only a male priest could act *in persona Christi* until Paul VI's *Inter Insigniores*. All subsequent appeals to the necessity of a male priest acting *in persona Christi* echo *this* argument. It would be more honest to say about the *in persona Christi* argument against women's ordination: “There is nothing about *this* in the Tradition!” As I have documented [elsewhere](#), the historic argument against women's ordination is that women are ontologically inferior – and no one is arguing that now. So, no. The “old argument” does not still hold. The *new* argument, which did not exist until Paul VI came up with it, necessitates a “novel” response, because, by definition, any response to a new argument will be novel – which I have provided.

Finally, there was the almost obligatory *ad hominem* attack.

14) *I was informed of a comment . . . the theology and history of the comment having no merit, and exemplifying the kind of sophistry that makes banality seem profound. Unfortunately, like the famous El Greco Fallacy, the comment has the danger of creating an idea that will catch on unless it is nipped in the bud. Therefore, not to pick on a man who flew too close to the Sun, but simply to prevent a dangerous bit of Gnostic “reasoning” from catching on, I post here the comment and some*

very good responses that refute it well . . .

I don't know if I appreciate more being called a "sophist," a "gnostic," "banal" or "dangerous," or having it pointed out that my argument has "no merit." (Really? No merit whatsoever, not even as a kind of "sophistic," "gnostic," "banal," "dangerous," pretense of an argument?) I do admire the creativity of suggesting that I "fly too close to the sun." The reader can decide about the quality of my "reasoning" by reading my own responses to the above "good responses" that have refuted me so "well."