

Concerning Women's Ordination: Aquinas and the "Tradition Challenge"



Of all of the essays I have written on the topic of women's ordination, the one that has received the most negative feedback has been the one entitled "[Concerning Women's Ordination: The Argument 'From Tradition' is not the 'Traditional' Argument.](#)" In this essay, I argue that despite claims simply to be upholding the church's historic tradition, both versions of the current arguments against women's ordination used respectively by Roman Catholics and by Protestants are not traditional at all, but actually represent departures from the historical reasons that women were not ordained.

In that essay, I made the case (citing numerous historical examples) that historical opposition to women's ordination is rooted in an ontology of inequality: women could not be ordained because they were less intelligent, emotionally unstable, and more subject to temptation than men. Moreover, the traditional argument was not simply an argument against the ordination of women, but against any leadership of men over women.

It seems fairly obvious why so many have reacted negatively to this essay. If I am correct, historical opposition to women's ordination is not only based in a questionable major

assumption, but is also directly contrary to a key claim of both the new Catholic and the new Protestant positions, that opposition to women's ordination is not based on any kind of intellectual or moral inequality. Resistance to this essay led me to post something I called the "[Tradition Challenge](#)." In that essay, I laid out the traditional position in three premises:

(A) Women are less intelligent, more emotionally unstable, and more subject to temptation than men.

(B) Ordination necessitates exercising authority over others, particularly teaching and speaking in an authoritative manner. Women cannot be ordained because they are necessarily subordinate to men, and therefore cannot exercise authority in this manner. This is primarily an exclusion from women exercising any authority whatsoever over men, and only secondarily a specific exclusion from ordination.

(C) Proposition (B) is a direct corollary or consequence of Proposition (A). Women are necessarily subordinate to men, and cannot exercise authority over them because of an ontological incapacity located in a deficiency in reason, emotional instability, and susceptibility to temptation. Because of this ontological deficiency, they cannot exercise authority over or teach men, and so cannot be ordained.

To the contrary, both Evangelical "complementarians" and Catholic traditionalists affirm:

(A1) Women share an equal intellectual, moral, and spiritual capacity with men. They are not less intelligent, emotionally unstable, or more subject to temptation than men.

Protestant "complementarians" continue to affirm (B), but because they no longer affirm (A), must affirm the following rather than (C):

(C1) Although (A1), women still cannot be ordained because God has created different “gender roles” rooted in “male headship.”

The Catholic traditionalist affirms neither (A), (B), nor (C), but rather affirms (A1) plus:

(B1) The argument from authority no longer applies. Women can exercise any role of teaching, exercising authority, and speaking, and even preaching within the church. (There are no “gender roles” rooted in “headship.”)

(B2) The distinct function of ordination has to do with presiding at the sacraments. The presiding minister (the priest) represents Jesus Christ, that is, acts in the “person of Christ” (in persona Christi) when presiding at the sacraments. Because Jesus Christ is a male, only a male priest can represent a male Christ.

(C2) Because women do not resemble a male Christ, women cannot be ordained.

In order for Protestant “complementarians” and Catholic traditionalists to make the case that they are simply defending the traditional position, they would need to affirm (A), (B), and (C); however, they rather affirm (A1) (both), (C1) (Protestants), (B1), (B2) and (C2) (Catholics). In conclusion, not only do Protestant “complementarians” and Catholic traditionalists depart from the traditional reasons for opposition to women’s ordination, they do not even agree with each other in their reasons for doing so.

I concluded that essay with a challenge:

Provide an actual historical reference from the Christian tradition that corresponds to what I have called the Complementarian or Sacramentalist positions. It is not enough to provide some individual positive statement about women mentioned by a Patristic, Medieval, or Reformation author.

Rather, from a discussion that specifically deals with the issue of women's ordination and opposes it, provide an example from a Patristic, Medieval, or Reformation author (or authors) that clearly endorses either (A1), (B), and (C1), or (A1), (B1), (B2), and (C2) as a coherent and integrated position. It is not enough to find individual quotations from an author that can be read to endorse any single one of the above propositions. Rather, in the same way that I have shown through detailed quotations that there is a sizeable body of Patristic, Medieval, and Reformation writers who endorse (A), (B), and (C) and bring them together to form a coherent argument against women's ordination based on female ontological incapacity, an adequate demonstration that what I have called the (2) Protestant Complementarian or (3) Catholic Sacramentalist positions are not innovations to the tradition would have to substantiate with actual textual references that one or the other of these two was an actual position that was held by someone in the history of the church before the mid-twentieth century.

So far, there has been only one attempt to respond to the challenge, which I addressed in "[Concerning Women's Ordination: A Response to the 'Ordination Challenge.'](#)" I recently discovered what might be considered a [kind of "response"](#) to the original essay, but the author neither contacted me nor commented on my blog. The comment appeared after my "Tradition Challenge," but the author seems unaware of it. The writer, who only identified himself (I assume the author is "he") as *post-Presby papist prowler*, challenges my reading of Thomas Aquinas:

I only read the third article in the series, but I found it selective to the point of dishonesty. He claims that before the 20th century everyone thought women were intellectually inferior to men, yet ignores this from Aquinas:

Of course, no one likes to be accused of dishonesty. In my case, if I have misstated, I am more than willing to be corrected, especially regarding Thomas Aquinas, as I consider myself at least a "Peeping Thomist." If it should turn out that Thomas Aquinas was a glaring exception to the standard argument, I would be thrilled. Unfortunately, the writer shows that he did not read me very well when he states that I claim that "before the 20th century everyone thought women were intellectually inferior to men." In the essay, I actually stated: "It seems that Martin Luther may be an exception to the patristic and Medieval notion that women are inherently less rational and capable of leadership than men." In [another essay](#), I wrote: "There have been some exceptions. In his exegesis of Genesis, Martin Luther suggested that, apart from the fall, women would not have been subordinate to men. John Chrysostom, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, stated that the subjection of women to men is a direct consequence of the fall . . ." Yet we need to be careful. "One swallow does not a summer make." The same Chrysostom states that "To woman is assigned the presidency of the household; to man all the business of state, the marketplace, the administration of government . . . She cannot handle state business well, but she can raise children correctly . . ." and that God has assigned "greater tasks" to men and "lesser" ones to women. In other words, whatever might have been the case before the fall, Chrysostom seems to have believed that one of the consequences of the fall is that women are lacking in a certain kind of competence that would prohibit them from doing "greater tasks," such as, presumably, ordained ministry.

post-Presby papist prowler accuses me of being "selective" because I ignore the following passage in Aquinas:

Therefore we must understand that when Scripture had said, "to the image of God He created him," it added, "male and female He created them," not to imply that the image of God came through the distinction of sex, but that the image of

God belongs to both sexes, since it is in the mind, wherein there is no sexual distinction of sex, but that the image of God belongs to both sexes, since it is in the mind, wherein there is no sexual distinction. Wherefore the Apostle (Col. 3:10), after saying, "According to the image of Him that created him," added, "Where there is neither male nor female." ST 1.93.6.ad 2

However, it would appear that I am not the one who is being selective. The section of my essay that covered Aquinas was only a few paragraphs long, and I began in an entirely positive manner – “Thomas could speak in almost glowing terms of the relations between men and women” – and followed with a citation in which Aquinas speaks of “the social union of man and woman,” writing that woman should not be subject to man’s contempt as his slave because she was created from his side (*Summa Theologiae* 1.1.92.3). I did not include a citation from ST 1.93.6, although I did acknowledge that Aquinas “argues that women share equally in human nature with men.” I am happy to have it pointed out that Aquinas states that the image of God “is in the mind, wherein there is no sexual distinction.” At first reading, this would indeed seem to accord with (A1). However, what Aquinas writes in 1.1.93.6 has to be read alongside what he writes in the previous question, which I cited: “At the same time, however, women are subject to men based on an economic subordination in which ‘the superior makes use of his subjects for their own benefit and good. . . . For good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates.’” (S.T. 1.92.1). So whatever Aquinas means by stating that women equally share in the image of God, and that there is no sexual distinction “in the mind,” this does not prevent him from also stating that women are subject to men “for their own benefit and good,” because “in man [in contrast to woman] the

discretion of reason predominates.”

post-Presby papist prowler then turns to *Supplement to the Summa Theologiae*, q. 39, which I had cited, and states:

Furthermore, Aquinas explicitly uses the sacramental argument:

Objection 1: It would seem that the female sex is no impediment to receiving Orders. For the office of prophet is greater than the office of priest, since a prophet stands midway between God and priests, just as the priest does between God and people. Now the office of prophet was sometimes granted to women, as may be gathered from 4 Kgs. 22:14. Therefore the office of priest also may be competent to them.

Reply to Objection 1: Prophecy is not a sacrament but a gift of God. Wherefore there it is not the signification, but only the thing which is necessary. And since in matters pertaining to the soul woman does not differ from man as to the thing (for sometimes a woman is found to be better than many men as regards the soul), it follows that she can receive the gift of prophecy and the like, but not the sacrament of Orders.

And he even said that women may exercise temporal power, and presumably over men given that his given example was Deborah:

And thereby appears the Reply to the Second and Third Objections. However, as to abbesses, it is said that they have not ordinary authority, but delegated as it were, on account of the danger of men and women living together. But Deborah exercised authority in temporal, not in priestly matters, even as now woman may have temporal power.

Again, however, it is *post-Presby papist prowler* who is being selective, and not myself. *post-Presby papist prowler* states that Aquinas uses the “sacramental” argument, but he does not

state what Aquinas's sacramental argument actually is. In his *sed contra*, Aquinas cites 1 Tim. 2:12, making clear that his concern is with authority of men over women (the traditional argument), and not whether a female priest can represent a male Christ (which is the current "sacramental" argument). Aquinas makes a standard sacramental distinction between a sign and the reality of the sign. In his reply to objection 1, he distinguishes between prophecy and a sacrament, distinguishing between I would call "charisma" and "orders." Women can prophecy (exercise a charismatic gift) because they have the reality – "sometimes a woman is found to be better than many men as regards the soul" – but women cannot have the signification, i.e., the sign. What is the "sign"? Not resemblance to a male Christ, but authority. Thomas states the reason for his opposition to the ordination of women at the conclusion of his *Respondeo*, which I cited: "Accordingly, since it is not possible in the female sex to signify eminence of degree, for a woman is in the state of subjection, it follows that she cannot receive the sacrament of Order."

What then about Aquinas's references to "abbesses" and to the prophetess Deborah? Both cases actually make clear that Aquinas's concerns are about women exercising authority over men in the church (the traditional argument) and not about sacramental representation of a male Christ (the new argument). Concerning abbesses, Aquinas writes that their authority is "delegated . . . on account of the danger of men and women living together," delegated, that is, from a superior male authority, a male authority which would be preferable if there were no dangers of sexual temptation. Aquinas does seem to acknowledge concerning Deborah that women can exercise "temporal," but not "priestly" power. This would indeed make his position different from those earlier writers like John Chrysostom or Thomas's teacher Albertus Magnus or (later) Richard Hooker and John Knox, who quite explicitly draw a connection between an inability to exercise temporal authority and an inability to exercise ecclesial authority. I

am pleased to acknowledge that difference. At the same time, Aquinas makes clear that his opposition to the ordination of women is nonetheless because "it is not possible in the female sex to signify eminence of degree," specifically because a "woman is in the state of subjection." Aquinas wrote this early in his career, but when he later wrote the *Summa Theologiae*, he made clear the reason for female subjection: "woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates."

It is apparent then that Aquinas's reasons for opposition to the ordination of women are the traditional ones. He endorses (A), (B), and (C). But how is this consistent with what Aquinas wrote about women (like Deborah) exercising temporal power? I honestly cannot see that it is. If the necessary subjection of women to men provides the reason why women cannot be ordained (and Aquinas states that it is), then this should apply not only in the case of priestly ordination, but in temporal power as well. If subjection of women to men is not sufficient grounds for denying temporal power to women, "since in matters pertaining to the soul, woman does not differ from man . . . [and] sometimes a woman is found to be better than many men as regards the soul . . . ," then it should not be grounds for denying ordination. Aquinas is simply inconsistent here, not to say incoherent.

Whether Aquinas is consistent or not, it is once again necessary to be reminded that his position is not the current Roman Catholic position. In my original essay, I had quoted Roman Catholic author Sarah Butler: "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." It was, however, Aquinas's reason.

Finally, this again make clear that the main argument of my original essay stands. In my "Tradition Challenge," I had written: "from a discussion that specifically deals with the

issue of women's ordination and opposes it, provide an example from a Patristic, Medieval, or Reformation author (or authors) that clearly endorses either (A1), (B), and (C1), or (A1), (B1), (B2), and (C2) as a coherent and integrated position. It is not enough to find individual quotations from an author that can be read to endorse any single one of the above propositions." At the most, *post-Presby papist prowler* has shown that Aquinas allowed that under certain circumstances, women could exercise charismatic gifts and some kind of temporal authority. I am happy to concede that in this one area, Aquinas differed from the vast majority of the earlier tradition. He did not affirm (B) in its totality. However, at the most, all that *post-Presby papist prowler* has done is to "find individual quotations . . . that can be read to endorse [one] of the above propositions." Aquinas seems to have embraced a kind of incomplete (or rather inconsistent) version of (A1) and a slightly modified (B), which does not exclude women from occasionally exercising temporal authority. He continues to affirm (C). *post-Presby papist prowler* has not shown that Aquinas affirmed either "(A1), (B), and (C1), or (A1), (B1), (B2), and (C2) as a coherent and integrated position."