

And yet, because of this distance between aspiration and actuality our incorporation within the ideal world to which we reach out is the more whole-hearted, as we 'leap the gap' which the symbol makes for us and share in its resolution of an essential difference. The symbol points us towards the perfection of all meeting. It is distance that makes it so, for it is distance which prevents confusion and permits relationship. There is no question of any kind of subjugation of the ideal by the limited and finite — only of a relation of otherness by which the self reaches out to what is not itself, and in doing so, discovers its true identity in acknowledging its boundaries, and proclaiming the urgency of its need for transformations which are real and not contrived.

1 Martin Buber: 'The Space Problem of the Stage', in *Pointing the Way*, RKP 1957.

A Note On Aquinas

And Ordination Of Women

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On 20 January 1977 the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood," reaffirming the Catholic position barring women from priestly ordination. The issue is complex and thorny. The major argument of the Declaration was that the restriction is founded on an "unbroken tradition" possessing a "normative character". Later in the Declaration other arguments from fittingness, described as being in themselves non-demonstrative are brought forth.

One set of these arguments developed the sacramental idea of natural resemblance, listing in support various theologians, among whom was Thomas Aquinas. Because this latter part of the Declaration, with its attendant idea of *maleness* as a prerequisite for priestly ordination, attracted so much interchange in newspapers and periodicals, it behooves us to take a more careful look at the position of Aquinas referred to by the Declaration. While it is our opinion that the real strength of the Declaration hinges on the idea

of “unbroken tradition”, and on which we are not commenting in this essay, it remains instructive to understand the context within which Aquinas’ views on ordination are elaborated. For this reason the essay is termed a *Note* and simply wishes to make a small contribution to a much wider discussion engaging theology today.

A fairly arguable case can be made that some earlier Patristic authors, when advancing arguments against ordination of women, were engaged in a polemic against heretical movements and their female leaders. With Aquinas there is no similar polemic in his writing against movements with female ministers, although he knew of the Catharists in his century. Aquinas’ writing will be influenced, not by polemic, but by the *auctoritates* – the Fathers, church canons, on the one hand, and by a cultural world view on the other. The implications of his theological principles can be understood within this context. We will examine the pertinent texts first and then draw some conclusions.

The classic text on ordination of women, for Thomas Aquinas, occurs in his *Commentary on Lombard’s Sentences*, which dates from early in his career.¹ The more mature thought of the *Summa Theologiae*, Pars. III, was abruptly ended by his death while writing on the Sacrament of Penance. We do not imply, in saying this, that there is evidence of a possible change of mind had he lived to rewrite his theology of Orders. He did, of course, change certain sacramental positions, such as a broader view of sacraments as healing and cultic; but on the question of ordination of women, a change of position from the *Commentary on the Sentences* is hardly likely. What then was this position?

By a necessity of the nature of “sacrament”, a woman cannot be ordained. A sacrament, for Aquinas, has not only the level of the communicated grace (the *res*), but also the level of sign-value or humanly perceptible significance of the sacramental action (the *sacramentum*).² Because a woman is in a *status subjectionis ex natura*³ she cannot simply, as a perceptibly encountered human person, signify *aliqua eminentia gradus* – “a level of dignity above others”. Aquinas draws a parallel in the case of Extreme Unction, saying that unless someone is truly sick, there can be no sacrament since there is no sign-value of “needing cure”. The sign-value functions at the level of “natural similitude”; thus a slave, though in a greater state of subjection than a woman, is not subject *ex natura* and could be ordained, although that fact removes him from servitude.⁴ As humanly perceptible, the symbolizing dimension of sacraments hinges on materiality. A woman, in her dimension of *corpus* is in a state of subjection because she is feminine. Sexual differentiation, however, does not describe the *anima* – the spiritual dimension of being human – and thus there is no natural inferiority for divine gifts.

We must broaden this context to give something of Aquinas' theology of Orders. Basing his view on the principle that effects are proportioned to the causing agent, the spiritual effects of a sacrament, i.e. grace, the life of God, can only be attributable to Christ, who as man merited, and as God authors, grace.⁵ Another person can only be an "instrumental agent", such that the recipient of a sacrament is configured to the principal celebrant of the sacrament, Christ, and not to the human minister.

The human celebrant does not bear a likeness in form to the effect (only Christ, as plenitude of grace, communicates himself to the recipient in grace); but the human celebrant at the level of sign-value displays a "certain proportion" of instrumental agent to the sacramental effect. What, then, is this proportion? Ministers are not placed above others because they have a more noble existence, but because they are instruments of the one *caput Ecclesiae*, Christ.⁶

Ordination, for Aquinas, places one "above others" which then signifies this relationship of *caput* to *membra*. This is clear from the texts. Through Orders someone is constituted *supra plebem* in some grade of power ordained to dispensing sacraments.⁷ With such a view of what ordination accomplishes spiritually (the *res*), then at the level of sign-value Aquinas could not possibly place women who were, as feminine, believed to be in a state of subjection. They could not signify the hierarchical view of persons acting instrumentally for Christ-*caput*. Once again, it is not a question for him of the human dignity of a woman, which he identifies with the *anima*, but of the natural significance of woman as enfleshed, the *corpus* dimension. Thomas Aquinas, in this context, simply repeats and shares in the cultural viewpoint that woman is symbolically inferior to the male. This is phenomenological and not an essentialist view.

It is necessary now to examine more closely this cultural viewpoint. The classic Scripture texts on the "subdued role" of women are noted: I Cor 11:7; I Cor 14:34; I Tim 2:12. Their employment is more illustrative of a hierarchical view of things, than probative, as we shall see. There is also the idea of the "weaker sex", not in the strong terms of Tertullian, but at least in reference to lack of knowledge. But principally, for Aquinas, it is a question of a hierarchical view of reality.

In the *Summa*, Aquinas presents the natural order in terms of grades of being.⁸ Whereas material distinction differentiates individuals of the same type, formal distinction describes levels of being, and this bespeaks inequality. Form differs as numbers do, viz. by addition or subtraction of units. Thus by analogy one has an ascending order of being: elements, minerals, plants, brutes, humans. Grades of being reflect a more perfect universe, for no single

reality mirrors the divine simplicity (I, q. 23, a. 5, ad. 3).

Among humans there is further differentiation, not at the level of “form” or of being (the *anima*), but at the level of the phenomenal expression of *anima*, through sexuality. In the created order, a woman’s purpose is to assist man in reproducing the species. Whereas for other beings, the only purpose is reproduction (e.g. plants), the most noble purpose of human life is of the spiritual order. Thus, human activity is only occasionally for reproduction. For this reason, there is sexual distinction (I, q. 92, a. 1).

The problematics of this article, theoretically posed against God’s creation of feminine humanity, are classic ones: from Aristotle the idea that woman is a “misbegotten male”; and from the patristic tradition the idea that a woman is of lesser dignity than a male. To Aristotle, Aquinas responds that, according to the purpose of nature, God intended woman for reproductive possibility. But seen as an individual human, a woman is “something deficient”. His reason is that the “active force” in male semen intends to produce its likeness. A woman results when (a) there is some weakness in this power; (b) there is some indisposition of the foetal matter supplied by the female sexual partner (cf I, q. 118, a. 1 ad. 4); (c) or some extrinsic agent interferes (the famous “southerly wind” of Aristotle). As to the patristic idea of subjection, Aquinas distinguishes servile subjection from civil subjection. In servile subjection one uses others for his own benefit – a condition characterized as resulting from the Fall; in civil subjection, one rules others as subjects, for their own good and benefit, a condition which obtained before the Fall and which God could countenance. On this latter point of distinction, Aquinas says that women are naturally subject to men, for the male has greater reasoning powers (Cf I, q. 96, a. 4).

Aquinas’ commentary on Genesis 2:22, in which woman is described as formed from the rib of Adam, develops the view that the male, phenomenologically, signifies the *caput* – an idea which we saw earlier to be so important for Aquinas’ sacramental view. This superiority fittingly gives a certain dignity to the first human, the male, who as *principium* of his species mirrors the unoriginated God. The position of headship of the male is also evident when the sexes cohabit for domestic purposes (I, q. 92, a. 2). Formed from the rib of man, woman does not dominate him, Aquinas argues, using I Tim 2:12 in support of his point. Neither, however, is she in servile subjection since she was formed from man’s rib and not from his feet.

At issue thus far is Aquinas’ reliance on two false positions: Aristotelian biology and a view of female reasoning powers. The interpretation of Genesis 2:22 can be recognized as more isogesis than exogesis, reading into the text the *de facto* male domination

of the prevailing civil order as well as in the household. In any event, the understanding of the “rib of Adam” is quite different in contemporary exegesis. Also operative in this context is Aquinas’ penchant for seeing reality in hierarchical order. This penchant leads him to view the sexual differences in the human species hierarchically. His metaphysics thus colours his anthropology, and in this instance, without warrant.

In addition to the implications concerning sacramental ordination which Aquinas draws from this cultural viewpoint, two other issues reflect this hierarchical view. He asks (in III, q. 67, a. 4) whether a woman can baptize, noting the injunctions of I Cor 14:34 and I Tim 2:12. Christ principally baptizes, but a male or female, *quasi minister Christi*, can baptize. There is, however, this proviso: a woman ought not to baptize if males are present; and a layman ought not if clerics are present; nor should lower clerics if priests are present. Although this question is argued on the basis of instrumental agency, it differs from the question of Orders because the sign-value of baptism is the *lavacrum aquae* and not the person of the baptizer.

Noting the same Scriptural injections, Aquinas asks whether women can preach, and distinguishes discourse into (a) privately delivered, to one or to a few, which women can do; and (b) a public addressing of the whole Church, which women cannot do (II-II, q. 177, a. 2; cf also III, q. 67, a. 4. and 1). Three reasons support this position: according to Genesis 3:16 women are subject to men; they might sexually tempt men in such a role; generally they are not sufficiently informed. He mentions in another context an intellectual deficiency, noting that women lack *solidam rationem* (II-II, q. 156, a. 1, ad. 1).

One last instance of the application of his stance on femininity will suffice for this treatment of the position of Thomas Aquinas. Because women, according to St Paul, are in a state of subjection, they cannot have spiritual jurisdiction. Even Aristotle notes that civil disorder follows when women rule. Therefore, only in female communities should a female rule others.

Aquinas employs vocabulary carefully. In the survey above, he is never contrasting *femina* or *mulier* with *homo*, but with *vir* or *mas*. His anthropology is in nearly every instance predicated of *homo*, which is better translated as “the human” person, and thus applicable to males and females. When he further precises the human person into *anima* and *corpus*, he speaks of the male/female distinction only with reference to *corpus*, and finds the image of God to be rooted in *anima* (I, q. 91, a. obj. 5). However, in one text (I, q. 93, a. 4, ad, 1) he forces a secondary sense of *imago Dei*, to support what he believes to be the demands of I Cor 11:7, that a woman be subject to a man. One feels here, as in some other

texts, the pressure to incorporate the traditional understanding of a text of Scripture as authoritative. In his tract on the six days of creation, there is the constant refrain, when objections are posed: *in contrarium sufficit auctoritas Scripturae*.

Even the authority of Aristotle, with whom Aquinas does not always agree, seems to force certain of his conclusions. A case in point is his commentary on *Ethics* VII, ch. 4, in which Aristotle says that continence and incontinence cannot be properly predicated of a woman. Aquinas simply repeats the Philosopher's idea that women are swayed *quasi de facili sequentes passiones* (II-II, q. 156, a. 1, ad. 1).

All of these factors – the weight of authorities, the hierarchical view of natural reality, the *de facto* social realities of his age – present a context within which it was impossible for Thomas to conceive even remotely the possibility of ordaining women. The strength of Thomas' sacramentality, as noted by so many modern commentators, is his phenomenological approach through sign-value. Since the *signum sacramenti* must function as a genuinely expressive symbol from one's natural experience, and since Orders connotes a "level of dignity above others", feminine humanity could not function for Aquinas at the level of sign-value. Our own world view is different, and with the growing emancipation of women from a "state of subjection", a situation we clearly see as culturally conditioned, there may well be new implications from the notion of sign-value in Thomas' theology of Orders. In fact, given the sign-value of feminine humanity as one might analyze it today, Thomas' theology of Orders may indeed provide an argument for the ordination of women, from reasons of fittingness.

From this analysis of Thomas' argument against ordination of women, and its context, one must note that the Vatican Declaration on women's ordination has misapplied his teaching on the issue of sign-value to support its argument from natural resemblance. There was nothing in Thomas' treatment to require that, because Christ was a male, an ordained minister had to be male so as to act *in persona Christi*. For Thomas, Christ as principal celebrant of the Sacraments is foremost *caput* and *principium gratiae*. The human celebrant surely acts in the person of Christ, but as carrying these connotations of "head" and "origin", and not by virtue of maleness as such.

1 IV *Sent.* d. 25, q. 2, a.1, q.1a.1 (= *Supp.* q. 39, a. 1).

2 The mediating level of *res et sacramentum* in his thought is not germane here.

3 Cf. q. 39, a. 3, ad. 4.

4 Q. 39, a. 3, ad. 4 and 5. This position on sign-value has nothing to do with personal sanctity, for Aquinas notes that women can be better equipped for spiritual gifts than men, and in fact have received the *donum Dei prophetiae*.

5 *Supp.* q. 19, a. 4.

6 *Supp.* q. 36, q. 3, and 2.

7 Q. 35, a. 2. By Orders, one is constituted *dux alius in rebus divinis* (q. 36, a. 1). The ordained is placed in *quadam dignitate prae aliis constituuntur* (q. 39, a. 5).

8 *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 47, a. 2. (Subsequent references to the *Summa* will be incorporated within the text). In this context Aquinas follows Aristotle, *Metaphysics* VIII.