

# «In Persona Christi»: Gender, Priesthood and the Nuptial Metaphor

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## I: Introduction and statement of thesis

The great honour of this invitation to Lund, and especially of your granting to me a doctorate in Theology, *honoris causa*, is something for which I must first, and most heartily, thank the whole Faculty of Theology, and indeed all of you gathered here today. My deep surprise at this honour can only be matched by my equally deep gratitude; I am both touched and humbled by your faith in me and your interest in my ongoing work.

What I offer you today in this short lecture, then, takes a certain risk, because I have to serve you a mere slice of a much larger project. The slice, to be sure, has contemporary import both for ecumenical relations and for gender theory: it concerns the gendered body of the priest at the altar, the «performative» movements of the eucharistic rite, and the relation of these issues to questions of erotic meaning and of divine presence. The larger project, as some of you already know, is a systematic theology in progress, one in which the category of «desire» is given sustained analysis both anthropologically and theologically (see Coakley 2002, 2003; and Shortt 2005). It thus reaches back to classical resources such as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, the pseudo-Dionysius, and the 16th-century Carmelites,

Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, to attempt a re-minting of the notion of «desire» as both divine gift and implied ascetical demand. And as such, I regret to tell you, it flies right in the face of the *disjoined* reading of *agape* («love») and *eros* («desire») enunciated in the work of perhaps your most famous bishop of Lund, Anders Nygren (Nygren 1953), for whom *eros* could only represent a distorted and grasping tendency, incompatible with the purity of divine *agapeistic* love. My own larger systematic treatment, and defence, of the category of «desire» laps at the edges of what I am presenting today and is presupposed in this lecture. Indeed, the lecture is founded on the presumption (which I cannot fully argue here, but have discussed elsewhere: Coakley 2004, 2005a) that the eucharist, especially, as the most concentrated form of Christian prayer, presents us with the task, and means, of an ascetical training of desire. The result of this presumption is that certain features of my argument may perhaps surprise you, or cut across what you normally take to be disjunctive theoretical alternatives (see Coakley 2005b). Let me name these surprising features at the outset, in order to clear the path for a bold and specific thesis.

You will doubtless be accustomed to the strategies of earlier forms of «feminist theo-

logy» in which gender theory of one sort or another (and there have been notable swings of fashion in this area, of course, since the 1970s) is borrowed from secular discussion and then used as a critical tool in relation to the Christian tradition, its language and thought forms. Feminist theologies of this sort (and they are various, depending on what theoretical base they choose from a range of philosophical, political or psychoanalytic approaches to gender) have tended to be extremely suspicious of the very enterprise of «systematic theology». They see it as «totalizing», «hegemonic» and (if they are influenced by French psychoanalytic theory) «phallogocentric» — that is, repressive of the so-called «feminine», or «semiotic», realm of the unconscious. Male systematic theologians of stature, in contrast — with one or two noble exceptions — have tended to distance themselves from «feminist theology» in general, and discussion of the category of «gender» in particular (except insofar as they may wish to reassert a traditional subordinationism that they find in certain selected biblical texts). The first «surprise» feature of my approach, then, is that I refuse this disjunction between a commitment to the task of «systematic theology», on the one hand, and the task of a critical probing of the matter of gender, on the other. That is, I wish to argue that systematic theology, *when properly understood as sustained in a matrix of contemplation*, can evade the common charges of being a «hegemonic» or «phallogocentric» discourse. It can — by virtue of sustained, bodily practices of dispossession, both private and liturgical — undercut false pretensions to «mastery» even as it welcomes the creative destabilizations that an engagement with the realm of the unconscious involves. Such practices indeed acquaint one most urgently with matters of desire, and the need to sift and order our desires aright in relation to God. The matter of gender, then — the matter of «differentiated, embodied relationship» (as I shall define gender) — becomes interestingly subsumed into a more fundamental, and profoundly *theological*, discussion of the nature of such «desire».

The second surprising feature of my argument follows directly from this perception. Unlike almost all existing forms of «feminist theology», my approach does not start with a

given *secular* discussion of gender theory. Rather, it inverts the usual procedure and asks instead: what view of desire and gender might emerge from the enacted practices of prayer and liturgy and their theological undergirdings in incarnational and trinitarian thought? What if, that is, instead of starting with secular categories and using them to judge the theological, we start with the theological and liturgical categories and use them to judge the secular? It is normally presumed that such an inversion could result only in the return to a rigid or authoritarian biblicalism on matters of gendered subordination; but it is precisely that presumption that I set out to contest.

The third and last surprising feature of my argument is also correlated. Standard defences of the ordination of women prefer to *de-emphasize* the significance of gender for the priesthood, and to concentrate on the functional dimension of the minister as «presider» at the common table. Clearly such a move has important roots in Reformation thought; but it also has a modern, «liberal» manifestation, focusing on the «equality» of men and women before God. Such a repression of the categories of gender and desire would emphatically not be the view of the Roman *magisterium*, of course, whose insistence on a nuptial vision of the eucharist (founded in Ephesians 5.25ff. and in the tradition of the *Song of Songs*, and perceiving the rite as one of Christ loving the church) forms now the crucial fulcrum of the Roman *rejection* of the ordination of women. For Rome, therefore, of late, questions of eroticism and gender have ironically become the *more* central — not the more peripheral — to the official theology of the eucharist, and a crucial means of resisting the ordination of women. My strategy here is once more counter-intuitive. Rather than sanitizing the issue from the outset, I propose to walk boldly into the fanned flames of ecumenical debate that this question of women priests enshrines. Whereas — as we have noted — the usual feminist *riposte* to Rome on women's orders has been to de-sexualize the eucharist, to stress what anthropologists call «commensality» rather than «sacrifice», and to declare eroticism and gender irrelevant to eucharistic celebration, I shall explore the opposite tack. Starting from this hotly-contested base, I shall seek in this lec-

ture to provide a new response to the issue of what it is for the priest or minister to act *in persona Christi*.

And here I arrive at the enunciation of my promised bold thesis, which I shall attempt to sustain in the remainder of this lecture. True to my focus on the category of «desire», I shall argue that Rome and the Orthodox are entirely right to seek the Christic clue to eroticism and gender in the eucharist; but that Rome's particular attempt to debar women from the altar and to «freeze» the gender binary back into mandated roles finally fails in its very articulation. It defeats itself even in the terms of its own «erotic» logic.

In order to sustain this bold thesis in more detail, we shall now move to gather three strands of argument, before drawing our own systematic conclusions. We shall turn first to the contemporary Roman treatment of the discussion in Thomas of the priest's role *in persona Christi*. What we shall trace briefly here is the *particular* way that the 1976 magisterial document *Inter Insigniores* interprets Thomas Aquinas on this topic, and — more crucially — how it is forced at points to depart from Thomas. Then we shall note how one recent conservative defender of the Roman position (Sara Butler), and one liberal Catholic detractor (Dennis Ferrara), have extended — and bifurcated — the debate on the reading of Thomas; and how — hovering behind and between these readings — lies the now-massive influence of Hans Urs von Balthasar, with his significantly greater emphasis on the Marian role of the priest. This is a theme strangely suppressed in *Inter Insigniores*, but entirely congruent with late-medieval sensibilities, with the theology of John Paul II, and indeed with Thomas's own insistence that the priest is *medius* between divinity and humanity — *in persona Christi* but no less *in persona Ecclesiae*, for whom Mary is the ultimate prototype. But once this *duality* of the priest's role is recaptured, we shall suggest, the central argument of both the *magisterium* and of von Balthasar himself begins to unravel. Finally, and in the light of this exposition, we shall state our own view: that precisely because of the importance of the Christ/church nuptial model of the eucharist, a fixed gender binary becomes theologically

impossible. For in fact the priest is in an inherently fluid gender role as performative representative of *both* Christ and church, strategically summoning the stereotypical gender associations of each, but always destabilizing the attempt to be «held» in one or the other. And, if I am right, a significant part of the undeniably «erotic» tug of the priest's position at the altar lies in this very destabilization, a gesturing towards a *divine* incarnational «order» of union and communion beyond the tidy — but fallen — human attempts at gender characterization and binary division.

## II: «Inter Insigniores» (1976) and the use of Thomas Aquinas's theme of «in persona Christi»

This has all been by way of forecast and introduction. Let us now begin with *Inter Insigniores*. There are in fact two major prongs to the argument against the ordination of women presented in this text. The first is simply the argument from tradition: Jesus and the early church did not ordain women, it is claimed (barring some gnostic aberrations in the second century), and the unchanging tradition is therefore against it. The second prong, however, is the one that interests us and on which much depends. Citing Thomas, first from the *Summa* and then from the commentary on the Sentences, the crucial argument of the priest's status *in persona Christi* is invoked. A woman cannot be a priest, because in the eucharist the priest «acts not only through the effective power conferred ... by Christ [in ordination], but *in persona Christi*, taking the role of Christ, to the point of being his very *image*, when he pronounces the words of consecration» (V, 41, my emphasis; *ST* III. 83, art. 1, ad 3: «the priest ... bears Christ's image ...»). But what exactly does this mean? *Inter Insigniores* does not mention that this matter remains somewhat elusive in the *Summa* treatment, in which Thomas does not expatiate on the impediment of gender, although he considers a whole range of other possible difficulties, such as the priest's senility, or living in sin, or blindness, or leprosy-infested limbs. But in the *Sentence* commentary, to which *Inter Insigniores* next appeals,

Thomas ostensibly fills in a gap here: «Sacramental signs», he says, «represent what they signify by *natural resemblance*» (V, 43; *In IV Sent.*, dist. 25, q. 2, quaestiuncula 1 ad 4); and *Inter Insigniores* — by a certain sleight of hand — uses this principle to drive home its point of the necessity of male priesthood, whilst actually — note — tacitly *departing* from Thomas's own line of argument in some significant ways (I shall mention two here). First, *Inter Insigniores* does not argue, as Thomas does in *IV Sent.*, that what clinches the argument against the ordination of women is a) a Scriptural warrant against female authority over men (I Tim ii.12), and b) the supposed inherent inferiority of woman as «in the state of subjection» (based on an Aristotelian biology of sex, now defunct). These particular appeals are seemingly now an embarrassment to the *magisterium*. Secondly, then, *Inter Insigniores* has to fill in the gap left by the embarrassing and now-defunct biological argument in new ways (and this it does with great haste and stealth, in one short paragraph: V, 43). It argues, in fact, that the «natural resemblance» that must adhere between Christ and the priest is not now based in supposed greater male authority and superiority (see V, 43), but rather in physiological resemblance; and that without this resemblance, *qua* male, it would be «difficult» (not, note, impossible) «to see in the minister the image of Christ». It then adds, quickly, «For Christ himself was *and remains* a man» (V, 43, my emphasis).

Now neither of these last points, as far as I know, are ever wielded by Thomas himself against the ordination of women; and the question of Christ's genital maleness, *qua* risen body, might well continue to be a matter of dispute between Eastern and Western Christian traditions. Be that as it may, we have now dissected the crucial dimensions of the appeal to Thomas in the *magisterial* document. But what we should also note, finally, is that *Inter Insigniores* then goes on, in clear distinction from the Thomistic appeal, to expand at some length the nuptial theme of Ephesians 5 beloved both of Hans Urs von Balthasar and of John Paul II, and it is this which purportedly — and finally — clinches the argument. Now as Kari Børresen demonstrated long ago, Thomas himself inter-

estingly eschews the marriage metaphor for Christ and the church (see Børresen, 234), and so this appeal plays no part in his argument on women's incapacity for ordination. Not so *Inter Insigniores*. It is actually the supposed deep mystery of sexual «difference» (V, 45, 47) as enunciated in the eucharist, and in no way «suppressed in the glorified state» (V, 47) that here renders a female *unable* to be a priest. The priest, *qua* eucharistic, Christic bridegroom, «must be (it is said) ... a man» (V, 45). There is an ostensibly awkward moment, at the end of this section of the document, when it is admitted that the priest does also act *in persona Ecclesiae* — «in the name of the whole Church and in order to represent her» — as well as *in persona Christi* (V, 47). But no mention, interestingly, is made of this other posture as inherently «feminine» or «Marian» — even though the logic of the nuptial argument implicitly demands it.

### III: Disputing the Thomistic reading: Dennis Ferrara and Sara Butler

Unsurprisingly, the appeal to Thomas in *Inter Insigniores* did not go long unchallenged. A significant dispute ensued, mostly in the pages of *Theological Studies*, between Dennis Ferrara and Sara Butler. Not all the details of this complicated exegetical debate need detain us, for we have already sketched some of the ways that *Inter Insigniores* significantly departs from Thomas's own intentions. The crucial dividing issue for our own purposes here lies in Ferrara's well-intentioned, but ultimately misleading, attempt to read Thomas on *in persona Christi* «apophatically», as he puts it, rather than «representationally». What is evidently motivating him here (and is worthy of note, because it is a classic «liberal» ploy that I explicitly wish to eschew in my own argument), is a desire to make eroticism and gender entirely *irrelevant* to the matter of priesthood. Thus, according to Ferrara, Thomas does not intend by acting *in persona Christi* a personal, let alone, gendered, «representation» of Christ. Rather, says Ferrara, he is inviting the priest merely to «quote» Christ, and so to «give way [ ] visibly to the *persona* of Christ» (1994, 213, my emphasis). On this (so-

called) «apophatic» reading of the elusive *in persona Christi* theme, Ferrara can claim that gender has nothing to do with priesthood, once Thomas's erroneous Aristotelian biology is jettisoned. To this argument Sara Butler rightly replies, in my view, that Ferrara on this particular issue of *in persona Christi* has utterly misconstrued Thomas — or rather, flattened the elusive subtlety of his position. Thomas intends the priest to be both *sign* and *instrument* in the sacrament of the altar: it is therefore not enough for the priest simply to «quote» Christ in order to consecrate. If that were all that was involved there would be a mere memorial, but not a *bona fide* «sacramental representation» (Butler 1995, 74). Thomas argues in the *Sentence* commentary, points out Butler, that Christ uses not just the words, but the minister too, as «instruments» in the form of the sacrament (*In IV Sent.* d. 8, q. 2, a. 3, sol. 9; Butler 1995, 72). Thus Ferrara's reading abstracts — gnostically we might say — from the essential bodiliness of the sacramental representation; and this is an ironic position to arrive at given that Ferrara wishes to make a *feminist* commitment to the ordination of women. But Butler is surely right to insist that Thomas intends the minister neither to be physically insignificant, nor merely to «play act» Christ: as she puts it, the sacramental mode of representation in Thomas is *sui generis* (ibid, 74), and that is doubtless why it is so hard to describe or encapsulate clearly. It is neither a complete self-effacement nor yet a *dramatic* representation. Both those analogues are misleading.

There are two remaining points, however, on which Butler has to admit a certain defeat where the limits of Thomas's argument are concerned. One point finds her in agreement with *Inter Insigniores*, the other in criticism of it. Like the authors of *Inter Insigniores*, first, she 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, and this means, she admits, that some different — and, as she puts it, «complementary» — view of the sexes (see ibid, 80) will have to be brought in to sustain the *magisterial* rejection of women's ordination. (Butler does not acknow-

ledge at this juncture in her argument that the idea of the sexes as «complementary» to one another has a specifically modern, Romantic, flavour — but to this point we shall shortly return in discussing von Balthasar.) Secondly, 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, notes Butler, the fittingness of the male representation in Thomas resides in the man's supposed natural superiority *tout court* (back to the faulty biology again), not in his physiological impression; it is a strand in Bonaventure's sacramental theology that is being drawn upon here, she rightly avers, not Thomas's, and that is needed to fill the gap in the argument as to the relevance of the «male sex to the signification of Christ the Mediator, who became incarnate as a male» (ibid, 67). For it is Bonaventure, who — in commenting on the same point in the *Sentences* that Thomas also responds to — insists that only a man can «signify» the Mediator, not because the male is biologically superior, but simply because Christ *was* a man: «quoniam mediator solum in virili sexu fuit et per virilem sexum potest significari» (*In IV Sent.* d. 25, a. 2, q. 1 concl., *Opera Theologica Selecta*, 1949, 4. 639; see Butler 1995, 67).

Now where does all this leave us? Let us gather the strands of the argument so far so that we can see where we are going.

What the complex technical debate over Thomas's account of *in persona Christi* shows us, it seems to me, is three things. First, there is something irreducible about the bodiliness of the priest's representational function at the altar, and not just of the recitation of words; but the question of how that bodiliness relates to Christ as a *man* remains obscure once Thomas's Aristotelian biology is questioned. Secondly, if Thomas's faulty biological theory is to be replaced by a Romantic view of the so-called «complementarity» of the sexes — as Butler suggests — then this needs to be made explicit. It is here that we shall find von Balthasar's example peculiarly revealing; but at the same time it must be acknowledged, as *Inter Insigniores* does not acknowledge, that the notion of

woman as the «*opposite sex*» — as Thomas Lacqueur and others have explored of late (Lacqueur 1990) — was the product of a particular period of Western medical and cultural history, precisely replacing the «subordinate sameness» theory that Thomas and the whole Aristotelian tradition had long taken for granted. It is in no way *obviously* mandated by Bible or Christian tradition. Thirdly, when *Inter Insigniores* covertly slides away from Thomas to invoke a Bonaventuran principle of necessarily male representation at the altar, the issue of the priest's representation of the *laity* becomes obscured. Yet as Thomas himself rightly insists, it must be that the priest is representative both of Christ and of the people.

In the remainder of this lecture we shall make a brief critical analysis of the telling gender arguments of von Balthasar — which themselves lap at the edges of *Inter Insigniores*, given von Balthasar's role as an official commentator on the document, and are — I believe — credible extensions and clarifications of the official Roman position. As we shall see, all three of the issues just highlighted come explicitly to the fore in von Balthasar's treatment; but all three — if I am right — reach a point of logical crisis. From our treatment of von Balthasar we shall then be able to conclude with a reading of the *in persona Christi* theme that chooses neither the so-called «apophatic» route of Ferrara nor the Bonaventuran argument of Butler; instead we shall plot a third way through the dilemma and argue that the very nature of the priest's role *destabilizes* a fixed gender binary: precisely the bodily and gendered significance of the priesthood, and especially the nuptial and erotic overtones of the eucharist, make the «freezing» of the gender binary impossible.

#### IV: Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) on the eucharist and gender

The extraordinary richness and complexity of Balthasar's theory of gender has still not received the detailed analysis it deserves — though one must mention the excellent *Cambridge Companion to von Balthasar*, which begins to fill out the picture (see Oakes and

Moss 2004). Gender is so profoundly woven into von Balthasar's deepest theological themes (Trinity, Christology, ecclesiology, Mariology — especially in volumes III and IV of the *Theodramatik*), and so surprisingly and counter-intuitively in some of its twists and turns, that I cannot possibly do full justice to its entanglement with the issue of priestly status in this brief treatment. I shall simply fasten for these present purposes on three central points of analysis, which roughly correlate with the three issues for further discussion which I have just raised: together these will provide us with a fulcrum for critical discussion.

At the heart, first, of Balthasar's explicit rejection of the ordination of women is a key paradox, which simultaneously reveals a capacity for «fluid» thinking about gender vis-à-vis men, and yet a means of «fixing» womanhood outside the bounds of priesthood. It is well expressed in the essay he wrote as commentary on the publication of *Inter Insigniores*, entitled, «The Uninterrupted Tradition of the Church» (von Balthasar 1996), and also in a later essay on «Women Priests?» in *New Elucidations* (von Balthasar 1986). On the one hand, men and women are «equal», and nowhere is this clearer than in the person of Christ: as Balthasar puts it in the latter essay, «One can say that Christ, inasmuch as he represents the God of the universe in the world, is likewise the origin of both feminine and masculine principles in the church ...» (1986, 193). Yet this equality does not suppress a «difference» which is even more fundamental: «the Catholic Church is perhaps humanity's last bulwark of genuine appreciation of the *difference between the sexes*», he writes, and of «the extreme *oppositeness* of their functions ...» (ibid, 195, my emphasis: note the Romantic language). It is actually the «feminine» which for Balthasar is seen as primary for the church, and pedestalized as the «comprehensive feminine, [the] marian», unsullied and actively «fruitful», «already *superior* to that of the man» (ibid, 193, 192; my emphasis); and yet it is the man, «consecrated into [his] office» who alone can represent the «specifically masculine function — the *transmission* of a vital force that originates outside itself and leads beyond itself» (ibid, 193). As Balthasar puts it in a much-

quoted remark in another essay in the collection *Elucidations*: «What else is his Eucharist but, at a higher level, an endless act of fruitful outpouring of his whole flesh, such as a man can only achieve for a moment with a limited organ of his body?» (1975, 150).

So here we confront the essential gender double-think at the heart of Balthasar's system: the priest *must* be physiologically male, though also «feminine» *qua* transmitter of an ecclesial vital force that is more fundamentally that of the «perfect feminine Church» (1986, 193). Women, however, are always and *only* «feminine», expressing their «natural fruitfulness» which is «already superior to that of the man» (ibid, 192): «equal» but «different», «equal» but *superior* (even), but «equal» and inherently and physiologically incapable of the priesthood. Thus if a woman aspires to be a priest, she is disordered, breaking the rules of her own primary «fruitfulness».

This central paradox — all are «equal», but men are more equal than women (to adapt a phrase of Orwell) — is reduplicated, secondly, in the Marian fundament that explicitly sustains it. For whilst the «feminine» here, as Mary, is the *sine qua non* of the church (as Balthasar puts it, «The Church begins with the Yes of the Virgin of Nazareth» [ibid, 192]), this «feminine» tips over into Petrine «masculinity» *where men are concerned*: «What Peter will receive as «infallibility» for his office of governing will be a partial share in the total flawlessness of the feminine, marian Church,» he writes (ibid, 193). Thus a fluidity from and between «femininity» and «masculinity» is the lot of the man, whilst, in contrast, woman is only and solely the «feminine».

If we ask, thirdly and finally, how this (selective, male) potential for gender fluidity finds its counterpart in Balthasar's thought about God-as-Trinity, we confront even more fascinating and labile material. As a careful reading of the *Theodramatik* in particular shows (and Rowan Williams discusses this material briefly in the new *Cambridge Companion*: ed. Oakes and Moss 2004, 37–50), Balthasar can re-apply his theory of «femininity» and «masculinity» at this higher level of theological reflection to arrive at the following conundrum: that the Son is «feminine»

in relation to the Father's «masculinity», yet Father *and* Son are «masculine» in jointly spirating the (initially «feminine») Spirit; and yet again that the Father too can be said to be «feminine» in receiving the processions back into himself from the other two (see *TD* 3, 283, and *TD* 5, 91). All the persons, in other words, are *both* «masculine» and «feminine» (with the possible exception of the Spirit?); and by extension, it must be again that the Christ/Word/priest who «pours himself out» as seed at the altar is *also* «feminine», receptive, as representing the capacity of the church so to be fructified.

And so we arrive at what I suggest is the internal undoing of Balthasar's own recitation of Romantic gender binaries. For while the woman is fixed normatively as «feminine», both pedestalized and subordinated (though not in rhetoric, as we have seen), the male in contrast has this infinite capacity for reversal and internal reciprocity, just as God's «persons» do in the Trinity. *And indeed his priesthood vitally depends on this fluidity*. I would hypothesize here that the profound influence on Balthasar of Gregory of Nyssa's subversive gender fluidity, so fascinatingly expressed in Gregory's ascetic works and in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*, and strongly alluded to by von Balthasar in his own book on Nyssen, *Presence and Thought* (1988), is here in the ascendancy. Yet it meets, and is stopped short *in the woman's case*, by Balthasar's equally immovable German Romanticism, his seeming adulation of the notion of *das ewig Weibliche*. It is an odd, fascinating, and altogether uncomfortable mix, as I hope these brief foci for examination have shown. But it is a mix concocted, however strangely, from two quite different inheritances of the primary symbolism of the nuptial metaphor. For Gregory of Nyssa's treatment of this metaphor (as I have tried to show in my own recent work: Coakley 2002, 2003, 2005b) precisely *cannot* be constrained into such an immovable binary. For Gregory, gender is always being recast, renegotiated, the closer one gets to a elusive intimacy with Christ.

Let us now conclude, then, what this all might mean for our contemporary consideration of gender and eucharistic priestly enactment, and its continuing connection with that erotic metaphor.

## V: The Woman at the Altar: The Cosmological Disturbance of the Incarnation

I said at the start of this lecture that I was set on demonstrating that «the priest is in an inherently fluid gender role as representative of *both* Christ and church, strategically summoning the stereotypical gender associations of each, but always destabilizing the attempt to be «held» in one or the other». Perhaps we are now in a better position, after our interlocutions with Thomas, *Inter Insigniores*, and especially von Balthasar, to bring this argument to its conclusion, and at the same time bolster it with some crucial points of contrast with *secular* feminist and gender theory. Again, I think I can gather my conclusions under three main headings.

First, what the excursus into von Balthasar's thought has surely revealed is that — once the Aristotelian appeal to the inherent inferiority of womanhood is abandoned — some *developed* theory of nuptial reciprocity is required if the argument against women's ordination is to be sustained. But once the crucial role of the priest as *medius* between the divine and the human is fully spelled out — the priest *in persona Christi* precisely because also *in persona Ecclesiae* or *in persona Mariae* — then the implicit gender fluidity of the ministerial role becomes apparent. It is precisely the priest's ritual undertaking — *qua in persona Christi* — to stand at the boundary of the divine and the human, and indeed transgressively to cross it, just as the very act of incarnation also made that transgressive crossing — once for all. Even outside Christianity, anyone familiar with the anthropological literature of ritual will know of a certain parallel typos: as Victor Turner put it classically in *The Ritual Process* (1969, 95–7), the *shaman* or ritual enactor, whose unique job it is to stand on the «limen» between the known and the unknown and to mediate across it, is often credited with «threshold» capacities or traits such as bisexuality, dispossession or strange humility. Likewise, Catherine Bell's remarkable *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* has more recently explicated how ritual practice subliminally mediates certain cultural «oppositions» in a way that *creates* particular sorts of bodies, bodies that

could not be so made simply by taking *thought* (1992, ch. 5). I do not of course intend, by these allusions to anthropological and ritual theory, to imply that the Christian eucharist is merely a manifestation of a recurring «structural» type of human ritual; but I do intend to draw attention, beyond the mere words of the Christian rite, to powerful effects that are wrought more subliminally by the physical enactment of it, and in this area anthropologists and psychologists can well provide insight.

And so secondly, we are surely forced, after what has been revealed in von Balthasar's example and argument, to re-consider the theological *dangers* of the now-fixed West-facing position of most liturgies — both Protestant and Catholic — in the post-Vatican II era in the West. This might be seen as an odd tack for a feminist to take, since it is often presumed — over-hastily — that the «anti-hierarchical» opposition to the Eastern-facing position is precisely what should constitute a feminist liturgical agenda. But as Kallistos Ware remarks in a recent essay on Orthodox attitudes to the ordination of women (Ware 1999), the Catholic West-facing «stuck» position has new dangers of *male* idolatry, and unnecessarily intensifies the *facially* iconic dimension of the priest's role as being *in persona Christi*; in fact it emphasizes the *sexed* representation of Christ in a way that (as we now see) even Bonaventure would not have envisaged, given that for him the East-facing celebration would have been normative. The problem may then arise for the congregation *either* of an unconscious male idolatry of the priest's person («everyone is in love with Fr. X»), *or* of a false — but gnawing — sense of incongruity at the particular appearance of the priest (old, ugly, fat, bespectacled, spotty, etc.). This problem, note, is in no way improved by substituting a woman priest; indeed the symbolic evocations may ultimately be the more theologically worrying if the eucharist is at the same time perceived, or taught to be, merely a «family» meal: here, we might say, is the West-facing «Tina Nordström» posture, with the woman priest and her assistants merely whipping up the Sunday lunch.

My point — to return to Thomas — is that the liturgical circumstances that he could

assume as backcloth for his subtle theory of *in persona Christi* were those of an East-facing celebration, in which much of the symbolic significance of the rite lay in the priest's movements back and forth across the representational boundary line between Christ and his church — a ritual function which we now see has not been abandoned without huge symbolic loss. Indeed, if I am right, it has involved an actual intensification of, rather than liberation from, repressive gender strictures.

So thirdly, and to end, what is the theological gender theory that I suppose emerges from these accumulated considerations about *in persona Christi*, both textual and liturgical? My precise speculation here is one that I find tends almost always to be misheard as something more familiar; so let me be careful, in closing, to distinguish it from certain brands of secular gender theory that I believe it casts under what we might call «Christic judgment». We are indeed dealing here with a *sui generis* — indeed an incarnational — phenomenon. What I am suggesting is that the fundamentally «erotic», or «nuptial», nature of the eucharist might properly be called *proto-erotic*: it is, in fact, the gift of Christ's body to the church by a desiring God who longs for our desiring, participatory response. But such desire-in-God, of course, does not in God's case signal *lack* — it is, as the Pseudo-Denys puts it in a memorable passage from the *Divine Names*, iv that Thomas later comments upon, a divine *ecstasis* that ceaselessly seeks and yearns for a responsive human *ecstasis*. If it is an «economy of *divine* desire» into which we enter in the eucharist, then, we might rightly conclude that *this desire is ontologically more fundamental than human gender*; the priest, acting *in persona Christi* but no less *in persona Ecclesiae*, and moving between them, cannot be «fixed» in one gender pole or the other in her response to the dictates of this desire (*pace* the masculinist *fiat* in *Inter Insigniores* at this point in the argument). Neither the movements of the rite, nor the theological propulsions of the text, can «freeze» the priestly figure into either pole of the erotic gender play.

But it is not, note, that the priest — male or female — has *obliterated* the endless differences in «gender» because, according to some existing

«liberal» ideology, this is irrelevant to the undertakings of the priesthood; *nor* is s/he performing a form of liberal «androgyny» that leaves Romantic gender stereotypes untouched whilst conjoining them (like «John Wayne and Brigitte Bardot scotch-taped together», as Mary Daly once caustically put it: Daly 1975); *nor* again — as in the post-modern feminism of Judith Butler (Butler 1990, 2004) — is it that the priest is performatively conducting a «queer protest» that will condone certain previously-banned forms of sexual pleasure. No — and this is why this *Christic* alternative is so hard to «grasp» — it is rather that the flow of «divine desire» is what liturgically *refuses* to allow the human gender binary to settle and «freeze», let alone be summed up in some triumphant secular ideology. For the fundamental «difference» to be negotiated here is not male and female (see Gal. 3.28), let alone the Romantic «masculine» and «feminine», but rather the ultimate difference between God and humanity; and this only Christ has «negotiated». *This* is indeed a «cosmological disturbance» of unrepeatability status (see Coakley 2004). What happens in the eucharist, then, happens on the *limen* between the divine and the human, where the miracle of divine enfleshment challenges and undercuts even the most ingenious secular theorizing about the order of this world. In that sense the woman at the altar precisely shocks into consciousness an «erotic» liturgical logic that Rome has itself always more secretly guarded. In sum: the magisterium has, I conclude, ironically presented us with the very ritual evidences, not only to mandate the ordination of women, but to destabilize the very gender theory it insists upon.

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