

Women Priests - History and Theology (Part II) (Fr. Patrick H. Reardon)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Theodora Episcopa

But now let us continue to follow the lead of the feminist tour leaders through the streets of Rome from the Catacomb of St. Priscilla to the Church of St. Praxedes. There we find a ninth-century mosaic depicting four female “saints” who were dear to Pope Pascal I (817-824), a fierce opponent of iconoclasm. The heads of three of these women are each shrined in a round nimbus, signifying that they were already venerated as saints in the liturgical calendar of the Church: St. Praxedes, the Virgin Mary, and (supposes Henri Leclercq, who enjoys a kind of infallibility in these matters) St. Prudentiana. The woman on the extreme left is featured with a square nimbus, indicating that she was still alive when the mosaic was made.



Priest and Presbyteria

This woman was also important to Pope Pascal I; she was his mother, Theodora. (She was not the Empress Theodora, as one might be led to think by the picture that unfortunately accompanied Torrance's article in *Touchstone* and which I am sure he did not choose.) Undoubtedly, none of this would solicit our attention in the present discussion on women's ordination were it not for the inscription to the side of and over her head in the mosaic: Theodora Episcopa [Theodora the Bishopess]. Torrance, convinced now that he has at last discovered the smoking gun, sums up his case: "And so we have papal authority for a woman bishop and an acknowledgment by the pope that he himself was the son of a woman bishop."

Well, if he insists on grasping for that straw, I am afraid that Torrance's proposition must simply sink with it. As I will show in a moment, an adequate exegesis of that inscription will necessarily involve some element of reasonable surmise and contextualizing. Torrance's ipse dixit, however, cannot seriously be called even a conjecture; it is a revisionist bluff, an unfounded affront to everything we know about the ninth century by accepted standards of inference and context. During the period under discussion every ordination canon in force and every ordinal in use presumes that only persons of the male sex are ordained. No feminine noun, adjective or referent is ever employed in those testimonials. Every single contemporary literary reference to a bishop, whether in sermon, treatise, or letter, including those of Pope Pascal himself (Volume 129 of Migne's *Latin Petrology*), is masculine. To seize on this one inscription, then, and gratuitously pretend that it

documents the existence of a female bishop at Rome in the ninth century is an embarrassing exercise in ideological fantasy, first advanced, I believe, by Joan Morris in her 1972 hallucination, *The Lady Was a Bishop*.

We are left, nonetheless, with the task of finding out what the word *episcopa* does mean as it appears over the head of Theodora. Literary references are the first and most obvious place to look for an answer. Here the positive and direct evidence, though materially slight, demolishes Torrance's thesis. In 813, during Pascal's priestly and monastic ministry in Rome and just four years before he was made pope, the Second Council of Tours prescribed the following Canon 13: "Let no entourage of women accompany a bishop who does not have a bishopess" (*Episcopum episcopam non habentem nulla sequatur turba mulierum*). By itself this text is unanswerable proof that an *episcopa* in ninth-century Latin was understood to be the wife of a bishop.

It has also been suggested that *episcopa* may likewise have meant "abbess." I am aware of no evidence supporting this attractive suggestion, however, except the very inscription we are talking about (see the sources cited in Du Cange's entry *episcopa*). In our mosaic Theodora does seem to be wearing the coif normally associated with feminine monasticism. (Indeed, that coif was once invoked to argue that Theodora was unmarried and thus not the wife of a bishop!—See Irvin, 6). That the mother of so monastic an enthusiast should have become a nun in her advancing and widowed years would be no surprise. Still, in the absence of supporting testimony, it appears to me a rather shaky business to regard *episcopa* as the equivalent of *abbatissa* solely on the basis of this inscription. I would be delighted, nonetheless, to have some medievalist show me wrong.

At the risk of seeming fickle, let me submit one more possibility. In spite of the testimony of the Second Council of Tours cited above, I confess that I am not really convinced that Pope Pascal's mother was married to a bishop. My suspicion, based on nothing more than what I know of the folk habits of Orthodox Christians, and advanced here with all due discretion, is this: Theodora was called an *episcopa* or bishopess, simply because she was the mother of the bishop of Rome. As the latter had no wife (the Roman popes and most other bishops having been celibate for quite some time) but did have a popular mother living close at hand, the name *episcopa* was informally transferred to her by those who held her in high regard. If this was so, *episcopa* in her case was a name of endearment, charmed with that hint of play and irony that often adorns terms of affection. Pope Pascal's mother was later remembered as gracious and kind (*benignissima genitrix*, says a source cited in Du Cange). In his mosaic crafted during her lifetime, then, her son

memorialized her with that respectful and affectionate name by which everyone in Rome knew her: the bishopess. It would take another thousand years and a vastly different ecclesiastical context for that title to be so totally misunderstood.

So, at the end, how much archaeological evidence has been found for women's ordination to the priesthood in the Church of the first thousand years? Zero, and not the faintest fraction more. Those who have sought for solid historical data in its support have come up with just plain zero. Unfortunately, they have often enough then proceeded to multiply their zeros and pretend that they are ready to alter the ministerial structure of the Church.

It would cause me no grand surprise and only small pain to learn that sometime in some ecclesiastical back water or infrequently visited village, some bishop had sneaked his ordaining hands onto some woman's head. But the proponents of this most novel of novelties have failed to give us even a single historical example of such a laying on of hands. That has not, however, prevented their impressive display of sleight of hand.

Theological Reasoning

In the second part of his article Torrance (as noted above) advances speculative theological reasons for female presbyteral ordination, commencing with the premise that "there is no intrinsic or theological ground for the exclusion of women." He accuses opponents of women's ordination of arguing that "it is only a man who can be an icon of Christ at the altar," and then goes on to show why he thinks them wrong.

Torrance hints repeatedly that those who would restrict presbyteral ordination to men alone are not taking seriously the biblical doctrine that both men and women are made in God's image and likeness. In Christ, he reminds us, there is neither male nor female. So, he argues, "woman as well as man was made in the image of God, and may therefore be said to be an icon of God as well as man." This likeness to God, in short, pertains to human nature, not a specific sex. So if "iconography" is a basis of ordination, then the male must not be given preference to the female. I trust that this summary accurately represents the thought of Torrance.

In response, let us ask another question: Can a Christian man icon, or represent, Christ in a way that is not possible for a Christian woman? If the answer to this question is yes, then perhaps there may be a doctrinal basis for ordaining men and not ordaining women. Keep that thought in mind: if the answer is yes-if the Christian man really can icon or represent Christ in a way that the Christian woman

cannot-then everything today's feminists write on this matter by way of theological reflection is beside the point.

If I have correctly understood Torrance, however, his answer to that question must be no. Indeed, it seems to me that he says repeatedly throughout his article that, in this matter of iconing or representing Christ, the male cannot do it in any way not also available to the female. Such representation always has to do exclusively with human nature as such, he contends, and never with a specific sex. Now if that is truly what Torrance is saying, then he is manifestly at odds with Holy Scripture. I take it to be the clear teaching of the New Testament that the Christian man, as male and not simply as person, can represent Christ in some way that the Christian woman cannot.

We are taught in the New Testament that the husband in the Christian family, precisely as husband, can represent Christ in some way that his wife is not able to duplicate (Ephesians 5:21-33), and that this representation has to do with his specific sex. This representation involves his being masculine and not feminine. This representation is further described as one of headship: "the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the Church." The text here is something of a hard saying in our contemporary setting precisely because it is so clear and so irreducible. It says that the Christian husband, as head of the family, represents Christ who is head of the Church. This representation of Christ in headship pertains to the husband's specific sex (see also 1 Corinthians 11:3).

Now if that is true, then the answer to the question posed above must be yes: It is possible for the Christian man to icon Christ in a way that is not possible for the Christian woman. And if that is true, then there is a reasonable and possible theological basis for ordaining men and not ordaining women, and thus Torrance's major premise is eviscerated.

Please understand, I am not making that argument myself; I am simply saying that the argument can be made on a scriptural basis. I am reluctant to craft any such theoretical argument, because I do not want to convey the impression that the Church's refusal to ordain women is based on some theological study or speculative reflection. That refusal by the Church is not founded on any sort of rational theory excogitated by theologians but on the authority of the living Apostolic Tradition. Quite simply, the ordination of women was not received from Christ and handed down to us by the Apostles. It is an alien intrusion, a meddling with Moabites, and consequently must be numbered among those novelties against which the Bible warns us.

Male headship, however, does raise an important point of Christology and Trinitarian doctrine. Prior to becoming a male in the human race, the eternal Word was already God's Son, not just his offspring. The fatherhood and the sonship in the Holy Trinity are not simply cultural names. Even if there were no such things as men and women, God could still be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Male headship in the Church and in the Christian family, then, is not an arbitrary arrangement. It has to do with the very being of the God of Christians. Change it and you start to alter that most patriarchal/of dogmas: the doctrine of the Trinity.

I hasten to add that sex may not be read back into the Being of God as Father. I simply want to insist that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, not something else. If it is erroneous to read sex back into God, then it is at least as wrong to read androgyny or gender-neutrality back into God, and that is exactly what has happened among some Christians who several years ago adopted female ordination. Anyone entertaining doubts on this point is invited to examine the new Methodist service book or the various trial liturgies recently inflicted on some unsuspecting Episcopalians. The theology in those books goes out of its way to portray an androgynous divinity by concentrated and intentional recourse to gender-neutral, feminine, and even animist metaphors with a view to "balancing" the biblical names "Father and Son," while these latter are only sparsely employed. The books are shocking examples of a modern reluctance to voice the two proclamations given us by the Holy Spirit: "Abba, Father" and "Jesus is Lord."

Theological Error

Torrance cites with approval George Carey's much publicized assessment that those who oppose women's ordination are in "serious theological error." Well, perhaps so. But we may do well to examine the implications of that assessment. If we are in serious theological error, how did we get that way? We got that way from the previous generation of Christians. Okay, how did they come to be in serious theological error? Apparently they got it from the generation before them, and so forth. A slight difficulty arises here, however, because it is a matter of historical fact that all generations of Orthodox Catholic Christians for roughly 2,000 years have been opposed to the ordination of women. Why? Because of the supposed vestigial Manichaeism of St. Augustine and his alleged sexual hangups? Be serious. Just where did the error come from?

The Last Supper, that's where. If we are in error, it is penultimately because the Apostles themselves got it wrong. And if the Apostles were in error, they received that error from the One who told them what to do and how to do it. And if that

Person was in error, we-those among us who believe him to be the Son of God, the Savior of the world and its only hope-have a rather serious problem on our hands.

That was the whole point of my reference to the neopaganism of the new Methodist and Episcopalian worship experiments. I trust it will not be a matter of indifference to Torrance that our opposition to women's ordination springs from a deeply held conviction that the practice itself is a grave act of disobedience and a first, but firm, step toward apostasy. In fact, this was the assessment explicitly asserted by C. S. Lewis several decades ago in a passage that is well known. Lewis argued that ordaining the male sex to minister at the Eucharist has to do with the "correct appearance" ("orthodoxy" in Greek), the proper iconography. Change that appearance, alter that icon, he reasoned, and in due time you are worshipping a different god. That is precisely what we are witnessing today in congregations that were still Christian back when C. S. Lewis spoke his mind.

I see the matter to be every bit as serious as that tiny but notorious fourth-century iota that Athanasius would have died to keep out of the Creed. The adoption of female ordination is regarded by some of us as an implicit but definite challenge to the lordship of Christ and the finality of his word.

Published in Vol. 3 of The Christian Activist. Posted with direct permission from The Christian Activist.

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An Associate Editor of Touchstone, Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor of St. Anthony Orthodox Church in Butler, PA, remembers with affectionate gratitude that Dr. Thomas Torrance published his modest article on John Calvin two decades ago in The Scottish Journal of Theology.