

Why a Male Priesthood?

Peter Kreeft

The selection below is from *Women and the Priesthood* by Peter Kreeft and Alice Von Hildebrand (Franciscan University Press, 1994). Kreeft's essay "Why Only Boys Can Be the Daddies" presents four arguments defending the Catholic Church's teaching on an exclusively male priesthood. The excerpt below gives his second reason: sexual symbolism.



The first two things we learn about sex from God, right from the beginning, are that God designed it, not man or society, and that it is very good. The first command was, "Be fruitful and multiply." I do not think God had in mind growing oranges and memorizing times tables. It is significant that most advocates of priestesses do not seem to believe or care much about this. Feminists usually see sexuality as a social, human, conventional, changeable thing, and radical feminists usually see it as a problem, an obstacle, or even an enemy, when they rail against the "prison" of having wombs. The next step is natural: glorifying the act of breaking out of this "prison" by killing their unborn babies. If they see their bodies and their sexuality as theirs and not God's, it is quite natural that they should proceed to the next step of seeing their babies as theirs and not God's.

Advocates of women's ordination usually misunderstand sexual symbolism because they misunderstand symbolism itself as radically as they misunderstand authority. They think of symbols as man-made and artificial. They do not see that there are profound and unchangeable natural symbols, that *things* can be *signs*. Saint Thomas Aquinas based his multiple method of scriptural exegesis on this eminently sound but tragically forgotten principle. He writes: "The author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to signify His meaning, not by words only (as man also can do) but also by things themselves. So whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science [sacred science] has the property that the things signified by the words [of Scripture] have themselves a signification. Therefore that first signification, whereby words signify things, belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal and presupposes it."

In other words, God writes history (and nature) as man writes words. Behind St. Thomas's hermeneutic is a metaphysics—the sacramental view of nature and history. Thomas Howard

has brilliantly pinpointed the difference between the ancient world-view, in which everything means something, and the reductionistic modern world-view, in which nothing means anything, in *Chance or the Dance*? If every thing in nature means something, then the big things in nature mean something big. And sex is a Big Thing. What it means is so big that we will never exhaust it, only discover more facets of its diamond. But it is there, a massive fact of nature, not a clever human idea.

Every good poet knows that natural symbols are like the essential structures of language itself, unchangeable. The sky is, always was, and always will be a natural symbol for heaven; dirt is not. The eye's seeing is a natural symbol for the mind's understanding; the gut's groaning is not. We all know and recognize this unconsciously. That is why our language has evolved as it has. We use "see" to mean both literal, physical seeing and symbolic seeing or understanding. Ascending, light notes in a major key somehow *have* to mean hope and joy; descending, heavy notes in a minor key inevitably mean something grave. Words like "grave" and "gravity" have multiple meanings glued with inextricable mental epoxy. Everything is connected, and everything points beyond itself—especially sex. God, who deliberately designed sexuality, also deliberately designed to incarnate himself as a male. Jesus Christ is still a male. He still has his human body in heaven. It is and forever will be a male body. This is not ideology or theology or interpretation this is fact, this is data.

What follows is my attempt to explain the Church's "no" to priestesses in light of this data. My explanation can be summarized in two propositions. First, priests of Christ who are Christ's mouths through which he himself says, "This is my Body," must be men because Christ is a man. Second, Christ, the perfect human image of the Father, is male because God is Father. To deny my first proposition is to deny the Eucharist, and thus Catholicism. To deny my second proposition is to deny the authority of Christ, and thus Christianity.

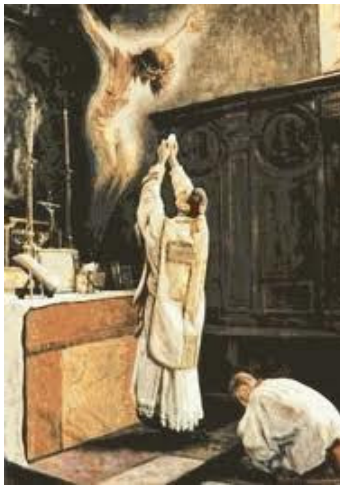


C. S. Lewis—not a Catholic himself—saw point one better than most Catholics do:

Why should a woman not in this [priestly] sense represent God?... Suppose the reformer stops saying that a good woman may be like God and begins saying that God is like a good woman. Suppose he says that we might just as well pray to 'Our Mother which art in Heaven' as to 'Our Father'. Suppose he suggests that the Incarnation might just as well have taken a female as a male form, and the Second Person of the

Trinity be as well called the Daughter as the Son. Suppose, finally, that the mystical marriage were reversed, that the Church were the Bridegroom and Christ the Bride. All this, as it seems to me, is involved in the claim that a woman can represent God as a priest does.... ..Christians think that God Himself has taught us how to speak of Him. To say that it does not matter is to say... that all the masculine imagery is not inspired, is merely human in origin... And this is surely intolerable: or, if tolerable, it is an argument not in favour of Christian priestesses but against Christianity.... It is also surely based on a shallow view of imagery.... ..One of the ends for which sex was created was to symbolize to us the hidden things of God. One of the functions of human marriage is to express the nature of the union between Christ and the Church.

The priesthood does not mean merely ministry. The new ICEL [International Commission on English in the Liturgy] mistranslations of the liturgy which substitute "minister" for "priest" are blind to the blindingly obvious fact that a priest is not just a minister. Ministries like lector, eucharistic minister, teacher, psychologist, counselor, social worker, and political activist—and even prophet—are indifferent to sex. Women can and do perform them. But priesthood is different. Only a priest can consecrate. A Catholic priest is not just a symbol of Christ (even that would form a strong argument against priestesses) but is sacramentally *in persona Christi*. When he says, "This is my body," we hear Jesus Christ speaking. Father Murphy does not mean "This is Father Murphy's body"! The priest is not merely remembering and repeating Christ's words here; he is really "channeling" them. The ICEL-proposed revisions of the Roman Missal, rejected by the bishops in November 1993, substituted "presbyter" (elder) and "presider" for "priest"; and eliminated references to God as "Father."



Christ's priests are men because Christ is a man.

But why is Christ's maleness essential? Because he is the revelation of the Father, and the Father's masculinity is essential. This is the second half of our equation.

To understand this second proposition, we must distinguish "male" from "masculine." Male and female are biological genders. Masculine and feminine, or yang and yin, are universal, cosmic principles, extending to all reality, including spirit.

All pre-modern civilizations knew this. English is almost the only language that does not have masculine and feminine nouns. So it is easy for us who speak English to believe that the ancients merely projected their own biological gender out onto nature in calling heaven masculine and earth feminine, day masculine and night feminine, sun masculine and moon feminine, land masculine and sea feminine. In the Hindu marriage ceremony the bridegroom says to the bride, "I am heaven, you are earth." The bride replies, "I am earth, you are heaven." Not only is cosmic sexuality universal, its patterns are suspiciously consistent. Most cultures saw the sun, day, land, light, and sky as male; moon, night, sea, darkness, and earth as female. Is it not incredibly provincial and culturally arrogant for us to assume, without a shred of proof, that this universal and fairly consistent human instinct is mere projection, myth, fantasy, and illusion rather than insight into a cosmic principle that is really there?

Once we look, we find abundant analogical evidence for it from the bottom of the cosmic hierarchy to the top, from the electromagnetic attraction between electrons and protons to the circumincision of divine Persons in the Trinity. Male and female are only the biological version of cosmic masculine and feminine. God is masculine to everything, from angels to prime matter. That is the ultimate reason why priests, who represent God to us, must be male.

There is striking historical evidence for this in the Jews, God's chosen people, the people to whom God revealed himself (and if we do not believe that, we do not believe in *that God*, for that is the only place we find *that God*).

The Jews, and the Christians and the Muslims and the philosophical theists who learned from them, were radically different from all the others in their concept of God in five related ways.

- First, they worshipped no goddesses, and no bisexual or neuter gods. The Jews' only God was always He, never She or It.
- Second, they had no priestesses.
- Third, the Jewish God was utterly transcendent to the universe, for he created it out of nothing. There is even a word in Hebrew that is not in any other ancient language: *bara'*, "to create." Only God can do it, not man. This God was not a part of the universe, as in polytheism, or the whole or the soul of the universe, as in pantheism.
- Fourth, God spoke. He revealed himself in prophetic words and miraculous deeds. He came out of hiding and acted. All other religions were man's search for God. Judaism (and Christianity, its fulfillment) was God's search for man. Therefore, religious experience for a Jew was fundamentally response, not initiative. There were no yoga methods, no ways to push God's buttons. God initiated, man responded.
- Fifth, the Law was the primary link with God, who revealed his will in Thou Shalts and Thou Shalt Nots. The god of pantheism may have a consciousness, but not a will; and the gods of polytheism have conflicting and sometimes evil wills. Only in Judaism is

there a full union of religion and morality. Only the Jews united mankind's two primary spiritual instincts the instinct to worship and the instinct of conscience. Only the Jews identified the object and end of worship with the Author of conscience and morality.

These five remarkably distinct features of ancient Judaism are clearly connected. As a man comes into a woman's body from without to impregnate her, God creates the universe from without and performs miracles in it from without. He also calls to man, reveals himself and his law to man from without. He is not The Force but The Face; not Earth Spirit rising but Heavenly Father descending: not the ideal construct of man's mind but the Hound of Heaven. To speak of "religion" as "man's search for God," if we speak of this God, is like speaking of the mouse's search for the cat (to steal an image from C. S. Lewis).

This issue is absolutely central, and therefore I beg your indulgence while I quote a long paragraph from Lewis, which I believe is the best single paragraph ever written on the difference between Christianity and man-made religions:

Men are reluctant to pass over from the notion of an abstract... deity to the living God. I do not wonder. Here lies the deepest tap-root of Pantheism and of the objection to traditional imagery.... The Pantheist's God does nothing, demands nothing. He is there if you wish for Him, like a book on a shelf. He will not pursue you. There is no danger that at any time heaven and earth should flee away at His glance. If He were the truth, then we could really say that all the Christian images of kingship were a historical accident of which our religion ought to be cleansed. It is with a shock that we discover them to be indispensable. You have had a shock like that before, in connection with smaller matters—when the fishing line pulls at your hand, when something breathes beside you in the darkness. So here; the shock comes at the precise moment when the thrill of *life* is communicated to us along the clue we have been following. It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone. 'Look out!' we cry, 'it's alive!' And therefore this is the very point at which so many draw back—I would have done so myself if I could—and proceed no further with Christianity. An 'impersonal God'—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband—that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion ('Man's search for God!') suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He had found us?

The fundamental problem with most advocates of priestesses is as radical as this: they do not know who God is. Most would register strong discomfort or puzzlement at the description Lewis gives of God—i.e., the Bible's God. Now, if the reply is that this ancient biblical picture of the hunter-king-husband God is historically relative, and that we should throw away the accidental shell and keep the essential, timeless meat of the nut, I reply:

First, the masculinity of God is not part of the shell, but part of the nut. It is not like Hebrew grammar, a translatable and replaceable medium. Something as deliberate and distinctive and as all-pervasive in Scripture as God's he-ness is no mere accident, especially when so obviously connected with the other four points of the five-point complex noted above.

Second, if it is a residue of the sin of sexism, then God has revealed himself sinfully. This really denies the existence of divine revelation. Or it judges the divine revelation by human ideology and opinion rather than vice versa, thus frustrating the very purpose, the essential purpose, of revelation, which is to reveal something that we could not have come up with from our own opinions or ideologies, to correct them.

Behind the idea of the need for divine revelation is the idea of Original Sin—another traditional notion which most priestess-advocates deny, ignore, or at least are very embarrassed at. We are not good and wise and trustable, but sinful and foolish and in need of correction, so we should expect to be surprised and even offended by God's revelation; otherwise, we wouldn't need it.

Third, there is the "camel's nose under the tent" argument. Once you start monkeying with your data, where do you stop? Why stop, ever, at all? If you can subtract the divine masculinity from Scripture when it offends you, why can't you subtract the divine compassion when that offends you? If you read your Marxism into Scripture today, why not your fascism tomorrow? If you can change God's masculinity, why not change his morality? Why not his very being? If you can twist the pronoun, why not the noun? If you revise his "I," why not his "AM"? Priestesses are merely the camel's nose under the tent. If it is admitted, the rest of the camel will follow, because it is a one-piece camel.



My previous point concerned the masculinity of God. The other half of the case against priestesses based on sexual symbolism is the femininity of the Church.

The Church is God's Bride. All the saints and mystics say the ultimate purpose of human life, the highest end for which we were made, is the Spiritual Marriage. This is not socially relative; it's eternal. And in it, the soul is spiritually impregnated by God, not vice versa. That is the ultimate reason why God must always be *he* to us, never *she*. Religion is essentially heterosexual and therefore fruitful.

The new birth—our salvation—comes from above, from without, from transcendence. We do not spiritually impregnate ourselves with salvation or divine life any more than we physically impregnate ourselves. Modernism, humanism, and naturalism amount to spiritual auto-eroticism, spiritual masturbation.

The Church can no more be fruitful without being impregnated by her Divine Husband than a woman can be impregnated with new life without a man. Feminists who resent this fact, resent this fact, and thus tend to resent facts as such, including their own nature as feminine.

The issue of priestesses is ultimately an issue of God. There have been three basic theological options, historically: the single transcendent Divine Husband (theism), many imminent gods and goddesses (paganism), or the pantheistic Divine Neuter or Hermaphrodite. Priestesses have always served the latter two gods, never the former. Deny God's transcendence, which is the condition for his revelation, and you get a lesbian Church, declaring independence from God as The Other, God as transcendent, God as masculine, believing herself to be already innately in possession of divine life, that is, denying Original Sin, or trying to impregnate herself horizontally by a kind of perverse auto-eroticism, narcissism, and self-idolatry. Lesbians, like gays, simply cannot make life, and the lesbian spirit of Womynchurch will never be able to make life without God the Father. The Christian saints and mystics have constantly used the scriptural and authoritative heterosexual metaphor of God as Husband to the Church and to the soul.

God made the Jews different and was extremely ornery and cantankerous about them remaining different, even to the extent of demanding the wholesale slaughter of pagan populations in the Promised Land to prevent them from corrupting his pure revelation to the Jews. Is this true? Is this divine revelation? Is this data? There it is, right in the very politically incorrect Bible. If God did not invent the Jews, then the Jews invented God. In that case, let's all be honest and cease to be Christians, or even theists, and become atheists, pagans, or pantheists, as many radical feminists have already done. Their spiritual gravity toward these three false religions is natural. And it is the agenda behind priestesses.

The obvious and ubiquitous objection to this view is that it is male chauvinism. To quote my colleague Mary Daly, "If God is male, then the male is God." Besides the logical fallacy of the illicit conversion of an A proposition, I see five other mistakes in this argument:

- The **first** and most obvious of which is her claim that Judaeo-Christian tradition claims that God is male. It does not. God is masculine, not male. Women as much as men represent the image of God (cf. Gn 5.1-2). But at the heart of divine revelation is the simple fact that the First Person of the Trinity has chosen to reveal himself to us as

Father. This is a category which transcends human biology (male and female), and of which human fatherhood is a shadow (cf. Eph 3.14).

- **Second**, another essential part of the Christian data is the fact that the Eternal Word chose to incarnate and reveal himself as the Son of the Father and Bridegroom of God's People. In order for a human to be a son or a bridegroom, he must be male. Jesus Christ is male because he is Son, not vice versa, as feminists assume. His choice does not constitute an insult to women, nor does it imply "an alleged natural superiority of man over woman," yet it "cannot be disassociated from the economy of salvation." For it was part of the divine plan from the beginning for God to covenant himself to a people as a groom covenants himself to a bride. Christ is the Bridegroom, the Church is his Bride. This makes us all feminine in relation to God. Women need not become like men when they approach God, but men must become like women, spiritually. All souls are Christ's brides.
- **Third**, Julie Loesch Wiley argues that if Jesus had been born a woman in the male-dominated world of the first century, his life and teaching of unselfish love for others would not have been as arresting and as instructively scandalous as it was. For women, in all times and places and cultures until modern feminism, have always been in general more altruistic, less power-greedy, less violence-prone, more self-emptying, and more naturally religious than men. (You still see more women than men in church.) In becoming a man, Jesus in a sense let women be and went after men to transform them—not into women, and certainly not into wimps, but into men like himself. He redefined manliness and power as the courage to suffer instead of the lust to dominate; giving instead of taking. Women were a little less in need of that lesson. Christianity seems closer to female chauvinism than to male.
- The Incarnation was the kenosis, the "emptying." The Son of God came down to the lowest place, a crucified criminal in a Roman-occupied hick town—not an angel or an emperor, and not a woman. The Incarnation was not into privilege and power, but into suffering and service, and it was into a male. It is the modern feminists who are the real male chauvinists, lusting for reproductive freedom (sexual irresponsibility) like playboys and demanding empowerment, that is, envying and imitating not only males, but male fools, judging inner worth by outer performance, sacrificing being for doing, finding their identity in their worldly careers, not in their inner essence, in their physical and spiritual wombs and motherhoods. This is what Karl Stern called "the flight from woman." It is a strange and sad phenomenon. Genuinely hurt women often become radical feminists, hating their own femininity and hating ordinary women who love and enjoy their ordinary femininity. How often have you heard radical feminists praise midwestern housewives?
- **Fourth**, women priests would demean and insult women, for it would be like asking them to be cross-dressers or to wear male sex organs. It would remove the distinctive dignity of women qua women as symbols of the Church, whom Christ, symbolized by the priest, marries. A symbol or sign is to be looked along, not looked at. What would priestesses mean, what would they symbolize? They would signify to all women that they are spiritual lesbians instead of brides.
- **Fifth**, Christ's maleness is not chauvinistic because he had a mother (but no earthly father). Mary is the definitive refutation of the charge of chauvinism. No merely

human being was ever nearly as great as this woman, according to the distinctive teachings of this "chauvinistic" Church. Mary is "our tainted nature's solitary boast."

"Mother of God" is hardly a title to sneer at! Mother of anyone is hardly a title to sneer at. A boy and girl were arguing about who would play captain in a game of pirates. The boy insisted on being captain; the girl won the argument by agreeing: "Okay, you can be the captain. But I'm the mother of the captain!"

The ground of Mary's greatness is the thing so simple and innocent that it is too simple and innocent for the feminists to see. The reason she is crowned Queen of Heaven, the reason for her great glory and power is her total submission to God – her sacrifice, her suffering, her service. It is the total surrender, the fiat, and the peace, the shalom, that are the secret treasures hidden in this submission, the delicious fruit of this thorny plant. Modern feminist "Christianity" becomes radically different from Christianity when it drifts into a radically different ideal of sanctity, of the *summum bonum*, the greatest good, meaning of life, and purpose of all faith. Feminists need most fundamentally what we all need most fundamentally: to go to the cross, unclench the fist, and bow the knee.

