

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Why the Jesus as mother tradition undermines the symbolic argument against women's ordination

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### Abstract

The symbolic argument against women's ordination supposes that the theological significance of Christ's sex is his saving relationship to the Church, which takes the form of that of a bridegroom and his bride. It infers that a male priest alone is fit to represent Christ in his capacity as the Saviour of the Church, and thus that only men should be ordained. Since the emergence of the symbolic argument, however, scholars have rediscovered a long tradition of understanding Christ's saving relationship to the Church in maternal terms. While remaining neutral on whether women ultimately ought to be ordained or not, I argue that the kind of reasoning in the symbolic argument, if updated with the Jesus as Mother tradition, would suggest that it is fitting for a female priest to represent Jesus as Mother, just as it is fitting for a male priest to represent Christ the Bridegroom. Other critics of the symbolic argument tend to contest what is seen as its 'literalist' or 'essentialist' or overly gendered-balanced assumptions about priestly representation. I show that even if we grant to the symbolic argument more gendered and 'essentialist' views on each of the major points of disagreement in these debates, women might still be fit to represent Christ because of the maternal ways that Christ has traditionally been thought to relate to the Church. As a result, the symbolic argument may be repurposed to support women's ordination rather than undermine it.

**Keywords:** Ordination; symbolic argument; Jesus as Mother; *Inter Insigniores*; Mary as Priest

### Introduction

Bonaventure supposed that it was fitting that Christ, the source of all life and regeneration, did not take flesh as a woman because, according to the view of his time, the male sex was the more fertile of the two.<sup>1</sup> Bonaventure was influenced by Aristotelian biology, according to which the male seed actively supplied the form and thus the life of the child while the female body supplied inert matter to passively receive the child's form. Bonaventure's reasoning about fertility, if updated with the biology of today rather than Aristotelian biology, would suggest that, at least as far as matters of fertility are concerned, it would have been as fitting if Christ had been female as it is that he was male.

Aquinas supposed that 'woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the

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production of woman comes from defect in the active force or from some material indisposition' (ST I, q. 92, a. 1, ad 1). Aquinas concludes, 'the male sex is more noble than the female, and for this reason He took human nature in the male sex' (ST III, q. 31, a. 4, ad 1). Aquinas's reasoning, if updated with a view of the sexes as equally noble instantiations of humanity, would suggest that, at least as far as issues of dignity are concerned, it would have been as fitting if Christ had been female as it is that he was male.

Today, the symbolic argument against women's ordination supposes that the theological significance of Christ's sex is his saving relationship to the Church, which takes the form of that of a bridegroom and his bride. It infers that a male priest alone is fit to represent Christ in his capacity as the Saviour of the Church, and thus that only men should be ordained. Since the emergence of the symbolic argument, however, scholars have rediscovered a long tradition of understanding Christ's saving relationship to the Church in maternal terms. While remaining neutral on whether women ultimately ought to be ordained or not, I want to argue that the kind of reasoning in the symbolic argument, if updated with the Jesus as Mother tradition, would suggest that it is fitting for a female priest to represent Jesus as Mother, just as it is fitting for a male priest to represent Christ the Bridegroom.

Central to the symbolic argument are suppositions about priestly representation – who the priest represents and what it takes for him to do so appropriately in light of gendered realities. As philosophers know, there are many senses in which one thing might represent another, and for any of these senses, it is notoriously difficult to specify what is required for representation.<sup>2</sup> Critics of the symbolic argument tend to contest what is seen as the symbolic argument's 'literalist' or 'essentialist' assumptions about priestly representation and advocate less gender-balanced, more fluid, or more multifaceted models of priestly symbolism. As a result, debates between proponents of the symbolic argument and its critics tend to boil down to disputes about priestly and gendered representation. I want to show that even if we grant to the symbolic argument more gendered and 'essentialist' views on each of the major points of disagreement in these debates, women might still be fit to represent Christ because of the maternal ways in which Christ has traditionally been thought to relate to the Church. As a result, the symbolic argument may be repurposed to support women's ordination rather than undermine it.

### **The symbolic argument in *Inter Insigniores***

The first, most authoritative, and most influential statement of the symbolic argument against women's ordination appeared in the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Inter Insigniores: Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*, approved by His Holiness Pope Paul VI in 1976. After offering several arguments from tradition as the 'basis' for a male-only priesthood, *Inter Insigniores* offers an argument from symbolism to demonstrate 'the profound fittingness' of this norm. *Inter Insigniores* observes that when a priest serves liturgically, he 'does not act in his own name, *in persona propria*' but rather 'represents Christ, who acts through him'. The priest ministers '*in persona Christi*', taking the role of Christ, to the point of being his very image', especially when he issues the words of consecration: 'this is my body . . . this is my blood . . .' Consequently, he is a sign 'of a sacramental nature'. In the words of Thomas Aquinas, 'sacramental signs represent what they signify by natural resemblance' (ST III SUp., q. 39, a. 1).<sup>3</sup> For example, baptismal waters bear 'natural resemblance' to the waters of birth, communion wine to blood, the oil of unction to healing ointment, etc. Therefore, the priest, as a sacramental sign of Christ, must be a sign which bears 'natural resemblance' to him, which is by nature 'perceptible', and which the faithful can 'recognize with ease'.

*Inter Insigniores* then makes a striking claim:

there would not be this ‘natural resemblance’ which must exist between Christ and his minister if the role of Christ were not taken by a man: in such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ. For Christ himself was and remains a man.

And yet, the faithful do see the image of Christ in women, as they should in every person made in the image of God. Why must a representative of Christ bear ‘natural resemblance’ to him specifically with respect to his sex?

As if in answer to this question, immediately after making this claim, *Inter Insigniores* contends that the priest must resemble Christ with respect to his sex because the saving union between God and his people takes the form of a nuptial mystery of which Christ is the Bridegroom. In the Old Covenant, God betroths himself to Israel his Chosen People and remains faithful to her even when she goes whoring after other Gods. In the New Testament, Christ the divine Bridegroom rescues the Church his Bride with his blood and unites himself to her forever. Due to this nuptial symbolism woven throughout the whole of salvation history, according to *Inter Insigniores*, Christ’s male sex ‘cannot be disassociated from the economy of salvation’. Therefore, when Christ exercises his ‘ministry of salvation’ through a priest acting in his place, as when a priest celebrates the Eucharist, Christ’s saving office as the Bridegroom of the Church, and thus his male sex, is part of what must be represented. *Inter Insigniores* concludes, ‘unless one is to disregard the importance of this symbolism for the economy of Revelation’, the role of Christ in priestly ministry ‘must be taken by a man’.

### Main objections to the symbolic argument

Objections to the symbolic argument in *Inter Insigniores* tend to either contest the importance of the priest’s representing Christ relative to his representing Mary and the Church, or else contest the claim that a priest must be male to bear sufficient ‘natural resemblance’ to Christ. The priest is thought to represent the Church because the priest ministers in her place. *Inter Insigniores* teaches that the Church herself acts through the priest who ministers ‘in her name’ ‘with the intention of doing what she does’. *Inter Insigniores* sees this as no basis for women’s ordination because, on its view, the priest only ‘represents the Church, which is the Body of Christ’ because ‘he first represents Christ himself, who is the Head and the Shepherd of the Church’. The priest ‘presides over the Christian assembly’, not with the assembly. He acts first and foremost *in persona Christi*, not *in persona ecclesiae*. In order to ground women’s ordination in the priest’s acting *in persona ecclesiae*, critics of the symbolic argument thus tend to contend either that the priest acts *in persona ecclesiae* not just derivatively of acting *in persona Christi*, as *Inter Insigniores* claims; or, alternatively, they contend that although the priest may act only derivatively *in persona ecclesiae*, that is still significant enough to ground women’s ordination.<sup>4</sup>

Towards the first of these ends, the priest’s eucharistic celebration is understood as an activity performed at least just as principally *in persona ecclesiae* as *in persona Christi*, if not solely *in persona ecclesiae*. On this view, the Church through the priest stands as suppliant before God and, having remembered with thanksgiving the history of her salvation, offers herself with the gifts to God, asking that he, through the Holy Spirit, make them to be the body and blood of her Lord Jesus Christ. The narrative of the institution of the Eucharist, including Christ’s words ‘this is my body . . . this is my blood . . .’, are spoken in the person of the Church as part of her grateful remembrance (*anamnesis*) of God’s abundant mercy to her, supplying warrant for the audacious petition (*epiclesis*) that he approve her offering

and make her gift into his own body and blood. In this way, the eucharistic prayers, including the narrative of institution, are understood as the prayers of the Church which the priest offers to God as her representative on her behalf, acting at all points *in persona ecclesiae*. Those who understand the celebration of the Eucharist along these lines often claim that this was the universal view of the early Church. They trace the origin of the notion that the priest acts *in persona Christi* to the relatively late figure of Thomas Aquinas who first claimed so much as part of an argument that the words of institution are necessary and sufficient for the performance of the Eucharist.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas some critics of the symbolic argument contest the importance of the priest's representing Christ relative to his representing the Church, others contest its importance relative to his representing Mary. The priest is thought to represent Mary on the basis that priestly ministry, especially eucharistic celebration, is an essentially Marian activity. There is a long history of associating the priesthood with her who first brought forth the gift of Christ's body and blood.<sup>6</sup> Marian artwork from the early Church onwards depicts Mary either wearing the garb of priests and bishops (stole, mitre, Aaron's ephod, etc.) or else performing priestly actions (holding a paten, laying Christ on an altar, etc.). René Laurentin surveys writings which attribute a priestly role to Mary in his two-volume tome *Maria, Ecclesia, Sacerdotium: Essai sur le développement d'une idée religieuse*, published in 1953. The texts amassed therein range from fourth-century Greek homilies, which praise Mary as 'priest' and 'altar', to a prayer approved in 1906 by Pope Pius X, which petitions *Maria Virgo Sacerdos* (Laurentin (1953), I, 19–95, 522–526).

The primary theological basis for understanding Mary as a kind of priest are parallels between Christ's incarnation through Mary and Christ's bodily presence in the Eucharist through the priest. Mary's flesh became Christ's flesh through the Spirit's overshadowing her, and the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ through the Spirit's descending upon them on the altar. Christ took flesh through the words of Mary's fiat, and the gifts become the body and blood of Christ through the priest's words of consecration. Mary offered her son to God first at his presentation at the temple and later at the foot of the cross, and the priest offers the body and blood of Christ to the Father in the celebration of the Eucharist. Mary brought forth Christ's body and blood to the world for its salvation and continuously intercedes on its behalf, as does the priest in the Eucharist, and so forth. In addition to these parallels, tradition is rich with typology connecting Mary to the priestly realm of the temple, and as Karen O'Donnell (2019, ch. 4) argues, the priestly Old Testament figures of Melchizedek, Abraham, and Samuel typologically prefigure her.

Because the priest represents the Church, it seems to some that women as well as men might be symbolically suitable for priestly ministry. On their view, if a male priest can represent the Church, the Bride of Christ, then by the same token a female priest can represent Christ.<sup>7</sup> Similar arguments appear with respect to the priest's representing the Mother of God, although less commonly than arguments about the priest's representing the Church.<sup>8</sup>

Setting to one side considerations of ecclesial and Marian symbolism, another strand of criticism<sup>9</sup> of *Inter Insigniores* contends that women are symbolically suitable for the priesthood purely on the basis of Christological symbolism. What is central to the economy of salvation is not that Christ became male, but that he became human, as is suggested by the creed's proclaiming that Christ became *homo*, not *vir*. What Christ assumed and saved was human nature, not the male sex. Thus, on their view, the theologically important domain with respect to which a representative of Christ must bear 'natural resemblance' is his humanity, not necessarily his sex.<sup>10</sup> So, women, bearing the same humanity as Christ their Lord and being made in his image and likeness, can serve as a representative of Christ to the faithful. They are doubly apt representatives of Christ because beyond

sharing his humanity, they as Christians also share in his death, his divine life, his sonship, etc. The Christian is one who cries, ‘I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me’ (Gal. 2:20, NKJV).

### **Competing accounts of priestly symbolism**

As we’ve seen, the debate between the symbolic argument and these objections (the objection from ecclesial symbolism, the objection from Marian symbolism, and the objection from Christology) boils down to a dispute about priestly representation. First, different accounts make different claims about who the priest represents, whether he represents Christ, Mary, the Church, or some combination thereof, and if he represents some combination, how much relative significance to ascribe to different representations. The symbolic argument claims that, in the sense relevant for ordination, the priest only represents Christ, not Mary or the Church. In contrast, the objections from Marian and ecclesial symbolism claim that the priest represents Mary or the Church in such a way as to justify ordaining women as well as men. Second, accounts differ in the extent to which gender-valanced images drive priestly symbolism. The symbolic argument excludes women from the priesthood on the grounds that a priest must share the same sex as Christ to represent him, while the objections from Marian and ecclesial symbolism appeal to ways that a priest represents feminine entities to justify admitting women to the priesthood. In contrast, the objection from Christology claims that a priest is fit to represent Christ irrespective of sex in virtue of sharing his humanity.

Third, and requiring more complex treatment, there is disagreement about what role sexual difference plays in the mechanics of priestly symbolism. The symbolic argument has a reputation for being essentialist-leaning. Tina Beattie argues that it evinces an ‘essentialist and literal interpretation’ of the ‘symbols and sacraments of redemption’, resulting from ‘a nuptial ecclesiology that has become worryingly literal in its sexual allusions under Hans Urs von Balthasar’s influence’ (Beattie (2020), 151). In support, she notes that, as Pope John Paul II teaches in his 1988 encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Scripture uses both motherly and fatherly imagery to depict God, his divine generativity being neither feminine nor masculine but only depicted as such anthropomorphically and analogically. This point does not conclusively support her conclusion because what is at issue is not whether women can represent God the Father, who of course is sex-less, but whether they can represent the Son, who took flesh according to the male sex. She offers other arguments though. She notes that, as *Inter Insigniores* concedes, male priests represent not only the masculine Bridegroom but also the feminine Church, who is his Bride. It seems inconsistent to Beattie, on the one hand, to embrace a metaphorical economy of symbolism according to which male priests may represent the feminine entity of the Church without being biologically female, and yet, on the other hand, to insist on a literal economy of symbolism according to which women may not represent Christ because they are not biologically male. She finds a similar duplicity in the language of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, which often shifts without notice (or awareness?) from statements about femininity in an analogical, metaphorical sense that applies to all Christians, men and women, to statements about femininity in an essentialist sense that applies only to the female sex. According to *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Mary’s receptive, responsive, virginal love is the archetype of all Christian love for God, but is also ‘the fullness of the perfection of “what is characteristic of woman” of “what is feminine”’; no one can ‘fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self’, but women find ‘the entire meaning of their femininity’ by ‘making a sincere gift of self to others’; ‘God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being’, but God’s entrusts persons to women ‘in a special way – precisely by reason of their femininity – and this in a particular way determines their

vocation', etc.<sup>11</sup> Mary-like devotion, gift of self, and care for those entrusted to one are either the fulness of Christian life for men and women, or the fulness of what is unique to woman, but they cannot be both.<sup>12</sup> Coakley (2004) observes similar and other inconsistencies about gender in Hans Urs von Balthasar's writings on women's ordination.

In contrast to what Beattie and Coakley see as an inconsistently essentialist economy of priestly symbolism, Beattie and Coakley propose more 'fluid' or 'expansive' ones. Beattie stresses that femininity and masculinity have 'porous boundaries and shifting meanings' (Beattie (2020), 150). Like all concepts, they change as they are passed through cultures, 'morphing to fit the material realities within which faith finds incarnate expression'. The priest mediates a multiplicity of gendered images, both feminine and masculine, which together destabilize any gender-essentialist typology and point to a reality 'beyond all human concepts' (*ibid.*, 141). The priest is metaphorically both the Bride and the Bridegroom, father and mother, virgin and spouse, humanity and divinity, femininity and masculinity, etc. Coakley (2004) helps explain how this multiplicity of images could be mediated through one person. According to Coakley, as the priest shifts between facing east and facing west, addressing God and addressing the people, offering prayers on behalf of the people and distributing the gifts on behalf of Christ, the priest shifts between the human and the divine, the feminine and the masculine, taking up 'both in both' (Coakley (2004), 76). In the priestly office, the priest points away from herself to the interplay of human and divine, including the feminine and masculine elements of each, rendering herself 'prayerfully diaphanous to the fluidity of the proto-erotic dimensions of the divine nuptial enactment that one is "re-presenting"' (*ibid.*, 92). In this way, the priest is neither simply feminine nor masculine nor androgenous, but 'an inherently fluid gender role as beater of the liminal bounds between the divine and the human' (*ibid.*, 76).

As my survey has suggested, Beattie and Coakley's criticisms in particular, as well as the main objections to the symbolic argument more broadly, all boil down to objections to its underlying suppositions about priestly symbolism – whom the priest represents, whether priestly symbolism is gender-balanced, and if so, what role sexual difference plays in the mechanics of priestly symbolism. Consequently, it might seem that the success or failure of the symbolic argument turns on these points of tension. I want to show that this is not the case. As I argue below, even if one concedes suppositions favourable to the symbolic argument on each of these major points of contention in the debate, there are still resources to show that women might bear the relevant 'natural resemblance' to Christ for the priesthood. To that end, I first specify in more detail what the symbolic argument's account of priestly symbolism might be.

### Priestly symbolism in the symbolic argument

Unfortunately, beyond saying that the priest bears 'natural resemblance' to Christ, *Inter Insigniores* does not specify in much detail the symbolic mechanism by which the priest represents Christ. As a result, excavation and speculation are required. Three possible, representative explanations are:

- (1) Male bodies share sexual features with Christ's body. So, a male priest represents Christ's body by having a body that physically resembles Christ's body.
- (2) Society associates male bodies with masculine-coded traits. So, a male priest represents Christ's masculinity by having a body that the faithful naturally associate with masculinity.
- (3) Male bodies are characteristically capable of performing a biological function that is God's chosen metaphor for Christ's saving relationship to the Church as her Bridegroom. So, a male priest represents Christ by having bodily features the

function of which is a theologically important image of his role as the Saviour of the Church.

Of these three mechanisms of priestly symbolism, I want to argue that the third is both the most defensible and the one that accords best with the text of *Inter Insigniores*.

The first option assumes a liturgical typology that is implausibly reductionistic and materialistic. The liturgy is not a theatrical event, and the priest is not an actor who outwardly looks like Christ. If the priest represented Christ merely by physically resembling him, then it might follow that the Church ought to ordain those who are bearded or of Middle Eastern descent or in their thirties. Because, according to *Inter Insigniores*, the priest must be male to represent Christ (but need not possess these other traits), we may infer that, even on *Inter Insigniores*'s view, the way a priest represents Christ goes beyond his merely having a body that physically resembles Christ's. As *Inter Insigniores* explains,

in human beings the difference of sex exercises an important influence, much deeper than, for example, ethnic differences: the latter do not affect the human person as intimately as the difference of sex, which is directly ordained both for the communion of persons and for the generation of human beings.

The differences of sex that exert these deeper influences are at least partly archetypal in nature and not constituted merely by biological features. Likewise, Christ's masculine hypostasis is not constituted merely by Christ's male features. It is plausible, therefore, that what the priest represents about Christ is not just Christ's physical make-up but his masculine hypostasis more broadly, with its archetypal and theological significance. However the priest's body represents this about Christ, he cannot represent it merely by having a body that directly physically resembles it because it is not a merely physical entity.

Consequently, one might suppose that what a male priest represents about Christ is not just his physical body but his gender more broadly. This brings us to the second option proposed above: a male priest represents Christ's masculinity by having a body that the faithful naturally associate with masculinity. (I use the term 'masculinity' here to mean the traits that society generally associates with men who go beyond being male.) The problem with this proposed mechanism of priestly symbolism is that it is too dependent on whatever society regards as masculine at a given time. Conceptions of masculinity and femininity have changed. Recall that at one time the male sex was seen as the more fertile and generative of the two. If society's conception of masculinity shifted such that Christ no longer exhibited what society considered to be masculine traits, then the faithful might still associate a male priest with masculinity, but that conception of 'masculinity' wouldn't depict anything about Christ. As a result, on this mechanism of priestly symbolism anyway, a male priest would no longer represent Christ. If the first conception of priestly symbolism is too narrowly tied to the body to explain how a priest represents Christ's masculine hypostasis as a whole, this one is too untethered from the body to withstand cultural fads about masculinity and femininity.

The third option weaves between the dangers of the first and second. What the priest represents about Christ is not just Christ's physical body but his saving relationship to the Church as her Bridegroom, a feature of Christ which is archetypically masculine and theologically significant indeed. This role is not wholly dependent on societal ideas about masculinity because it is rooted in a concrete, biological function of the male body. As a result, any male priest throughout the ages can represent Christ regardless of what the prevailing culture regards as 'masculine'.

The text of *Inter Insigniores*, seems to suggest something like this third mechanism of priestly symbolism. According to *Inter Insigniores*, the reason the priest must bear ‘natural resemblance’ to Christ specifically with respect to his sex is that Christ’s role as the Saviour of the Church takes the form of a bridegroom’s relationship to his bride. This is why Christ’s male sex ‘cannot be disassociated from the economy of salvation’. When a priest consecrates the Eucharist, Christ exercises his ‘ministry of salvation’ through his priest, and so the priest represents Christ in his capacity as the Saviour of the Church. Therefore, to fittingly represent Christ in this context, the priest must share Christ’s sex. He must possess the kind of body which can perform the biological function of a bridegroom so that when he represents Christ as the Saviour, he can mediate Christ’s saving relationship to the Church as her Bridegroom.

It is beyond the scope of this article to definitively show that my proposed mechanism of priestly symbolism is the one that underlies *Inter Insigniores* and, moreover, that it solves once and for all the philosophical problem of how a physical body can represent something archetypal in nature. Nonetheless, I’ve given some evidence that its plausibility as an account of priestly symbolism at least surpasses that of the obvious, representative alternatives. Moreover, it grants to the symbolic argument its own suppositions about priestly symbolism more so than any other account of priestly symbolism proposed by any other major objection to the symbolic argument. It claims that the priest represents Christ and does not rely on the priest’s representing Mary or the Church. It appeals to gendered realities, not just Christ’s humanity, to explain how the priest bears ‘natural resemblance’ to Christ. It grounds gendered imagery not in abstract, shifting, or culturally constructed conceptions of masculinity and femininity, but rather in the concrete workings of the male and female bodies, rendering it much more essentialist than Beattie and Coakley’s economies of priestly symbolism. In addition, Christ’s role as the Saviour of the Church informs what features it picks out as the means by which a priest represents Christ. For all of these reasons, my proposed account of priestly symbolism is a charitable heuristic of the symbolic argument’s (underspecified) account of priestly symbolism. In the next section, I argue that there are resources within this account of priestly symbolism to justify ordaining women on symbolic grounds.

### **Seeing the image of Christ in the maternal body**

If Christ’s saving relationship to the Church only took the form of that of a bridegroom to his bride, then given my proposed mechanism of priestly symbolism, it might make sense only to ordain those who have bodies that can function as a bridegroom’s does. However, since the publication of *Inter Insigniores*, scholars have recovered an important historical tradition of understanding Christ’s relationship to the Church as that of a mother to her child.<sup>13</sup> This tradition of understanding God as Mother suggests maternal ways in which Christ relates to the Church.

The parts of the tradition that do so most compellingly for my purposes compare Christ’s ministry to the concrete workings of the maternal body. Some parts of the tradition compare God to a mother, but do not clearly compare Christ to her. Instead, they compare the Holy Spirit or divine activity in general to her. As a result, it is not evident from these texts alone whether it is appropriate to depict the person of Christ in particular as a mother. Other parts of the tradition compare Christ to a mother, but do so by noticing that Christ exhibits maternal traits such as sweetness, tenderness, and fondness. These comparisons rely on traditional stereotypes about maternal character and psychology which many today would regard as a shaky foundation for theology. It is not obvious, for example, that mothers are actually more tender than fathers or ought to be thought of as such. The tangible workings of the maternal body transcend culture

much more than stereotypes about maternal character or psychology. Comparing Christ's ministry to basic activities of the childbearing body offers us a concrete means of understanding Jesus as Mother.

The Jesus as Mother tradition suggests four main ways in which mothers resemble Christ in their bodies. First, the pregnant body is a site of union, intra-dwelling, and incorporation between persons. The Scriptures portray the saving union between Christ and the Church with images of corporal dependence and integration – as members sharing one body and as a branch growing out of a vine (1 Cor. 12:12–14, John 15:1–8). The Christian's life becomes one with Christ's as she lives and abides in Christ, and Christ lives and abides in her. The Jesus as Mother tradition illustrates this theology by depicting the Christian as a child in the womb of Christ.<sup>14</sup> Just as the child *in utero* lives incorporated into the mother, dwelling within her body in a state of total dependence and profound biological at-one-ment with her, so the Christian is depicted as taking refuge inside the wounds of Christ, sustained in his side by his breath and blood, incorporated there into Christ's own body.

Second, the maternal body sacrifices itself for the life of another. Just as Christ on the cross gave himself up for the life of the world, so mothers in childbirth give their bodies for the life of their children. Sources in the Jesus as Mother tradition describe Christ as 'birthing' his Bride the Church from his side on the cross, just as Eve was taken from Adam's side. Medieval mystics employ particularly vivid birthing imagery in praise of Christ's passion, colourfully describing his agony on the cross as the throes of childbirth. Other sources focus on the blood and water that flowed from his side, likening it to that of a womb, to the water that gushed from the rock when Moses struck its side to nourish the people, and to the waters of baptism in which mother Church, the body of Christ, rebirths the faithful. Byzantine icons of the crucifixion standardly depict the water and blood that flowed from Christ's side as flowing from a wound oddly high up on his body, in his chest near to his breast.

This brings us to the third way in which mothers resemble Christ in their bodies; the maternal body offers itself as food. Just as Christ gives his own body to the faithful for their spiritual sustenance, so breastfeeding mothers offer their bodies as food for the physical sustenance of their children. Many patristic and medieval sources in the Jesus as Mother tradition employ milk imagery surrounding the Eucharist. There was even an early practice in North Africa and Rome of liturgically offering the newly baptized a blessed cup of milk and honey before feeding them the Eucharist (Berger (2011), 80–81; O'Donnell (2019), ch. 2), liturgically representing the Apostle Paul's maternal feeding of the spiritually young with metaphorical 'milk' before 'solid food' (1 Cor. 3:2). The common belief in ancient and medieval medicine that breastmilk was a form of blood further reinforced the early Church's association of the Eucharist with breastmilk.

Fourth, and overlapping with the other three, the maternal body is a source and sustainer of life. Just as all things were created through Christ, so God creates children through the mother's body. Employing almost maternal language, the Apostle Paul teaches that Christ 'gives everyone life and breath' through himself and 'in Him we live and move and have our being' for 'we are his offspring' (Acts 17:25, 28, Colossians 1:15–17). Similarly, a mother's body gives life and breath to her child through herself, and in her womb the child lives and moves and has its being. In addition to being an apt image of the creation of natural life through Christ, the maternal body is also an image of the Christian's entrance into supernatural life in Christ. A Christian is born again into new spiritual life through the waters of baptism, just as a child is born into life through the waters of birth. Christ himself compares new life in him to childbirth when he tells Nicodemus that he must be 'born again' 'of water and the Spirit' if he is to 'enter the Kingdom of God' (John 3:3, 7). Understanding water and Spirit to mean

baptism, the early Church associated baptism with the female body, at times even modelling baptismal fonts after female anatomy.<sup>15</sup>

In light of these maternal dimensions to Christ's saving ministry, one might suppose that just as Christ's male sex 'cannot be disassociated from the economy of salvation', so the maternal body 'cannot be disassociated from the economy of salvation'; that just as the male body provides the faithful with an image of Christ in his office as the Bridegroom of the Church, so the female body provides an image of him in his maternal relationship to the Church. As a result, there are many ways in which a female priest may actually be an apt representative of Christ. It is apt that she who offers the sacrifice of Christ's body on the altar be she who offers herself in childbearing, that she who nurtures the flock with the feast of Christ's body and blood be she who nurtures children with her own body, that she who serves as spiritual midwife to the rebirth of Christians in baptism be she who births new life into the world, that she who incorporates the faithful into the body of Christ be she who incorporates another into herself as a member of her own body, that she who brings the faithful into union with Christ be she who carries another dwelling inside her in corporal union with her.

It would be not only apt for a female priest to represent Christ in these ways, but moreover, in so doing, she would be representing him by means of the same mechanisms of priestly symbolism by which I argued a male priest (at least plausibly) represents Christ the Bridegroom. She would represent Christ by having bodily features the function of which are theologically important images of Christ's saving relationship to the Church. She would have breasts and a womb that can work in ways that are metaphors for Christ's passion for the Church, his union with her, his gift of new life to her in baptism, and his sustaining of her in the Eucharist. She would represent Christ not just by sharing his humanity, but in a highly gender-valanced way, by having a body that relates to a child similarly to how he relates to his Church. Thus, in representing Christ, she would not obliterate sexual difference in liturgy, but rather reveal the glory of Christ in what is unique to women. Moreover, she would do so perhaps most vividly precisely in her celebration of the Eucharist, that is at the same liturgical juncture that the male priest is thought to most represent Christ the Bridegroom. In all of this, she would emerge as a symbolically apt priestly minister, not in virtue of being an apt representative of Mary or the Church (although she is that too), but in virtue of being an apt representative of Christ, as *Inter Insigniores* insists the priest must. In this way, she would represent Jesus as Mother for the same reasons and by means of the same mechanisms that I argued a male priest (at least plausibly) represents Christ the Bridegroom in *Inter Insigniores*. Thus, far from excluding women from the priesthood, the symbolic argument, as essentialist-leaning as it is, may actually be repurposed to recommend them for it.

## Implications

There are a variety of conclusions one might draw at this point. One might suppose that the Church should go ahead and apply the symbolic argument to both the male and female body, ordaining women in virtue of the Jesus as Mother tradition, and likewise ordaining men in virtue of nuptial ecclesiology. Others, especially those wary of overly sexualizing the symbolism of the priesthood,<sup>16</sup> might read my argument as a *reductio* on the symbolic argument and conclude that the Church should jettison it altogether, just as it has discarded many traditional arguments against women's ordination.<sup>17</sup> Alternatively, one might suppose that although the working account of priestly symbolism that I defend and find consistent with the text of *Inter Insigniores* can be repurposed to justify women's ordination, a version of the symbolic argument that deployed different mechanics of symbolism might be sophisticated enough to apply to only men and not

women. Whatever these mechanics are, it is not obvious what they are like, on what theological grounds they should be preferred to the mechanics I propose, and how they could avoid the pitfalls I discuss of being too tethered to or too untethered from the body. Answers to these questions would greatly advance the symbolic argument.

But beyond the issue of women's ordination, the capacity of the female body to symbolize Jesus as Mother speaks to the Christological significance of what is unique to women. Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, promulgated by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI in 1965, teaches 'Whoever follows after Christ, the perfect man, becomes himself more of a man. For by His incarnation the Father's Word assumed, and sanctified through His cross and resurrection, the whole of man, body and soul, and through that totality the whole of nature created by God for man's use' (§41). In response, Janet Martin Soskice rightly wonders,

What can it mean for women to say that 'Whoever follows Christ, the perfect man, himself becomes more of a man' (§41: *Quicumque Christum sequitur, Hominem perfectum, et ipse magis homo fit*)? Do those aspects in which a woman is to become perfected or 'more of a man' include only those aspects she shares with males, like her intellect and her life of virtue, or do they also include her mothering, her loving, her sense of her own embodiment which must be different from that of a man? Is Christ the fulfilment of female 'men', as well as male 'men', and if so, how? (Soskice (2008), 47–48)

Understanding ways in which Christ cares for the Church as a mother cares for her child gives us a paradigm for understanding how women might be Christ-like, not just in virtue of things they share with men, like intellect or virtue, but in fact in virtue of what they do not share, like their capacity to carry and birth and feed. It offers us a way of making sense of how Christ, although he did not take flesh as a woman, still sanctified the whole of woman, body and soul, breast and womb, her totality and whole nature, created by God in his image.

## Notes

1. *Commentaria in quatuor libros sententiarum*, III, d. 12, a. 3, q. 1, 270–271. I am indebted to Soskice (2008, 85), who surveys medieval explanations for why Christ took flesh in the male sex, for making me aware of Bonaventure's view.
2. Terrence Cuneo (2016, 41) discusses this difficulty.
3. Tina Beattie (2020, 152–153) rightly points out that Aquinas makes this statement in the context of arguing that women's inherent subordination to men renders them ontologically improper matter for the sacrament of Holy Orders. Because the magisterium, on the one hand, disavows the old belief that women are inherently subordinate to men; but, on the other hand, uses for their own purposes Aquinas words that appear in the midst of an argument that assumes so much, Beattie claims that *Inter Insigniores* is 'based on a misreading of Thomas Aquinas' (*ibid.*, 140). A more charitable interpretation is that that the magisterium has read Aquinas correctly and is applying the backbone of Aquinas's sacramental theology in a new way, one which avoids Aquinas's 800-year-old baggage. Just because a principle is originally misapplied doesn't mean that a subsequent, different application of that principle is a misreading of the original principle.
4. For example, see Beattie (2002), ch. 3; *Idem* (2004), ch. 7; Coakley (2004); Jensen (1993); Wijngaards (1986), ch. 9; Keifer (1978); Kilmartin (1977).
5. See Witt (2020), 204–208; ST III, q. 78, a. 1.
6. For discussions of the priesthood of the Mother of God, see: O'Donnell (2019), chs 4, 5; Berger (2011), 147–154; Neubert (2009); Laurentin (1953); Beattie (2002), ch. 8; Samaha (2000); Youssef (2020); Cardile (1984); Cunningham (2020); Kateusz (2019), ch. 4.
7. For example, see Beattie (2002), ch. 3; *Idem* (2004), ch. 7; Coakley (2004); Jensen (1993); Wijngaards (1986), ch. 9; Keifer (1978); Kilmartin (1977).
8. For example, see Beattie (2002), ch. 8; Wijngaard (1986), ch. 8.

**9.** For example, see Beattie (2002), ch. 3; *Idem* (2004), ch. 7; *Idem* (2020); Ruether (2001), ch. 4; Torrance (1993); Johnson (1993), ch. 8; Wijngaards (1986), ch. 7; Wright (1977).

**10.** Some make the even stronger claim that if women are not fit to liturgically represent Christ, then this suggests that the incarnation cannot save them. For example, according to Beattie (2020), if bearing ‘natural resemblance’ to Christ means being male, then this suggests that ‘the redemptive power of Christ’s humanity resides in his assuming male flesh rather than human flesh’, an idea which together with the orthodox doctrine that ‘what is not assumed is not saved’ ‘comes perilously close to excluding the female body from the redeeming grace of the incarnation’ (*ibid.*, 153). This line of reasoning posits the demanding (and to my mind dubious) assumption that if women are to be saved by the incarnation, the kind of resemblance to humankind Christ had to assume to save humankind is necessarily the same kind of resemblance as the resemblance that the priest must have to Christ to properly liturgically represent him. A less demanding (and to my mind more plausible) view is that it is merely theologically fitting or compelling that these resemblances be the same kind of resemblances, not that they must be so for God to save women by the incarnation.

**11.** Beattie (2002), ch. 3; *Idem* (2004), ch. 7, makes the same series of arguments that she makes here.

**12.** This is Beattie’s underlying assumption. I myself suspect that there may be a nuanced way of reconciling these ideas.

**13.** A few notable developments in this literature include Sister Ritamary Bradley’s (1978) tracing of the patristic origins of understanding God as Mother, Caroline Walker Bynum’s (1982) discussion of its development in the Middle Ages, particularly amongst twelfth-century Cistercians, and Elizabeth Johnson’s (1993) analysis of biblical, feminine imagery for God. Other helpful discussions include: Pagels (1976); Foss (1986); Soskice (2008), ch. 5; Berger (2011), ch. 4; O’Donnell (2019), ch. 2.

**14.** For example, Cistercian abbot Guerric of Igny (c. 1070–1157) writes:

[Christ] opened himself to me wholly that I might enter ‘the place of his wonderful tent’ and be protected in its recesses. . . . linger in the wounds of Christ . . . He is the cleft rock . . . do not fly only to him but into him, go into the clefts of the rock, hide in dug ground, hide yourself in the very hands that were cleft, in the side that was dug. For what is the wound in Christ’s side but a door in the side of the Ark for those who are saved from the flood. . . . he opened his side in order that the blood of the wound might give you life, the warmth of his body revive you, the breath of his heart flow into you as if through a free and open passage. There you will lie hidden in safety . . . There you will certainly not freeze, since in the bowel of Christ charity does not grow cold. (Guerric (1970), vol. 2, sermon for Palm Sunday, ch. 5)

**15.** See Sonne de Torrens (2006), 35–49.

**16.** Hans Urs von Balthasar is infamous for his highly sexual depictions of the priesthood: ‘The priestly ministry and the sacrament are means of passing on seed. They are a male preserve. They aim at inducing in the Bride her function as a woman’ (Balthasar (1965), 24); ‘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?’ (*Idem* (1975), 150).

**17.** See Witt (2020), ch. 3.

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