

NOTE

A SCOTISTIC ASIDE TO THE ORDINATION-OF-WOMEN DEBATE

I have been following with interest the articles and notes by Dennis Ferrara¹ and Sara Butler² on the meaning of the formula "in persona Christi" and the question of women's ordination. They are a stunning intellectual tour de force and marvelous and critical contributions to our theological and historical understanding of the question of the ordination of women to the priesthood.

One of the medieval authors referred to is Duns Scotus. Though primarily interested in metaphysical questions, Scotus does ask in his *Ordinatio* if the sex of a woman impedes the reception of orders.³

Ferrara notes that Scotus's argument is extrinsic in that he relies on the argument from Christ's institution of the sacrament. Thus both Ferrara and the official commentary on *Inter insigniores* quote Scotus. The commentary declares: "It must not be considered to have been determined by the Church. It comes from Christ. The Church would not have presumed to deprive the female sex, for no fault of its own, of an act that might licitly have pertained to it."⁴ Ferrara had already offered a quotation in which Scotus argues against the ordination of women based on the assertion that a "woman is naturally in a state of subjection in relation to man, and therefore cannot possess a rank of eminence over any man . . ."⁵ Ferrara's presentation of Scotus's argument, as well as that of *Inter insigniores*, is essentially correct. However one important phrase which put Scotus's argument in a different light is left out of the first quotation, as well as a selection of quotes from the text of *Inter insigniores*. This is the full quotation from Scotus:

But this third impossibility is found in regard to a woman. This is not something held just because the Church decided it so, but this is something received from Christ. For the Church would never have presumed that the entire female sex through no fault of its own was deprived of an action ordained for the salvation of the woman herself and of others in the Church through her, *since this would seem to be the greatest of injustices*, not only to the sex as a whole,

¹ Dennis M. Ferrara, "Representation or Self-Effacement? The Axiom *In Persona Christi* in St. Thomas and the Magisterium," *TS* 55 (1994) 195–224; "The Ordination of Women: Tradition and Meaning," *TS* 55 (1994) 706–19; "In Persona Christi: A Reply to Sara Butler," *TS* 56 (1995) 81–91.

² Sara Butler, M.S.B.T., "In Persona Christi: A Response to Dennis M. Ferrara," *TS* 56 (1995) 61–80.

³ *Ordinatio* 4, d. 25, q. 2 (Paris: L. Vives, 1891–, vol. 19.137–41), translation by Allan B. Wolter, O.F.M.

⁴ As quoted in Ferrara, "The Ordination of Women" 716.

⁵ *Ibid.* 712.

but even to a few persons. If, however, it were at present licit by divine law for women to have an ecclesiastical Order, it could well redound to their salvation and that of others through their ministry. And the Apostle was not establishing just a statute when, referring to public teaching in the Church, he said (I Tim. 2): 'I do not permit a woman to act as teacher,' but I think it was because Christ has not allowed it.⁶

What is interesting about the argument when it includes the phrase I italicized is that Scotus identified the issue for what it is: a question of justice. He recognized what a great injustice the deprivation of ordination to women would be, absent a direct command of Christ. For Scotus, then, given the injustice the deprivation of ordination to women would confer upon them, the only possible justification could be a direct command from Christ. Scotus indeed, as other medieval theologians, used the arguments that Mary was not ordained and that women occupy a lower rank than men do. Yet I think the inclusion of this particular phrase indicates the seriousness with which Scotus took the issue and because of this can only revert to a command of Christ to resolve this problem of justice.

This phrase also poses an alternative explanation as to why Scotus referred to a command of Christ. Ferrara suggests that this type of extrinsic argument relying on such a command is understandable in light of the condemnations of 1277.⁷ The more complete citation also suggests that Scotus was so struck by the injustice of the situation that a command of Christ could be the only possible explanation.

Whether Scotus would have actively argued in favor of women's ordination had he been persuaded that there was in fact no command of Christ preventing it is an unanswerable question. Nonetheless his recognition of the severe injustice of not ordaining women, absent a command of Christ, gives a different nuance to the question. A critical key in resolving the issue from a Scotistic perspective, then, is the need to locate such a command. My sense of Scotus's position is that one needs a clear and relatively unambiguous statement that shows that Christ actually prohibited the ordination of women. Only the reality of such an unambiguous statement would overcome the clear and grave injustice that such a denial would bring. Perhaps finding such a text will be as difficult as finding one that actually shows that Christ directly intended the ordination of men.

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⁶ *Ordinatio* 4, d. 25, q. 2 (my emphasis).

⁷ "The Ordination of Women" 714-15.