

## THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

GARY MACY

*[The author analyzes a number of references to the ordination of women in the early Middle Ages in light of the meaning given to ordination at that time and in the context of the ministries of early medieval women. The changing definition of ordination in the twelfth century is then assessed in view of contemporary shifts in the understanding of the sacraments. Finally, a brief commentary is presented on the historical and theological significance of this material.]*

IN HER PROVOCATIVE WORK, *The Lady was a Bishop*, Joan Morris argued that the great mitred abbesses of the Middle Ages were treated as equivalent to bishops. In partial support of her contention, she quoted a *capitulum* from the Mozarabic *Liber ordinum* that reads “*Ordo ad ordinandam abbatissam*.”<sup>1</sup> Despite this intriguing find, there seems to have been no further research into the ordination of women in the early Middle Ages. A survey of early medieval documents demonstrates, however, how widespread was the use of the terms *ordinatio*, *ordinare*, and *ordo* in regard to the commissioning of women’s ministries during that era. The terms are used not only to describe the installation of abbesses, as Morris noted, but also in regard to deaconesses and to holy women, that is, virgins, widows,

GARY MACY is professor in the department of theology and religious studies at the University of San Diego, California. He received his Ph.D. in 1978 from the University of Cambridge. Besides a history of the Eucharist entitled *The Banquet’s Wisdom: A Short History of the Theologies of the Lord’s Supper* (Paulist, 1992), he recently published *Treasures from the Storehouse: Essays on the Medieval Eucharist* (Liturgical, 1999). He also edited last year’s proceedings of the annual convention of the College Theology Society: *Theology and the New Histories* (Orbis, 1999). In addition he has published a number of articles in journals and monographs on various aspects of medieval culture and sacramental life.

<sup>1</sup> *The Lady Was a Bishop: The Hidden History of Women with Clerical Ordination and the Jurisdiction of Bishops* (New York: Macmillan, 1973) 130; see also 8 and 13. I wish to thank Marie Ann Mayeski, J. Frank Henderson, and William W. Bassett for their helpful suggestions. Particularly useful was Dr. Mayeski’s paper, “Excluded by the Logic of Control: Women in Medieval Society and Scholastic Theology,” *Equal at the Creation: Sexism, Society, and Christian Thought*, ed. Joseph Martos and Pierre Hégy (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1998) 70–95.

nuns, or canonesses (*monacha* or *sanctimonialis*). In my article I offer a brief overview of early medieval references to the ordination of women and place those references into the broader understanding of ordination operative at that time. I attempt to present the roles played by medieval religious women so as to locate them within that clerical world. Finally, in a concluding section, I offer some thoughts on the historical conclusions one can draw from this data, and I discuss the theological assumptions underlying differing approaches to the status of women in the Church and indeed the status of ordination during those centuries.

### TEXTS RECORDING THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN

Several medieval ordinals, including the Mozarabic ordinal mentioned by Morris, refer to the commissioning rites for women as ordinations. In the *Ordo ad ordinandam abbatissam* there is an entire rite for ordination.<sup>2</sup> Marius Férotin, the editor of this rite, noted that he had found a second manuscript containing a rite *De ordinatione et electione abbatisse* in the Royal Academy of Science in Madrid. The rite apparently dates from the eighth or ninth century.<sup>3</sup> A Romano-Germanic pontifical from the tenth century offers two references to “*ordinatio abbatissae canonicam regulam profitentis*.”<sup>4</sup> A twelfth-century Romano-Germanic pontifical in the library of Bamberg includes the section on the ordination of religious women “*Ordinatio sanctimonialium*.” William of Durand’s famous 13th-century pontifical contains both the title “*De ordinatione diaconissae*” and a later copy of that work adds the title “*De ordinatione et consecratione virginum*.” William added that although deaconesses were once ordained in the Church, this no longer took place.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The ordo is contained in *Le Liber ordinum en usage dans l’église wisigothique et mozarabe d’Espagne du cinquième au onzième siècle*, ed. Marius Férotin, reprint of 1904 edition, ed. Anthony Ward and Cuthbert Johnson, *Bibliotheca Ephemerides liturgicae subsidia* 83, *Instrumenta liturgica quarreriensia* 6 (Rome: C.L.V. Edizioni liturgiche, 1996) 113–15.

<sup>3</sup> “J’ai copié à Madrid dans un manuscrit de l’an 976, aujourd’hui à l’Académie Royale d’Histoire (codex 62, fol. 63), un document, qui me semble inédit, sur l’*ordinatio abbatissae*. Il vaut la peine d’être signalé ici, quoique sa composition ne remonte pas, d’après toute apparence, au delà huitième siècle, peut-être même du neuvième. Il est tiré d’un texte de la Règle de saint Benoît, adapté à usage d’une communauté de vierges. C’est ainsi qu’à la place des mots *abbas, frater*, etc., on lit: *abbatissa, soror*, etc. — . . . Voici ce passage: «*De ordinatione et electione abbatisse*»” (ibid. 115 n. 2).

<sup>4</sup> René Metz, “Benedictio sive consecratio virginum,” *Ephemerides liturgicae* 80 (1966) 263–93; for a discussion of the relevant texts, see 284–85. I thank Marie Anne Mayeski for bringing this article to my attention.

<sup>5</sup> “Diaconissa olim, non tamen ante annum quadragesimum, ordinabatur hoc

Popes and bishops referred to the commissioning of deaconesses, abbesses, and nuns as ordination. In 1018 Pope Benedict VIII conferred on the cardinal bishop of Porto the right to ordain bishops, priests, deacons, deaconesses, subdeacons, churches, and altars.<sup>6</sup> Pope Callistus II granted a privilege in the year 1123 to the convent of the Holy Savior and St. Julia in Brescia, and reminded the abbess that the bishop has the right to ordain abbesses, nuns, and all other clerics moved to take sacred orders.<sup>7</sup> Bishop Gilbert of Limerick included in his *De usu ecclesiae* the injunction “The bishop ordains abbots, abbesses, priests, and the six other grades.”<sup>8</sup> In the Chronicle of Thietmar, bishop of Merseburg (d. 1018), it is recorded that “the same woman who at that time was twelve years old was veiled on Sunday, the kalends of May and on the next day ordained abbess.”<sup>9</sup> A tenth-century letter of Atto, bishop of Vercelli, described the initiation of deaconesses in the early Church as an ordination and that “therefore for

---

modo” (cited in *Les ordines romani du haut moyen âge*, 5 vols., ed. Michel Andrieu, *Spicilegium sacrum lovaniense*, Études et documents 28 (Louvain: Spicilegium sacrum lovaniense, 1956–65) 4.147; see also *ibid.* 3.411. Hereafter cited as Andrieu.

<sup>6</sup> “Pari modo concedimus et confirmamus vobis vestrisque successoribus in perpetuum omnem ordinationem episcopalem, tam de presbyteris quam diaconibus vel diaconissis seu subdiaconibus, ecclesiis vel altaribus, quae in tota Transiberi necessaria fuerit” (cited in Andrieu 4.144).

<sup>7</sup> “Chrisma, oleum sanctum, consecrationes altarum sive basilicarum, ordinationes abbatissae, vel monacharum sive caeterorum clericorum, qui ad sacros fuerint ordines promovendi, seu quidquid ad sacrum mysterium pertinet, a quibuscunque catholicis praesulibus fuerint postulata, gratis concedimus, et absque reprehensione tribuenda, sicut Anselperga prima abbatissa ejusdem monasterii, a Paulo beatae memoriae, apostolicae sedis pontifice, pro fragilitate feminei sexus obtinuit.” Epistola 380 (3 April 1123) in *Bullaire du Pape Calixte II, 1119–1124: Essai de restitution*, 2 vols., ed. Ulysse Robert (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1891) 2.165. An earlier edition of Callistus’s letter was included as Epistola 222 in PL 163.1284a-b. This same formula is used to remind abbots of the bishop’s duty and makes clear that the *praesul* mentioned here would be the local bishop. See *Bullaire du Pape Calixte II* 2.104 (PL 163.1264b); 2.131 (PL 163.1273a); 2.161 (PL 163.1281c); 2.163 (PL 163.1282c).

<sup>8</sup> “Ordinat Episcopus Abbatem, Abbatissam, Sacerdotum et caeteros sex gradus” (PL 159.1002d). Gilbert was a student of Anselm of Canterbury and bishop of Limerick from A.D. 1101. He died ca. 1140. See A. Schmitt, “Gilbert V. Limerick,” *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 2nd ed. 10 vols., ed. Michael Buchberger (Freiburg: Herder, 1957–68) 4.890.

<sup>9</sup> “Postea vero archipresul, a cesare, patrino suo, rogatus, eandem cum iam duodecim esset annorum, II Kal. Maii die dominica velavit et in proxima die ad abbatissam in patris presentia ordinavit; quod postea eum nimis penituit” (*Die Chronik des Bischofs Thietmar von Merseburg und ihre Korveier Überarbeitung*, ed. Robert Holtmann, *Monumenta Germaniae historicae, Scriptores rerum germanicarum* 9 [Berlin: Werdmannsche Bundhandlung, 1935] 93). An earlier edition is printed in PL 139.1223c–1224a.

the aid of men, devout women were ordained leaders of worship in the holy Church.”<sup>10</sup>

Other sources from this period speak of the ordination of women as well. The editors of the *Annales Camaldulenses* recorded a foundation charter from the year 867 granting lands to establish a convent of 20 nuns. The donors, Count Winigris and his wife Richild, insisted that the selection and ordination of the abbess remain firmly in their hands and in the hands of their successors.<sup>11</sup> A charter of Emperor Otto II dated 961 described how Bishop Bernhard of Halberstadt desired that a monastery for religious women be constructed and that his niece, Gundradam, be ordained abbess for that place.<sup>12</sup> A charter dated 1043 from the convent of Saint-Geniès in Maguelone also described how a young woman, Albergis, was elected and accepted by the acclamation of her fellow nuns. “And in this same year the bishop ordained and blessed the aforementioned young woman.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “Ad adjumentum virorum etiam religiosae mulieres in sancta ecclesia cultrices ordinabantur.” Atto of Vercelli, *Epistola [8] ad Ambrosium sacerdotem*, PL 134.114a. The word “cultrices” is difficult to translate. Originally it would refer to a “female laborer” but could also mean “female worshippers” or even “female priest.” See *A Latin Dictionary*, ed. Charleston Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969) 488, and the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P.G. W. Glare (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982) 466. On the problem of translating references to religious women in the Middle Ages, see *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, ed. Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halborg (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 1992) ix. Atto was the second bishop of Vercelli, governing from 924 until his death in 961. For recent information on Atto, see Edward A. Synan, “Atto of Vercelli,” *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph R. Strayer (New York: Charles Scribners, 1982–89) 1.641.

<sup>11</sup> The selection process is quite complex and repeated several times. One summary reads “Nam et ipsa electione et ordinatione de ipso monasterio sine licentia et consensum de heredibus et proeredibus nostris stabilis esse non debeat” (*Annales Camaldulenses ordinis Sancti Benedicti*, ed. Giovanni Mittarelli and Anselmo Costadoni (Venice: Jo. Baptistam Pasquali, 1755) 1. col. 23; see also *ibid.* col. 24 “Et quod ne permittat Deus fieri, si casus evenerit, quod de meo cispite, aut de Richil [sic] conjuge mea inventa non fuerit, que in suprascripto monasterio abbatissa esse possit, vel si fuerit, et abbatissa esse noluerit, tunc ipsa monachas de predicto monasterio habeat potestatem et licentiam una cum notitia de heredibus ac proheredibus nostris inter se abbatissam eligere et ordinare in ipso prefato almo loco, ut omnia statuta capitula faciat et adimpleat, ut supra legitur.”

<sup>12</sup> “Quapropter notum esse volumus, qualiter venerabilis Bernhardus Halverstedensis ecclesie episcopus nostram adiens clementiam, diu multumque postulans ex paterna hereditate in villa que vocatur Hathumeresleuu monasterium sanctimonialium construi ac suam neptem scilicet Gundradam ibidem abbatissam ordinari triumque tantummodo decimationem villarum Hathumeresleuu, Hiteburnun, Delthrop ad supplementum ipsius coenobii prestari desideravit” (*Diplomata regum et imperatorum Germaniae*, vol. 2, part 1 *Ottonis II diplomata*, ed. Th. Sickel, Monumenta Germaniae historica inde ab anno Christi quingentesimo usque ad annum millesimum et quingentesimum [Hannover: Hansche Buchhandlung, 1888] 11).

<sup>13</sup> “Uno animo parique consensu ibi [sanctimoniales] proposuerunt quandam

Finally, in an interesting but ambiguous passage from the *Rule for Virgins*, the seventh-century missionary Waldebert warned: "None of the nuns should presume, however, either to receive confession or to give penance *sine ordinatione abbatissae*."<sup>14</sup> The phrase could either mean that confession and penance cannot be celebrated without the permission of the abbess or confession and penance cannot be celebrated without ordination to the state of abbess. Since the Rule makes provision for confession to be heard by the abbess' designate, the first meaning seems most likely.<sup>15</sup>

### "Ordination" in the Early Middle Ages

These references to the ordination of women from the early Middle Ages are by no means exhaustive. A thorough and determined search of the sources would, I am certain, add considerably to this list. However, even this sampling demonstrates that neither liturgies, nor popes, nor bishops had a problem referring particularly to deaconesses and abbesses, or to nuns, as persons entering into an ecclesiastical order through a ritual ordination.<sup>16</sup> None of these sources distinguished the ordination of deaconesses, abbesses, or nuns from that of priests or deacons. In fact, two of the sources include the ordination of women along with other forms of male clerical ordination. It should be noted as well that the sources quoted cover the fifth through the twelfth centuries, some seven hundred years, not an insignificant period of Christian history.

Historically, however, the words *ordo*, *ordinatio*, and *ordinare* had a far different meaning in the early Middle Ages than they came to acquire in later centuries. The problem with references to ordination in the Middle

---

puellam, nomine Alimburgis, clarissimo genere exortam, specie pulcherrimam, bonitate conspicuam, in universa morum honestate praeclaram, qua electio atque conclamatio facta est in anno Incarnationis dominicae MXLII, aera millesia LXXX, indictione X, concurrentibus III, Christiano populo celebrante dominicam sexagesimalem. In hoc eodemque anno conventus factus est apud praefatum locum, ibique adveniens Arnaldus, gratia Dei sanctae sedis Magalonenis reverendissimus pontifex, ordinavit atque benedixit supradictam puellam . . . ." (Carta 221 in *Histoire générale de Languedoc avec des notes et les pièces justificatives*, ed. Claude de Vic and J. Vaissete [Toulouse: E. Privat, 1872–92, 1893] 5. cols. 445–46).

<sup>14</sup> "Nulla tamen monarcharum vel confessionem recipere, vel poenitentiam dare sine ordinatione abbatissae praesumat" (*Regula ad virgines*, chap. 7; PL 88.1060c). On Waldebert, see W. Böhme, "Waldebert," *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 10.932–33.

<sup>15</sup> "Abbatissa vel praeposita, vel quaelibet seniorum sororum cui ab abbatissa fuerit commissum ut confessiones recipiat . . ." *ibid.* (PL 88.1060b).

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of an eleventh-century *ordo* for the consecration of nuns, see Hermann Gräf, "Ad monachum faciendum: Die Mönchsprofess nach einem Fest-Sacramentar von Venedig aus dem 11. Jh.," *Ephemerides liturgicae* 88 (1974) 353–69.

Ages, in fact, lies precisely in the lack of precision with which that term was used. Yves Congar, in a brilliant exploration into the words *ordinare* and *ordinatio*, suggests that particularly in the period before the 13th century considerable diversity existed both over what constitutes an *ordinatio* and which states or *ordines* should be considered “clerical.”<sup>17</sup>

Ordination, for example, was not seen as irreversible until the 13th century. Before that time, deposed clergy were considered laity and even reordained when recanting from heresy.<sup>18</sup> According to Nathan Mitchell: “Not until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries did the Church’s official teaching, expressed in ecumenical councils, directly affirm the view that order is a sacrament which is permanently effective and ‘imprints character’.”<sup>19</sup>

Pierre van Beneden has argued that early Christians appropriated the language of “ordination” for use in their communities not so much from Roman law as from everyday usage. This “everyday” use of the terms *ordo* and *ordinare* continued throughout the Middle Ages as even a cursory glance at any thesaurus of medieval Latin will show.<sup>20</sup> *Ordo* could refer simply to one’s state of life and *ordinare* would still be used in its original sense of providing order either in a political or metaphoric sense.<sup>21</sup> It is no wonder that canonists and theologians had difficulty in clearly differentiating which of the many appointments to posts both civil and ecclesiastic

<sup>17</sup> Yves Congar, “Note sur une valeur des termes «ordinare, ordinatio,” *Revue des sciences religieuses* 58 (1984) 7–14.

<sup>18</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw, “Medieval Ordination,” *The Study of Liturgy*, ed. C. Jones et al. (New York: Oxford University, 1992) 377–78.

<sup>19</sup> Nathan Mitchell, *Mission and Ministry: History and Theology in the Sacrament of Order* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1982) 254.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., *Glossarium mediae et infirmae latinitatis*, ed. Charles Du Cange (Graz: Akademische Druck, 1954; reprint of the Paris ed. 1883–87) 6.58–59 s.v. “ordinatio,” 60–62 s.v. “ordo,” and *Novum glossarium mediae latinitatis ab anno DCCC usque ad annum MCC*, vol. O, ed. Franz Blatt and Yves Lefèvre (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1983) cols. 696–708 s.v. “ordinatio,” cols. 714–29; s.v. “ordino,” and cols. 731–72 s.v. “ordo.”

<sup>21</sup> For an example from the late tenth century, see “siquidem utroque sexu fidelium tres ordines ac si tres gradus, in sancta et universali Ecclesia esse novimus; quorum licet nullus sine peccato sit, tamen primus est bonus, secundus melior, tertius est optimus. Et primus quidem ordo est in utroque sexu conjugatorum; secundum continentium, vel viduarum, tertius virginum vel sanctimonialium. Virorum tantum similiter tres sunt gradus vel ordines, quorum primus est laicorum, secundus clericorum, tertius monarchorum” (Abbo of Fleury, *Apologeticus ad Hugonem et Robertum reges Francorum*, PL 139.463a-b). On Abbo, see Lawrence K. Shook, “Abbo of Fleury (Floriancensis),” *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, 1.12–13. Mayeski noted in her presentation: “During the ninth century, the emphasis on the superiority of virginity diminished, while the Carolingian Church promoted the idea that married people constituted a true *order* within the Church, equal to that of the celibates” (“Excluded by the Logic” 74).

actually counted as a true sacramental ordination as well as which aspects of those ordinations were sacramentally effective.

Pierre-Marie Gy, in an article on the ancient prayers of ordination, argued that “at least in the patristic era, *ordinare* is greater than *consecrare* or *benedicere* and designates not only the prayer of ordination but all ecclesial processes of which this was a part. As we have already seen, the term *ordinatio* had, after all, been applied in the high Middle Ages to kings, abbots, abbesses, and by imperial Christian law, to civil functionaries.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, based on medieval examples given in the *Novum glossarium mediae latinitas*, the words *ordinatio* and *ordinare* were used to describe not only the ceremony and/or installation of bishops, priests, deacons, and subdeacons but also of porters, lectors, exorcists, acolytes, canons, abbots, abbesses, kings, queens, and empresses. The terms could also apply to the consecration or establishment of a religious order or of a monastery or even to admission to the religious life.

The foundation charter from A.D. 867 already mentioned provides one striking example of the use of *ordinare* to indicate selection or election to a particular post. Even more dramatically, Orso, bishop of Olivolo near Venice, in 853 appointed his sister Romana as the administrator of his will. He further directed her to watch his successor closely and if he should mismanage episcopal property, “she would have the most firm power to ordain to the monastery [the basilica of St. Laurence] any person she wished” after the death of the miscreant bishop.<sup>23</sup>

So too, an *ordo* did not necessarily refer to a particular clerical state. In 1199, Pope Innocent III described canon lawyers as a separate *ordo*.<sup>24</sup> At least as late as the 14th century, *ordo* was used to designate the sacrament of extreme unction, and marriage was referred to as an *ordo* as late as the 15th century.<sup>25</sup>

Pope Leo the Great (440–461), in a letter later included in most important canon law collections, held that a valid ordination of a bishop could not occur unless the bishop had been chosen by the clergy, accepted by the

<sup>22</sup> Les anciennes prières d'ordination,” *Maison Dieu* 138 (1979) 109–19.

<sup>23</sup> “Quod si hoc malum quod supra legitur ipsa predicta soror mea Romana se observaverit et custodierit se de malo vicio, et Dei servicio adimpleverit tunc habeat firmissimam potestatem post hōbitum suum monasterio [recte: monasterium] a quocumque homine voluerit per vera virtutue sicut et ego ei omnia hordinavit.” Andrea Gloria, *Codice diplomatico padovano dal secolo sesto a tutto l'undecimo*, Monumenti storici pubblicati dalla Deputazione Veneta di storia patria 2, Serie prima document 2 (Venice: A spese della Società, 1877) 23.

<sup>24</sup> See James Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law* (London and New York: Longman, 1995) 68.

<sup>25</sup> For references to extreme unction, see *Glossarum mediae et infirmae latinitatis* 58. For marriage, see *ibid.* 60: “Perrotin de Solier . . . estant plevy en fiance à jeune fille . . . et suidant velle esouser et recevoir l'Ordre de mariage, etc.”

Christian community, and consecrated by the bishops of the province along with metropolitan bishop. Clearly “ordination” included more than just a particular sacramental ritual for Leo and those canonists who kept his ruling alive.<sup>26</sup>

In his study of ordination in medieval canon law, Gerard Fransen has noted that: “For [the medieval canonists] *ordinare*, *ordinatio* did not necessarily have a sacramental meaning. One calls *ordinatio* the election of a pope, the nomination of an archdeacon, the canonical establishment of a monk that he might administer a parish.”<sup>27</sup> Early medieval sources discussing ordination, then, cannot be read with the assumption that they are discussing the same institution that would emerge from either Lateran IV or Trent. What comprised ordination in the early Middle Ages, and who were encompassed by ordination, are both interesting questions. The rule of Benedict used *ordinatio* frequently to refer to the installation of an abbot.<sup>28</sup> Abbots, monks, and those entering the religious life were referred to throughout the early Middle Ages as ordained.<sup>29</sup> Kings and emperors thought of themselves as ordained, and their subjects considered them ordained. According to Congar, ‘to be ordained’ was the official formula for the coronation of the Capetians.<sup>30</sup> Pope Urban II in a letter of 1089 to Rainold, archbishop of Rheims, affirmed the archbishop’s power to ordain the kings and queens of France.<sup>31</sup> In another example of the use of *ordinatio* for a queen, the *Annales altahenses maiores* for A.D. 1043 described how King Henry led his bride to Mainz and here arranged for her to be consecrated queen, and then “having completed the days of ordination (*diebus ordinationis*) in Ingelheim, the region made preparations for the

<sup>26</sup> “Nulla ratio sinit ut inter episcopos habeantur qui nec a clericis sunt electi, nec a plebibus sunt expetiti, nec a provincialibus episcopis cum metropolitani iudicio consecrati” (quoted and discussed by Congar, “Note sur une valeur” 8–9).

<sup>27</sup> “Pour eux, *ordinare*, *ordinatio* n’ont pas nécessairement le sens sacramentel. On appelle *ordinatio* l’élection du pape, la nomination d’un archidiacre, l’institution canonique donnée à moine pour qu’il puisse régir une paroisse” (“La tradition des canonistes du moyen âge,” *Études sur le sacrement de l’ordre*, Lex orandi 22 [Paris: Cerf, 1957] 259).

<sup>28</sup> For a list of such references, see *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1981) 522. I thank Dr. J. Frank Henderson for providing this reference.

<sup>29</sup> For references, see n. 24 above, esp. *Novum Glossarium*, vol. O, cols. 722–28.

<sup>30</sup> Congar, “Note sur une valeur” 8.

<sup>31</sup> “Primam praeterea praecipuamque tibi tuisque successoribus potestatem contradimus Francorum reges consecrandi: ut sicut Beatus Remigius ad fidem Chlodoveo converso primum illi regno regem Christianum instituisse cognoscitur; ita tu quoque, tuique successores, qui ejusdem sancti Remigii vice in Remensi Ecclesia, Domino disponente, fungimini, ungenti regis et ordinandi sive reginae, prima potestate fungamini” (*Epistola 27*; PL 151.310b).

marriage.”<sup>32</sup> The coronation rite contained in a Florentine sacramentary from the second-half of the tenth century continues the rubric, “the ordination of the Empress at the entrance to the church.”<sup>33</sup>

Kings and queens, emperors and empresses often considered themselves and were considered by their subjects as validly ordained into an important *ordo* of the Church. No doubt such claims were more impressive when backed up with an army, nevertheless kingship and queenship represent a historical example of ecclesiastically supported ordination which later Roman Catholic theology judged not to be ordination at all.

If the terms *ordo*, *ordinatio*, and *ordinare* did not necessarily entail “ordination” in the sense which the Council of Trent later used the term, what exactly did it mean then to “ordain” a deaconess, an abbess, or a nun? If Congar is correct when he states that “[t]he words *ordinare*, *ordinari*, *ordinatio* signified the fact of being designated and consecrated to take up a certain place, or better a certain function, *ordo*, in the community and at its service,”<sup>34</sup> then what functions did ordained women play in the lives of their communities?

### The Roles of Ordained Women

In these early centuries women were commissioned for several different *ordines*. The vocations of widow, virgin, and deaconess were a continuation of early Christian practices.<sup>35</sup> The early Middle Ages also bore witness to

<sup>32</sup> “Mox convocata non minori multitudine profectus est rex Vesontionum urbem Burgundiae, et illic accipiens, quam praediximus, sponsam, duxit eam Mogoncia-cum ibique consecrari eam reginam curavit, consummatisque diebus ordinationis in Ingilnheim fecit nuptias regio, ut decuit, apparatu” (*Annales Altahenses*, ed. W. de Giesebrecht and E. von Oefele, *Monumenta germaniae historiae* 1 [Hanover: Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1891] 33–34).

<sup>33</sup> *Die Ordines für die Weihe und Krönung des Kaisers und der Kaiserin*, ed. Reinhard Elze, *Monumenta Germaniae historica, Fontes juris Germanici antiqui in usum scholarum separatim editi* 9 (Hanover: Hansche Buchhandlung, 1960; reprinted Hanover: Hansche Buchhandlung, 1995) no. 4b, 12.

<sup>34</sup> The entire quote reads: “But instead of signifying, as happened from the beginning of the twelfth century, the ceremony in which an individual received a *power* henceforth possessed in such a way that it could never be lost, the words *ordinare*, *ordinari*, *ordinatio* signified the fact of being designated and consecrated to take up a certain place or better a certain function, *ordo*, in the community and at its service” (“My Path-findings in the Theology of Laity and Ministries,” *The Jurist* 32 [1977] 180).

<sup>35</sup> There are many studies of the roles women played in the early centuries. Essential for the New Testament period is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983). Recent studies on women in the first three centuries of Christianity include Ben Witherington, *Women in the Earliest Churches*, Society for New Testament Studies, Monograph Series 59 (Cambridge: Cambridge University,

the ministries of *episcopae*, *presbyterae*, canonesses, abbesses, and nuns. In my present article, I use the Latin words *episcopae* and *presbyterae* for the feminine form of what might be better termed simply bishops and priests. But I use this Latin terminology so that it is clear that I am referring to women bishops and women priests. However, to refer to these offices as “women bishops” or “women priests” might imply that this is an office different from being simply bishop or priest. Since in part my argument is that this differentiation is not clear for the period under discussion, such terminology may not be useful. The term “priestess” might be a possibility but this title is still most commonly associated in English with non-Christian religions and therefore could be misleading. The usual titles for the ministries of deaconesses and abbesses do not present these problems and so will be used throughout.<sup>36</sup> Although scholars disagree about both the relative importance of these different groups and the relations among these different groups, they do agree that women who assumed these roles played an active part in the Church.<sup>37</sup>

### Episcopae and Presbyterae

The form of life which being an *episcopa* and *presbytera* entailed, apart from living chastely, is unclear.<sup>38</sup> Beginning with the medieval canonists,

---

1988); Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests* (San Francisco: HarperSan-Francisco, 1993); Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *The Widows: A Women's Ministry in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University, 1999); Ute Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000) who provides an exhaustive bibliography on this subject on pages 227–95. On virgins and widows in the early Middle Ages, see Suzanne Fonay Wemple, “Women from the Fifth Century to the Tenth Century,” in *A History of Women in the West*, ed. George Duby and Michelle Perrot, 2, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. Christine Klapisch-Zuber (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1992) 188.

<sup>36</sup> Although, as discussed below, it is not altogether clear that deaconesses or abbesses were always considered differently than deacons or abbots in terms of jurisdiction or liturgical function.

<sup>37</sup> For three recent discussions of the roles women played in the early Middle Church, see Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1981) 127–48, and her “Women from the Fifth Century” 186–201; see also Donald Hochstetler, *A Conflict of Traditions: Women in Religion in the Early Middle Ages, 500–840* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1992).

<sup>38</sup> Married bishops, priests, deacons, *presbyterae* and deaconesses were all instructed to live chastely once they were ordained. See Andrieu, 4.140–42. Wemple offers an extended and learned discussion of the gradual insistence on celibacy for bishops, *episcopae*, priests, *presbyterae*, deacons and deaconesses. Like Andrieu, she reads the prohibitions against marriage by *episcopae*, *presbyterae* and deaconesses

scholars have habitually assumed that *episcopae* and *presbyterae* held no other function than that of spouse to a bishop or priest.<sup>39</sup> Recently, however, Ute Eisen has pointed out that bishops' wives are usually referred to in sixth-century literature as *coniux* not *episcopa*, and that *episcopa* seems to refer to a quite different role than merely that of a spouse. She summarizes her analysis of both the epigraphic and literary evidence by noting: "We must conclude from this that as a rule the title *episcopa* was not applied to bishops' wives."<sup>40</sup> The ninth-century mosaic and reliquary inscriptions that mention "*Theodora episcopa*" obviously refer to a woman who was not married to a bishop, but was rather the mother of Pope Paschal I (817–824).<sup>41</sup> Clearly more work needs to be done to clarify exactly what roles these women played in early medieval society.

*Presbyterae* present an equally controversial situation. Although the term can refer to the wives of priests, this does not always seem to be the case. A list of forbidden marriages ascribed to Pope Gregory II and included in the ninth-century Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals includes injunctions against marrying *presbyterae*, deaconesses, and nuns.<sup>42</sup> According to Michel Andrieu, these injunctions forbid *remarriage* for the wives of priests and deacons.<sup>43</sup> This seems somewhat odd in juxtaposition to a similar invocation against marriage for nuns and might be seen alternatively as a demand for celibacy equivalent to that ascribed to male priests and deacons.

Further, an interpolated translation of the canon 11 of the Council of Laodicea again included in the Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals forbade the installation of *presbyterae* in a church as if they were appointed to it (*or-*

---

as forbidding only remarriage of those women who had been married to bishops, priests or deacons (*Women in Frankish Society* 129–36).

<sup>39</sup> The suggestion occurs in the twelfth-century *Summa Parisiensis* as well as in Guido de Baysio's *Rosarium super decretum* written between 1296 and 1300. For references, see Ida Raming, *The Exclusion of Women from the Priesthood: Divine Law or Sex Discrimination?* trans. Norman R. Adams (Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow, 1976) 57, 69.

<sup>40</sup> Eisen, *Women Officeholders* 200. For a recent discussion of *episcopae*, see *ibid.* 199–216. See also Andrieu 4.141, n. 3 and 145; also Torjesen 9–10. Wemple notes that at least one powerful abbess of the tenth century held the title *metropolitana* ("Women from the Fifth Century" 193).

<sup>41</sup> For a recent discussion of these controversial inscriptions, see Eisen, *Women Officeholders* 200–5.

<sup>42</sup> *Decretales Pseudo-Isidoriana*, ed. Paul Hinschius (Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz, 1863; reprinted Aalen: Scientia, 1963); *Decreta papae Gregorii iunioris*, chaps. 14, 754. Hinschius believes these decretales may actually date back to Gregory II (*Decretales Pseudo-Isidoriana* cvii). On the dating of the *Decretales*, see Horst Fuhrmann, *Einfluss und Verbreitung der pseudoisidorischen Fälschungen*, 2 vols., *Schriften der Monumenta Germaniae historica* 24 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1972) 1.182–83.

<sup>43</sup> Andrieu 4.141.

*dinatas*).<sup>44</sup> Although the canon pertained originally to the fourth-century Greek Church, the interpolation indicates that a contemporary situation required the repetition and explanation of the earlier canon.<sup>45</sup> It described *presbyterae*, however, not as the wives of priests but as “women who are called *presbyterae* among the Greeks, but by us, however, are called elder widows (*viduae seniores*), a once-married women (*unvirae*) and little mothers (*matriculariae*).”<sup>46</sup> The role that the bishops seek to curtail here appears to include more than just outliving a husband priest and does not in fact mention these women specifically as widows of priests.<sup>47</sup>

A letter by the tenth-century bishop, Atto of Vercelli, included a fascinating description of both *presbyterae* and deaconesses. Asked what the law says about *presbyterae* and deaconesses, Atto responded that in the early Church, because of a shortage of workers, devout women were ordained (*ordinantur*) to help men in leading the worship. Not only men, but also women, presided over the Church because of the great need. Women had been long familiar with pagan cults and been educated in philosophy and so, when converted, were well suited to teach religious practice. Atto explained, basing himself on the law of the Council of Laodicea, that *presbyterae* were no longer allowed by the Church. He described deaconesses as those who prepared other women for baptism through catechesis and then assisted at their baptism. Since most people are baptized as infants, Atto explained, this very rarely happens any more and women in any

<sup>44</sup> I have also translated “*ordinatas*” as “appointed” rather than “ordained” given the earlier discussion of the meaning of “*ordinare*” during this period and to avoid the suggestion that this statute was necessarily intended as a blanket prohibition of the ordination of *presbyterae*. For a similar use of *ordinare*, compare the comments by the twelfth-century canonist Gratian on such an appointment of a monk: “Monachi autem, si in dedicatione sui presbyteratus, sicut ceteri sacerdotes, predicandi, baptizandi, penitentiam dandi, peccata remittendi, beneficiis ecclesiasticis perfruendi rite potestatem accipiant . . . tamen executionem sue potestatis non habent nisi a populo fuerint electi et ab episcopo, cum consensu abbate, ordinati.” Quoted and discussed by Fransen, “La tradition,” 259. Du Cange quotes a similar gloss contained in a manuscript of this canon, “Presbyterae dictae generalius viduae omnes seniores, quae sacris in ecclesia exercitibus vacabant” (*Glossarium* 8.489).

<sup>45</sup> These injunctions also appeared earlier in a Roman synod held in A.D. 743, see Andrieu 4.142, again indicating a contemporary concern with this issue.

<sup>46</sup> “Mulieres quae apud Graecos presbyterae appellantur, apud nos autem viduae seniores, unvirae et matriculariae appellantur, in ecclesia tanquam ordinatas constitui non licebit” (Chap. 10 of the *Capitula synodi Laodicensae, Decretales Pseudo-Isidoriana* 274). The statute, based loosely on 1 Timothy 5:2–10, is difficult to translate. “*Seniores*” can refer to elders in the technical sense of an ecclesiastical post and is the word used in the Vulgate for presbyter, e.g. Ezekiel 7:26, 2 John 1, 1 Timothy 5:1. “*Matricularia*” is an unusual word that comes from “*matrix*” and can be used to mean progenitress.

<sup>47</sup> For a detailed discussion of the interpretation of this canon, see Raming, *The Exclusion of Women* 21–22, and Eisen, *Women Officeholders* 121–23.

case have been forbidden to baptize. Atto's description of the former role of *presbyterae* and deaconesses however is interesting. "As indeed those called *presbyterae* assumed their office by preaching, commanding or teaching, so deaconesses sensibly assumed their office by ministering and baptizing."<sup>48</sup> Atto did not completely rule out the existence of deaconesses in his own time. He alluded to some who claim that the office once called "deaconess" is now called "abbess." Atto disagreed, but only because the words "deaconess" and "abbess" come from very different roots.<sup>49</sup> Atto's argument would be taken up again in detail by the twelfth-century canonists.<sup>50</sup>

The roles therefore that *episcopae* and *presbyterae* played in the early medieval Church remain unclear. A long-standing tradition asserted that these titles refer only to the spouses of male bishops and priests. Yet, contemporary sources and their modern interpretations suggest that both offices may have held independent clerical positions.

### Deaconesses

Deaconesses present an even more detailed and interesting problem than *episcopae* and *presbyterae*. Michel Andrieu assumed that the term could refer to either the wife of a deacon or to a liturgically functioning deaconess whose exact role in the Church was unclear.<sup>51</sup> It does not seem necessary to separate these two forms of deaconess. Could it not be pos-

<sup>48</sup> "... sicut enim hae quae presbyterae dicebantur, praedicandi, jubendi vel edocendi, ita sane diaconae ministrandi vel baptizandi officium sumpserant" (*Epistola* 8; PL 134.114c). For the entire passages summarized here, see *ibid.*; PL 134.114a-c.

<sup>49</sup> "Sunt etiam, qui eas priscis temporibus diaconas asseruere appellatas, quas nunc abbatissas nominamus, quod nobis minime congruere videtur" (*ibid.* PL 134.114d).

<sup>50</sup> See my discussion of their opinions below.

<sup>51</sup> "Dès les premiers temps de l'Église, parmi les pieuses femmes consacrées à Dieu par le vœu de continence, certaines formèrent une catégorie spéciale et eurent auprès du clergé un rôle d'auxiliaires. Entre autres noms, on leur donna celui de *diacona*, qui eut bientôt valeur officielle, sanctionné par une ordination. Dans les oeuvres d'assistance et pour certaines cérémonies liturgiques, ces deaconesses furent une sorte d'équivalent féminin des diacres. Il n'est pas toujours facile, lorsque apparaît dans un ancien document romain le terme *diacona*, ou *diaconissa*, de reconnaître s'il s'agit d'une diaconesse proprement dite ou seulement de l'épouse d'un diacre" (Andrieu 4.142). See also "Depuis longtemps on leur avait retiré tout rôle liturgique et administratif. Elles ne pouvaient néanmoins être confondues avec les épouses des diacres, pareillement appelée diaconissae. Celle-ci, de même que les presbyterissae, ont laissé peu de traces certaines dans les documents. Vivant à l'ombre de leurs maris, elles dépensaient leur activité dans les obscures besognes familiales" (Andrieu 4.143-44).

sible that deaconesses and *presbyterae* (and perhaps *episcopae*) at times formed a liturgical team with their spouse?<sup>52</sup> That would explain why, according to a Roman Ordinal from ca. 900, *presbyterae* and deaconesses received their commissioning at the same time and as part of the same ceremony as the priests and deacons who were their spouses. The prayers for the ordination of deaconesses in the several sacramentaries through the twelfth century are identical (apart from the use of the feminine form) to those used in the ordination of a deacon. Both deaconesses and *presbyterae* received special vestments as part of their ordination rites.<sup>53</sup> These rites apparently did not distinguish between those deaconesses (or *presbyterae*) who had an active ministry and those who were merely the spouses of priests and deacons. It seems at best questionable to assume that a wife could not hold a ministry of her own alongside if not apart from her spouse, while at the same time assuming that a husband is able to do so. That women functioned in these early centuries as deaconesses, whether as spouses or not, does not seem to be disputed.

### Canonesses

Whether as the spouses of deacons or as unmarried deaconesses, women continued this ministry of the early Church at least into the sixth century. Some scholars suggest that just as deaconesses were slowly being removed from the clerical state, canonesses came to the fore to continue the ministries once held by deaconesses.<sup>54</sup> Canonesses were religious women who lived in an informal kind of community under an abbess, but retained their own property and did not take final vows of chastity. They could return to the world and marry if they so desired.<sup>55</sup>

Donald Hochstetler's study of religious women in this period suggests that canonesses played an important liturgical role in the Carolingian Church. Some of his findings are worth quoting at length:

That the involvement of consecrated women in the mass was a widespread phenomenon is confirmed by the Council of Paris of 829. The council gives us the most

<sup>52</sup> Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society* 129 suggests this may have been the case in the first three centuries of the Church. See also her discussion of deaconesses and priests' wives in "Women from the Fifth Century" 195–96.

<sup>53</sup> Andrieu 4.140–41, 146; also Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society* 132.

<sup>54</sup> Wemple argues that legislation against the diaconate for women was more or less successful by the sixth century when women were then forced into the monastic life if they wished to follow a religious vocation (*Women in Frankish Society* 136–41). Hochstetler follows earlier scholars in asserting that the role of deaconesses was taken over by the canonesses (*A Conflict of Traditions* 81–88).

<sup>55</sup> For a description of canonesses, see Hochstetler, *A Conflict of Traditions* 81–83; Wemple, "Women from the Fifth Century" 190, 192, and Morris, *The Lady was a Bishop* 10–12.

explicit description of what went on at services in which women assisted. It was found that in several provinces women “have of their own accord forced themselves up to the sacred altars and have impudently touched the sacred vessels and have assisted the priests with their vestments, and, what is even more indecent and more tasteless than all that, they have offered the body and blood of the Lord to the people and done other such things which are shameful even to mention.” . . .

The legislators at Paris went on to ascribe the involvement of women in the mass to the negligence and lack of attention of the bishops and to attack the priests who had so far abandoned their duties that they would let women do such a thing. From this declaration it is obvious that there was no question of women “forcing” themselves upon unwilling priests and parishioners. It is certain that women could not have gained access to the altar without the acquiescence of the officiating bishop or priest. Clearly, not all male religious leaders belonged to the reforming party. As for the people, they took the bread and wine from the hands of the women, so ordinary believers accepted the authority of certain women to administer the sacraments. There was no mention of scandal except among the reforming bishops of Paris.<sup>56</sup>

There do exist *ordines* for the distribution of communion which clearly were intended for use by women. As I noted in my address in 1997 to the Catholic Theological Society of America:<sup>57</sup> “Although described as communion services by Jean Leclercq, he admits that ‘nevertheless, in their ensemble they really constitute a long eucharistic prayer.’<sup>58</sup> While modern liturgists would understand these communion services as a form of *missa sicca* (that is, Mass without a consecration) it is not altogether clear that they were so understood by the participants. Given that neither the moment of consecration nor the clerical state itself had yet been closely defined, these rituals may represent the last vestiges of liturgies led by women for their own communities.”<sup>59</sup>

To conclude this section then, I argue that whatever role these women did play, either the full liturgical role envisioned by Hochstetler or the

<sup>56</sup> *A Conflict of Traditions* 99–100.

<sup>57</sup> “The Eucharist and Popular Devotion,” *Catholic Theological Society of America, Proceedings* 52 (1997) 41–42; reprinted in Gary Macy, *Treasures from the Storehouse: Essays on the Medieval Eucharist* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999) 174.

<sup>58</sup> Jean Leclercq, “Eucharistic Celebrations Without Priests in the Middle Ages,” *Worship* 55 (1981) 160–68. The text of the prayer reads: “[E]xaudi, quaeso domine, gemitum mei famulae tuae indignae et peccatricis supplicantis, et, quae de meritum qualitate diffido, non iudicium, sed misericordiam consequi merear. Per d[omi]num.” Emphasis by author. The entire text of this *Oratio ad accipiendam eucharistiam* has been published by Jean Leclercq, “Prières médiévales pour recevoir l’eucharistie pour saluer et pour bénir la croix,” *Ephemerides liturgicae* 97 (1965) 329–31.

<sup>59</sup> Medieval theologians speculated that the Sign of the Cross, or the entire Canon, or perhaps even the Lord’s Prayer, could consecrate; see Macy, *Theologies of the Eucharist in the Early Scholastic Period* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) 57.

lesser role envisioned by Andrieu, they clearly were considered during this period to form their own *ordines* and were perceived to hold as much of an “ordained” position in the Church as bishops, priests, or deacons. Indeed, Pope Benedict IX in 1033 in a letter to Peter, bishop of Silva Candida, proclaimed that all clerics were free of lay duties including the orders of priest, deacon, monk, hermit, cleric, religious woman, and deaconess.<sup>60</sup> Further, these women fulfilled an important liturgical ministry, one that was gradually reduced by some elements of the episcopacy over a period of some 400 years. They were, for all intents and purposes, ordained clerics in the sense that many early medieval writers understood that category.

### Abbesses

The role of abbesses in this period is much clearer than that of their sister ministers.<sup>61</sup> Since several rules for holy women have survived from this period, a better idea of the liturgical and clerical roles of abbesses can be ascertained. Abbesses clearly exercised functions later reserved to the male diaconate and presbyterate. The best example would be the responsibility, indeed, the duty of the abbess to hear her nuns’ confessions.<sup>62</sup> This is mentioned by at least two of the Rules for nuns from the early medieval period. The writers go on at great length about the necessity of the abbess (or her designate) to hear daily confession.<sup>63</sup> One of the main virtues required of an abbess was a merciful yet firm use of penance to train the

<sup>60</sup> Super his autem non novum facientes, scilicet quod antecessores nostris sacrosanctis Albanensis, Ostiensis et Portuensi, et aliis ecclesiis fecisse cognoscimus, a praesenti VI. indictione, per hujus nostrae Apostolicae praeceptionis paginam statuimus et statuendo per auctoritatem Apostolorum Principis confirmamus, ut presbyteri, Diaconi, monachi, mansionarii, clerici, cujuscumque ordinis sint, vel dignitatis, sanctimoniales, seu diaconistae omnes immunes sint a laicale servitio, iudicio, et publica datione in Galeria intra castellum, vel de foris habitantes, ita ut si Imperator, aut Marchio, sive missi eorum, aut successores nostri illuc venerint nullo modo in jam dictis personis per publicos ministeriales expensa colligatur, neque aliquo modo eis injuria irrogetur” (*Italia sacra sive de episcopis italiae*, ed. Ferdinando Ughello; 2nd ed. Nicolai Coleti [Venice: apud Sebastianum Coleti, 1717] 1. col. 303).

<sup>61</sup> The jurisdictional power of abbesses was also considerable. For a recent discussion of their power, see Mayeski, “Excused by the Logic,” 75–79.

<sup>62</sup> See Morris, *The Lady was a Bishop*, Appendix 6, “Abbesses with Powers of Confession” 140–43; and Wemple, “Women” 189. Morris also discusses information from the Rule of St. Columbanus and the Rule of St. Basil.

<sup>63</sup> See Waldebert, *Regula ad virgines*, chap. 6 “De assidue danda confessione” and chap. 7 “De non manifestandis sororum confessionibus” (PL 88.1059a–1060c), and Donatus of Besançon, *Regula ad virgines*, chap. 23 “Qualiter ad confessionem omnibus diebus veniant” (PL 87.282c-d); on the Rule of Donatus, see Hochstetler, *A Conflict of Traditions* 8.

nuns under her care. Abbesses also preached as indeed other orthodox religious women did in the Middle Ages.<sup>64</sup> Two of the Rules indicate that abbesses may have baptized children brought to the monasteries.<sup>65</sup> The abbesses' power to remove nuns from either table or the divine office or both is regularly termed "excommunication."<sup>66</sup> The abbesses of Monheim, at least, distributed to the laity the eulogia or bread blessed during the liturgy.<sup>67</sup> One of the *Regula ad virgines* includes readings from the Gospel as part of the Divine Office to be said by the nuns.<sup>68</sup> In fact several twelfth-century canonists argued that the reading of the Gospel by abbesses was proof that they were the successors to the earlier *ordo* of deaconess.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup> For recent studies on women preaching in the Middle Ages, see *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Wayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (Berkeley: University of California, 1998), esp. the articles by Katherine Ludwig Jansen, "Maria Magdalena: *Apostolorum Apostola*" 57–96; Nicoles Bériou, "The Right of Women to Give Religious Instruction in the Thirteenth Century" 134–45; Carol Muessig, "Prophecy and Song: Teaching and Preaching by Medieval Women" 146–50; Darleen Pryds, "Proclaiming Sanctity through Proscribed Acts: the Case of Rose of Viterbo" 159–72 and Roberto Rusconi, "Women's Sermons at the End of the Middle Ages: Texts from the Blessed and Images of the Saints" 173–95. On lay preaching in general in the Middle Ages, see Rolf Zerfass, *Der Streit um die Laienpredigt: Eine pastoralgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum Verständnis des Predigtamtes und zu seiner Entwicklung im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg: Herder, 1974).

<sup>65</sup> "Nulla infantem de baptismo excipiat" (Aurelian of Arles, *Regula ad virgines*, chap. 16; PL 68.402a) and "Nulla cujuslibet filiam in baptismo neque divitis neque pauperis praesumat excipere" (Donatus of Besançon, *Regula ad virgines*, chap. 54; PL 87.290c. On the Rule of Aurelian, see Hochstetler, *A Conflict of Traditions* 8.

<sup>66</sup> See Waldebert, *Regula ad virgines*, chaps. 18–20 (PL 88.1067b–1068b) and Donatus of Besançon, *Regula ad virgines*, chaps. 69–71 (PL 87.294c–295d).

<sup>67</sup> The devotion is mentioned by Janet Nelson in her article, "Les femmes et l'évangélisation au ix<sup>e</sup> siècle," *Revue du Nord* 69 (1986) 480. See also Donatus of Besançon: "Pro affectu tamen parentum aut cujusque notitia, si aliquas transmittere voluerit litteras aut eulogias panis, matri suggerat, et si ipsa permiserit, per posticiarias det, et ipsae de nomine illius transmittant cui voluerit ipsa; sine praeposita, aut posticiaria, per se nulla praesumat nec dare, nec accipere a quoquam; quod si praesumpserit, tribus suppositionibus poeniteat" (*Regula ad virgines* chap. 53; PL 87.290b) and "Cumque partes quas ipsa voluerit circumferint, protinus aut in saluatorium, aut ad portam redeant; ubi deinceps, si abbatissae visum fuerit, illa, si voluerit, praesente vel reliquis, eulogias accipiant, aut reliquum quod offerre decreverint" (ibid. chap. 56; PL 87.291a).

<sup>68</sup> The *Regula ad virgines* of Aurelian of Arles contains an addition entitled "Ordinem etiam quodmodo psallere debeatis, in hoc libello judicavimus inserendum." This section contains directions for the Divine Office which includes readings from the Gospel (PL 68.403c–406d).

<sup>69</sup> Raming, *The Exclusion of Women* 49–50, 54, 61, 65. According to Raming, the abbesses of the Carthusian Order sang the Epistle or Gospel at High Mass during the Middle Ages.

Evidence also exists that abbesses gave blessings to lay people and consecrated those nuns who entered their monasteries.<sup>70</sup>

### The Twelfth-Century Canonists' Debates

Indeed it is precisely these functions of abbesses that Pope Innocent III condemned in his letter of 1210 to the bishop of Burgos and abbot of Morimundo: “[A]bbesses . . . bless their own nuns, hear their confessions of sin and, reading the Gospel, presume to preach publicly.”<sup>71</sup> At least at the time of Innocent, abbesses were still thought to be performing all of the roles just cited and the pope was not happy about this fact. Innocent’s ruling did not come as a bolt out of the blue. It had been preceded by a half-century of canonical debate concerning the possibility of women’s ministries. Ida Raming has presented a thorough and intriguing study of this discussion. The canonists were clearly wrestling with the broad concept of ordination that they had inherited. What did it mean, for instance, when earlier laws (and even contemporary practice) spoke of women as “ordained” and, if women were once ordained, on what grounds should they now be excluded from ordination? Since Raming has provided a lucid discussion of the later question, I will concentrate now on the answers that the canonists offered on the first of these conundrums.

Following Gratian of Bologna, the collator of the massive collection of church law known as the *Decretum*, the majority of canonists argued that women could not be ordained, although not all the scholars gave their reasons.<sup>72</sup> Influential writers such as Rolandus Bandinelli,<sup>73</sup> Stephen of Tournai,<sup>74</sup> and Huguccio,<sup>75</sup> granted that women had once been ordained

<sup>70</sup> Hochstetler, *A Conflict of Traditions* 101–2. Again, this was done by the abbesses of Monheim; see Nelson, “Les femmes et l’évangélisation au ix<sup>e</sup> siècle” 480.

<sup>71</sup> “Nova quaedam nuper, de quibus miramur non modicum, nostris sunt auribus intimata, quod abbatissae videlicet, in Bugensi et in Palentinensi dioecibus constitutae, moniales proprias benedicunt, ipsarum quoque confessiones in criminibus audiunt, et legentes evangelium praesumunt publice praedicare. Quum igitur id absonum sit pariter et absurdum, [nec a nobis aliquatenus sustinendum,] discretioni vestrae per apostolica scripta mandamus, quatenus ne id de cetero fiat, auctoritate curetis apostolica firmiter inhibere, quia, licet beatissima virgo Maria dignior et excellentior fuerit Apostolis universis, non tamen illi, sed istis Dominus claves regni coelorum commisit” (*Corpus Iuris Canonici, Decretales* 1. 5, t. 38, chap. 10, ed. E. Friedberg [Graz: Akademische Druck, 1959] 2. col. 886–87).

<sup>72</sup> Raming, *The Exclusion of Women* 26–69.

<sup>73</sup> “Antiquitus diaconissas i.e. evangeliorum lectrices in ecclesiis ordinari moris fuisse, dubium non est . . .” (cited in Raming, *The Exclusion of Women* 180 n. 52).

<sup>74</sup> “Idem posset dicere de quolibet inferiori ordine. Sed de hoc dicit, quia forte videtur, quoniam antiquitus fiebant diaconisse, qui ordo hodie in ecclesia non est” (cited in *ibid.* 185 n. 95).

<sup>75</sup> “Alii dicunt, quod olim mulier ordinabatur usque ad diaconatum, postea fuit

but the Church later disallowed the earlier practice. Rolandus and Stephen apparently held that there is no intrinsic reason why deaconesses could not once again be ordained if church law should so dictate.<sup>76</sup> The possibility of this happening was real, since most canonists agreed with Atto's colloquist that the former role of deaconess had been replaced by the contemporary position of abbess.<sup>77</sup> The canonists, incidentally, were joined in this opinion by the twelfth-century theologian and monk Abelard in a letter to his wife Heloise, herself an abbess.<sup>78</sup>

Other canonists, starting with Rufinus, distinguished between an "ordination" that is merely a blessing, the granting of a particular function, and an "ordination" that is sacramental. For the majority of canonists who make this distinction, the "ordination" of deaconesses, or *presbyterae*, or abbesses are clearly of the first, non-sacramental variety.<sup>79</sup> A few canonists held that not only were the ordinations of deaconesses in the early Church valid, sacramental ordinations, but so too were the contemporary "ordinations" of holy women. As Raming noted, the anonymous author of the *Summa Monacensis*, "calls the *manus impositio consecratoria religionis* given to God-dedicated virgins, a sacrament, just like the *manus impositio consecratoria ordinis* for priests and deacons."<sup>80</sup> Since this "ordination" is a sacrament, the author contended, it cannot be repeated.<sup>81</sup> Cardinal Sicard of Cremona followed the *Summa* in this opinion, although he also held that women could not be validly ordained priests or deacons.<sup>82</sup> The *Apparatus* on the *Decretum* written by Joannes Teutonicus after the Fourth

---

prohibitum tempore Ambrosii, postea iterum ordinabantur tempore huius concilii [the Council of Chalcedon], nunc non ordinantur" (cited in *ibid.* 192 n. 157).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 50, 55.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 51, 53, 54, 61, 65, 69. For example, Stephen of Tournai, "Antiquitus ordinabantur in ecclesiis diaconisse, i.e. evangeliorum lectrices, que quia modo non sunt in ecclesia, forsitan dicemus eas abbatissas et iste ante quadragesimum annum ordinari non debent" (*ibid.* 184 n. 89).

<sup>78</sup> "Septem vero personas ex vobis ad omnem monasterii administrationem necessarias esse credimus atque sufficere: portariam scilicet, cellerariam, vestiariam, infirmariam, cantricem, sacristam, et ad extremum diaconissam, quam nunc abbatissam nominant" (*Epistola 8 in Petri Abailardi Opera*, 2 vols., ed. Victor Cousin (Paris: Aug. Durand, 1849) 1.164. See also Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society* 147 n. 112 for other references to abbesses as the replacement for deaconesses. However, I disagree with her reading of Atto of Vercelli, as I do not think he agreed with those who associated abbesses with deaconesses as Wemple suggests. See n. 50 above.

<sup>79</sup> Raming, *The Exclusion of Women* 51, 56, 61, 64, 65.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 58.

<sup>81</sup> The entire text reads "(Manus impositio) consecratoria religionis soli episcopo competit et est sacramentum et certis temporibus fieri debet . . . Cum sit sacramentum, regulariter non iteratur" (*ibid.* 187 n. 123).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* 59–60.

Lateran Council of 1215 recorded the opinion of some scholars who held that when nuns are ordained, they truly receive the character of orders.<sup>83</sup>

To hold that women could be sacramentally ordained was clearly the minority opinion, but that such an opinion was held with no obvious implication of heresy or opprobrium demonstrates that the concept of ordination was in considerable flux in the twelfth century. When Innocent, then, forbade the ministries undertaken by the Spanish abbesses, he was clearly taking the side of the scholarly majority in a long debated question. Theologians would also take up the question of the ordination of women, but not until the 1240s, some 90 years after the canonist Gratian first put forth his opinion on the subject.<sup>84</sup> For over 1200 years then the question of the validity of women's ordination remained at least an open question. Some popes, bishops, and scholars accepted such ordinations as equal to those of men; others did not.

### Sacraments and Ordination in the Twelfth Century

This change in the understanding of ordination so clearly exemplified by the debates among twelfth-century canonists was part of a much larger debate on Christian rituals. Several questions on the Eucharist, for instance, were open for theological debate. There was no agreement either over what or who could validly offer the Sacrifice of the Mass. Theologians did not agree, for instance, that the words of Christ at the Last Supper were the formula that had always consecrated the gifts of bread and wine. Some theologians, among them the monastic teachers Honorius Augustodunensis and Rupert of Deutz, followed Pope Gregory the Great in arguing that the original words said over the oblation were limited to the Lord's Prayer.<sup>85</sup> Other theologians suggested that the sign of the cross made over the gifts effected the consecration.<sup>86</sup> A continuing debate argued whether Jesus consecrated the gifts at the Last Supper by means of his

<sup>83</sup> "Alii dicunt, quod si Monialis ordinetur, bene recipit characterem (ordinis): quia ordinari (quaestio) facti est et post baptismum quilibet potest ordinari" (ibid. 67).

<sup>84</sup> For an excellent and thorough study of the discussion of women's ordination by the medieval theologians see John Hilary Martin, "The Ordination of Women and the Theologians in the Middle Ages," *Escritos del Vedat* 36 (1986) 115–77 and 38 (1988) 88–143.

<sup>85</sup> See Honorius Augustodunensis, *Gemma animae* PL 172.572b, and Rupert of Deutz, *De divinis officiis*, 1. 2, chap. 18 *Ruperti Tjuitiensis Liber de divinis officiis*, ed. Rhaban Haacke, *Corpus christianorum, Continuatio medievalis* 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1967). The 13th-century Waldensians appear to have retained this custom in their liturgies. For a discussion of this issue, see Macy, *Theologies of the Eucharist* 160 n. 115.

<sup>86</sup> See Macy, *Theologies*, 160, n. 116.

own word or a separate blessing.<sup>87</sup> The moment at which the change was supposed to take place was not determined until the early-13th century. Most importantly for this study, some theologians, notably the well-respected Parisian liturgist John Belet, held that the words of institution, on their own, transubstantiated the bread and wine regardless of who said the words. Abelard noted that he knew of two famous teachers who argued even women could so consecrate.<sup>88</sup> More heated was the debate over the validity of Masses offered by heretics or schismatics.<sup>89</sup> In short, the important connection between ordination and the ministry of the Eucharist was still under debate in the middle of the twelfth century.

Nor were the other sacraments yet clearly connected with ordination. Confessions were still being heard by unordained religious in the beginning of the 13th century, a practice that embarrassed Franciscans and led them to excise examples of this practice from their early histories. Theologians in the twelfth century debated the relationship between ordination and the power to absolve sin at the same time as they were debating the relationship between ordination and the presbyterate. Fierce battles also raged over the right of the laity to preach, most notably of course in the case of the Waldensians.<sup>90</sup> Nor was the number of Christian rituals later considered "sacraments" fixed in the twelfth century. Lists differed until the *Sentences* of Peter the Lombard became the standard text of a theological education and his list of seven major rituals became accepted teaching.<sup>91</sup>

The twelfth century was a watershed in the understanding of Christian ministry in the West. The separation between the roles of laity and minister widened as the "power" bestowed upon the minister in ordination became seen as absolutely necessary for the efficacy of many Christian rituals. Most importantly, ordination became intrinsically linked to the Eucharist and to ritual penance. A properly ordained minister became essential to the proper functioning of the ritual life of the community and indeed to salvation itself. The great Scholastic minds of the 13th century carefully laid

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. See also Edward Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, ed. Robert Daly (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998) 132–33.

<sup>88</sup> On the positions of both Belet and Abelard, see Macy, "The Eucharist and Popular Religiosity," *Treasures from the Storeroom: Medieval Religion and the Eucharist* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999) 172–73.

<sup>89</sup> See, e.g., the controversies discussed by Macy, *Theologies* 55–56, and Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology* 136–38.

<sup>90</sup> For references to these issues, see Macy, "The Eucharist and Popular Religiosity," 173–74. For a summary of the state of penance at this time, see as well Bernard Cooke, *Ministry to Word and Sacrament: History and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 467–73.

<sup>91</sup> For a summary of this process, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600–1300)*, *The Christian Tradition* 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978) 204–14.

out the reasoning behind these connections, basing themselves on Aristotelian metaphysics and Roman law concepts of *potestas*. Their arguments took hold and their conclusions passed into the definitions of the general councils notably Trent.<sup>92</sup> The sense of novelty that such debates occasioned in the twelfth and thirteenth century changed into a sense of inevitability in later centuries. This inevitability was then read back into early centuries and sometimes even the knowledge of earlier practices, such as that of the ordination of women, was lost.

### HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions can be drawn from this overview of the ministry of women in the early Middle Ages? First, there is the historical conclusion that at least some medievals, including bishops and popes, considered deaconesses and abbesses to be as ordained as any other cleric, given the definition of *ordinatio* used during these early centuries. As late as the twelfth century, there were still scholars who considered women to be sacramentally ordained. Secondly, despite continued opposition to that role by some church officials, these women routinely took on liturgical roles later reserved to the male presbyterate and diaconate. The answer to the historical question whether in fact Christians ever considered women as ordained clergy appears to be yes; women were considered to have been ordained at least in some ecclesiastical circles for over half of Christian history.<sup>93</sup>

The question of how theology might read this historical conclusion is a much more complex issue and one that this article cannot address in all its complexities. However, two important points should be made especially in light of the sensitivity of the question of the ordination of women at least in modern Roman Catholic theology. First, historical conclusions ought to be kept distinct from theological conclusions as far as this is possible. Secondly, it is important to understand that every use of historical studies by theologians necessarily involves choices that must be justified on theological and not on historical grounds. While these observations might seem

<sup>92</sup> An excellent summary of the formation of the classical definition of orders can be found in Kenan Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of the Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church*, (New York: Paulist, 1988) 200–18.

<sup>93</sup> Osborne reaches a similar conclusion concerning the early church in his brief history of minor orders: “The rite of entry into some of these ministries was called an ordination; at least this is clear from documents in the Eastern Churches. In these ordination rituals, deaconesses were clearly included. The question whether women were ever ordained in the early Church seems to be answered in the affirmative, as far as this evidence indicates, i.e., to the order of deaconesses” (*Priesthood* 199).

obvious, historical and theological conclusions are all too often conflated. Once conflated, the impression is created that history necessarily informs and supports one or the other theological opinion.

One could make the theological assumption, for instance, that the use of the term “ordination” for abbesses, deaconesses, and nuns in the early Middle Ages was simply a mistake, a confusion of terminology that was clarified at a later date. In later centuries, the doctrine of ordination developed into a fuller understanding. From this perspective, the position of those church officials in the sixth, ninth, and thirteenth centuries who legislated against any clerical role for women was the only valid tradition of the Church.

This is, for example, the position of René Metz, in his article discussing the proper term for the installation of virgins (*consecratio* or *benedictio*). Metz dismisses the occurrences of the term *ordinatio* for such an installation as unimportant, merely a transitory usage during a period in which the terminology for the sacrament of orders had not yet been developed.<sup>94</sup> Although his research contains several references to ordinals containing rites for the ordination of women, he argues strongly that such references cannot be to true ordinations. “Only men could belong to the clergy. Although deaconesses and widows did perform some minor duties, essentially of apostleship and charity, and mainly in the early church, women were never part of the clergy itself. During the Middle Ages some women, especially abbesses, assumed the rights to confess and to preach, but popes and councils reacted vigorously against such actions.”<sup>95</sup>

Metz’s conclusion that women were never ordained, however, is a theological, not a historical judgment. As Terrence Tilley effectively pointed out in his presidential address to the College Theology Society, it is a serious methodological error to confuse historical and theological judgments.<sup>96</sup> The theological assumption made by Metz presumes that the early medieval centuries cannot be normative for Christian life because the only

<sup>94</sup> On the importance of the texts, Metz notes: “Au XIIe siècle, nous rencontrons aussi le terme de *ordinatio*; mais cette expression a été utilisée de façon passagère seulement, si bien qu’elle ne mérite pas de retenir notre attention” (“*Benedictio sive consecratio virginum*” 267–68). He also states: “Les dénominations s’expliquent par l’imprécision des termes; c’est seulement à partir du XIIe siècle que l’on s’efforce d’apporter les distinctions voulues à la terminologie du sacrement de l’ordre” (*ibid.* 285). On Metz, see n. 4 above.

<sup>95</sup> S.v. “Clergy,” *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* 3.443.

<sup>96</sup> “The role-specific responsibility of the theologian is *not* to accept the hypotheses of historians—or sociologists, social psychologists or ethnographers—as vetoes on faith and practice or as sufficient warrants for expressions of faith and patterns of practice. Rather the theologian must accept these hypotheses as indicators of varying reliability of how the faith has been lived, been practiced, been incarnated both “there and then” and “here and now.” The theologian can then make her own

theology normative for Christian belief and practice must be that elaborated by the Scholastic theologians and promulgated by the Council of Trent.

Such an assumption implies a developmental understanding of Christian doctrine that determines certain periods and documents as normative and, more importantly, as irreversibly normative. From a historical point of view, all other periods must be judged more or less incomplete, faulty, or flawed in relation to those normative periods and documents and, further, the present must conform to the normative period in so far as is humanly possible. The crucial question remains, of course, how to decide which periods or actions in the long history of Christianity are normative.<sup>97</sup>

For the Roman Catholic papal magisterium in the 20th century that answer has often been that the magisterium decides which actions, pronouncements, and periods are normative. “Definitive” statements from the past are determined as normative based on the juridical standing of the bodies who produced such statements, and the papacy is empowered to adjudicate such standing. In effect, doctrine “develops” until the current pope says its development has stopped and that one or the other official statement is the last word on the issue.

Such an approach entails serious problems. Normative endorsement of an official statement depends on the reigning pope; future popes can and have removed such endorsements, thus annulling normative statements of early popes.<sup>98</sup> Apparently, what seems to be operative is a kind of “ecclesial Darwinism” in which the present is seen as an advancement over the past inasmuch as the present is better able to judge what from the past must be normative.

What counts in this theology is the present, since the past depends on the present for its authorization and authentication. To give but one example, canonical legislation from the reform movements of the fifth, ninth, and thirteenth centuries that gradually excluded women from any official role

---

recommendations for reformation or restoration—but *empirical claims, even if fully warranted, are not sufficient, and may not even be necessary, to warrant theological recommendations*” (Terrence Tilley, “Practicing History, Practicing Theology,” in *Theology and the New Histories*, College Theology Society Proceedings, 1998, ed. Gary Macy [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1999] 10).

<sup>97</sup> The theological issue raised here is the very complicated and nuanced problem of the role of authority and tradition in the determining the belief and practice of the Church. For a recent overview of the present theological discussion of this issue, see John E. Thiel, “Perspectives on Tradition,” *Catholic Theological Society of America, Proceedings* 54 (1999) 1–18.

<sup>98</sup> John T. Noonan makes this point in his article “Experience and the Development of Doctrine,” *Catholic Theological Society of America, Proceedings* 54 (1999) 43–56.

in the Church are deemed to be normative, definitive, and irreversible. However, equally strong canonical legislation and practice from the first through the nineteenth centuries insisting that ordination must include the voice of the community for which one is ordained is not considered equally normative or definitive and has been reversed in papal appointments to episcopal office during this century.<sup>99</sup> Clearly, what counts as normative and definitive constitutes a theological discernment that can vary from era to era. Thus, the clarity and certainty which such a theology seems to offer evaporates when seen through the larger lens of centuries of Christian history. Eternally true teaching taught everywhere and always depends, all too humanly, on which teaching office is choosing which places count as “everywhere” and which times count as “always.”

In such an approach, theological debate can too easily be reduced to discussion of authority. Who determines which statements are definitive becomes more important than the question of why such statements should be seen as definitive. For some writers, in fact, determining the first issue removes the need of pursuing the second. Metz, for example, makes no arguments as to why ordination should be understood only in the manner determined by the Council of Trent, nor does he offer a theological defense of the magisterium’s authority to determine the normative nature of certain historical moments. The historical choices made by the magisterium and the theological assumptions made by Metz are obscured by the conflation of history and theology.

The extreme example of Metz, however, does not mean that no sound theological arguments can be made for either the historical conclusions that he draws or for the theological assumptions he makes. Theologians have argued persuasively that tradition demands that certain historical moments ought to be determined as normative.<sup>100</sup> The further theological argument can be made that the magisterium is the appropriate body to determine

<sup>99</sup> Congar has written extensively on the history of community involvement in election and ordination of bishops; see, e.g., *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of the Laity*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Donald Attwater (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1967) 244–47; “Ordination invitus, coactus de l’église antique au canon 214,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 50 (1966) 169–97; “My Path-Findings” 178–80. For an excellent review of the early history of election, see Thomas F. O’Meara, “Emergence and Decline of Popular Voice in the Selection of Bishops,” *The Choosing of Bishops*, ed. William W. Bassett (Hartford, Conn.: Canon Law Society of America, 1971) 21–32. For a insightful discussion of the novelty of the recent papal practice of appointing bishops, see Garret Sweeney, “The Wound in the Right Foot: ‘Unhealed,’” *Bishops and Writers: Aspects of the Evolution of Modern English Catholicism*, ed. Adrian Hastings (Wheatthampstead, Hertfordshire: Anthony Clark, 1977) 207–34.

<sup>100</sup> See, e.g., David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

which historical periods should be considered as normative. Finally, the argument can be made that the position of the 13th-century theologians as interpreted by Trent is in fact the theologically most sound approach to the understanding of ordination. My point here is that Metz makes none of those arguments and furthermore gives the impression that such arguments need not be given. The choices made on several different levels have been obscured by the conflation of history and theology.

The purpose of these brief conclusions, as I have argued, is not to attempt any solution to the problems raised here nor to offer an alternative to the method under discussion.<sup>101</sup> My aim rather is more modest, namely to insist that use of historical conclusions by theology must be theologically justified and that such justification involves choices on several different levels. Conflation of these choices and the more basic conflation of theological and historical conclusions can seriously hamper meaningful dialogue between those who disagree over serious pastoral issues.

Hopefully, an awareness of the unavoidable human choice at the heart of the process of recovering our traditions, whatever theological method is adopted for that recovery, will make for a more critical and judicious application of past practices to present situations.<sup>102</sup> All theological readings of history involve such choices, or better still discernment of what can or should be normative for the present. To deny that such discernment exists or to fail to justify the criteria for such discernment is not only dangerous but morally suspect.<sup>103</sup>

The historical conclusions of my article, then, do not automatically either justify women's ordination nor do they automatically rule out such a possibility.<sup>104</sup> Nor do the historical conclusions automatically justify the acceptance or rejection of a broader and more communitarian understanding

<sup>101</sup> For an alternative approaches to the role history can play in informing theology, see the preface to Macy, *Theology and the New Histories*; also "Introduction to *The Theologies of the Eucharist in the Early Scholastic Period*," in *Treasures from the Storehouse* 1–19, and Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1998) esp. 64–93.

<sup>102</sup> For a recent and extended discussion of the problems of discerning the Christian tradition, see the essays in Macy, *Theology and the New Histories*.

<sup>103</sup> On the moral dimension involved in the making of church policy, see Norbert Rigali, "On the *Humanae Vitae* Process: Ethics of Teaching Morality," *Louvain Studies* 23 (1998) 3–21.

<sup>104</sup> Again, I agree with Tilley: "Whatever 'ordination' has meant—and it has meant many things—if it can be demonstrated historically that the Church "ordained" women in the past, that is neither necessary nor sufficient warrant for "ordaining" women today. If it could be demonstrated that the Church never "ordained" women in the past, that would not be necessary or sufficient warrant to prohibit the ordination of women today. While theological arguments often can and should be influenced by historians' excavations, analyses, and reconstructions, nor-

of ordination. Historical conclusions do not lead automatically to theological or ecclesial conclusions. What cannot be said *historically* is that Christianity has never officially recognized women's ministry or that that ministry had no cultic function. Nor can it be denied that the Church once accepted an understanding of ordination as a vocation or ministry to the community from which that ministry arose. To deny these claims would be the result of a *theological* conclusion that affirms these practices cannot be considered normative. Such a conclusion, however, must be justified theologically in the same way and with the same rigor as the opposing claim that such practices can play a normative function in present theological and ecclesiastical judgments.

Christians can never replicate the past. Even if we do the same things our ancestors did, they are done in a new social and cultural setting and hence cannot be the same. Therefore, we must always choose to do something new even if that is to do something old in a new setting. Fortunately, Christians who went before us have offered us many different patterns of behavior in varying cultural settings. We can learn much from them, judiciously and prayerfully discerning what will help us most. Perhaps the greatest lesson to be learned here is that our future does not have to, and indeed cannot, replicate our past. The most wonderful gift that the past gives us is the freedom to do something new and to trust, as did our predecessors, that in that newness the Spirit is still with us.

---

mative theological claims cannot stand or fall solely on the basis of historical warrant" (Tilley "Practicing History, Practicing Theology" 11).