

“The Image of God in Male and Female”

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Are men more like God than women are? That is the implication of many arguments against ordaining women as bishops, priests, or deacons. Whether the argument is that priests “icon” Christ in the Divine Liturgy, acting *in persona Christi*; or that fatherhood is especially priestly and more priestly than motherhood; or that the order of clergy and laity is like the order of Creator and creature, heaven and earth, or soul and body, the implication is that men and women are not equal: Men are outrank women in the hierarchy of being.

Inequality is inherent in the very concept of hierarchy. As originally defined and still commonly understood, hierarchy is all about mediation between highers and lowers, superiors and inferiors, the more godlike and the less godlike. And yet the first to define the concept—the sixth-century philosopher who wrote in the guise of the first-century St. Dionysius the Areopagite—did not attribute hierarchy to men and women. Neither did he attribute hierarchy to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In the Trinity, we therefore have a paradigm for interpersonal relations that are *equal yet ordered*—a *taxis* without *hierarchia*. How might such an order explain the exclusion of women from the clergy? That is the question to be answered here by outlining a theological difference between male and female—*theological* in that it relates male and female to the Persons of the Trinity.

There is an obvious danger in relating male and female to the Trinity. Too often theologians pondering the mystery of male and female have taken *what they think they know* about men and women and looked for the same in God—and tended thus to project masculinity and femininity on God in ways Church Fathers would never allow, for fear of sexualizing divinity and divinizing

sexuality, as pagans tend to do. The safer way is to take *what we are told* about the Father and the Son in the Gospels and then look for the same in the man and the woman.

Never mind the Origenist notion found in some Fathers that male and female are not related in any way to the image of God.¹ The fact is that both Holy Scripture and patristic tradition explicitly and implicitly indicate a relation. The explicit indication in the Old Testament is Gen 1:27: “In the image of God created He him; male and female created He them.” The explicit indication in the New Testament is 1 Cor 11:3: “But I would have you know that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God.”

In interpreting Gen 1:27, Church Fathers never settled on a single definition of the image of God. Some tended to identify the image with the rational soul, but many others identified the image with dominion per Gen 1:26: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion . . . over all the earth . . .”² Some of the same Fathers also saw the image of God in man’s creation of things.³ Clement of Alexandria even saw the image in man’s obedience to the commandment to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28), saying, “In this way the human being becomes the image of God, by cooperating in the creation of another human being.”⁴ All three of these interpretations are fundamentally relational—a matter of how man relates to God, to things, or to others of his own kind.

As for the word *head* in 1 Cor 11, prior to the Christian era, the Greek word *kephalē* for “head” in 1 Cor 11 often also meant “beginning.” The Septuagint, in fact, uses *kephalē* interchangeably with *archē* (“beginning”) to translate the Hebrew word *rōsh*, which also meant both “head” and “beginning,” as in *Rōsh Hashanah* (“head of the year”). We have this sense of the word *head* in the English words *trailhead*, *fountainhead*, and *headwater*, and also in the word *head* itself, which the King James uses to translate *rōsh/archē* in Gen 2:10, which speaks of the beginnings of

¹ I have dealt at length with the Origenist understanding of male and female in my book *Origen’s Revenge: The Greek and Hebrew Roots of Christian Thinking on Male and Female* (Pickwick, 2021), which also treats at much greater length the theological basis of male and female argued in this article.

² Identifying the image with dominion (*archetōsan* in Gen 1:26, *archete* in Gen 1:28) is typical of the more literal and less allegorical Antiochene tradition. See, for example, St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Gen 2.8*, *Homily 7 on the Statues*, and *Homily 26 on 1 Cor*; St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Gen 1*; and Theodoret of Cyrus, *Questions on Gen 1* and *Commentary on 1 Cor 11*.

³ Theodoret of Cyrus, for example, notes the difference that God sometimes creates things out of nothing, whereas man creates things from other things, “Yet creating even in this fashion, the human being to some extent imitates the Creator as an image of its archetype.” Theodoret of Cyrus, *Questions on Gen 1.20*. Translation by Robert C. Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus: The Questions on the Octateuch, Vol. 1* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2007), 53–54.

⁴ *Paed.* 2.10.83. Translation by David G. Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 41. Cf. Clement, *Strom* 3.9.66.

the four rivers watering the garden of Eden.⁵ This is also the sense of *kephalē* in Col 1:18, Col 2:19, and Eph 4:15, which all speak of Christ as the “head” or source of the Church.⁶ And it is also the sense of *archē* and *kephalē* in many patristic references to Christ as the “head of creation.”⁷

It should hardly surprise us, then, that Church Fathers frequently understood *kephalē* in 1 Cor 11:3 to mean “beginning” or “source.” St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. John Chrysostom, St. Cyril of Alexandria, and Theodoret of Cyrus all use 1 Cor 11:3 to argue for the equality of the Son with the Father on account of the Father being the source, the *Archē*, of the Son.⁸ Chrysostom argues plainly against a subordinationist understanding of the verse, saying:

For had Paul meant to speak of rule and subjection . . . he would not have brought forward the instance of a wife, but rather of a slave and a master. For what if the wife be under subjection to us? It is as a wife, as free, as equal in honor. And the Son also, though He did become obedient to the Father, it was as the Son of God, it was as God.⁹

But what does it mean, then, to be the source of someone or to owe one’s existence to someone? Here is where we must turn to the words of Our Lord Himself, in what He reveals to us about the Father and the Son.

Many things are said in the Gospels about the Father and the Son, but one difference stands out: In the Gospels, between the Father and the Son, all of the giving is done by the Father and all the thanking is done by the Son. The Father is said to “give” to the Son 16 times (Matt 11:27; Luke 10:22; John 3:35, 5:22, 5:26–27, 5:36, 6:37, 6:39, 13:3, 17:2, 17:4, 17:8–9, 17:11, 18:11); the Son is said to “thank” the Father 11 times (Matt 11:25, 15:36; Mark 8:6, 14:23; Luke 10:21, 22:17, 22:19, 22:27; John 6:11, 11:41). Not once is the Father said to thank the Son, and not once is the Son said to give anything to the Father *except thanks*. This defines their relationship for us better than anything else. As the *Archē* of the Son, the Father gives His very essence to the Son, from which “flows both

⁵ For a fuller analysis of the uses of *kephalē* in Holy Scripture, see Wayne Grudem, “The Meaning of the Word *Kephalē* (‘Head’) A Response to Recent Studies.” In *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Good News, 1991), 425–68.

⁶ See Stephen Bedale, “The Meaning of *kephalē* in the Pauline Epistles,” *JTS* 5.2 (October 1954) 211–15. Bedale (213) writes, “If this virtual equation of *κεφαλή* and *ἀρχή* be conceded a new and illuminating interpretation of several Pauline passages becomes possible.” Indeed.

⁷ G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 749.

⁸ St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat. Lect.* 13.22; St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 26 on 1 Corinthians*; Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:3*; Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11*.

⁹ *Homily 26 on 1 Corinthians*, NPNF1 12, 150.

the equality and the being of equals,” says St. Gregory the Theologian¹⁰; the Son in return gives thanks to the Father, showing His thanks by doing the Father’s will.¹¹

In the Father and the Son, we therefore have a divine paradigm not for *hierarchical* relationships, because hierarchy always means inequality, but for *archical* relationships in which the persons are equal because they are related archically, one being from the other and the two relating to each other through *archic* self-giving and *eucharistic* service.¹² And where do we find this said of the man and the woman? In Ephesians 5, where St. Paul once again draws an analogy from the man and the woman, this time to Christ and the Church: The man is to love the woman “even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it” (Eph 5:25), and the woman is to show her thanks by submitting to and serving him as the Church submits to and serves Christ (Eph 5:22, 33).

The woman is also to honor the man by covering her head in church. The Fathers do not always distinguish natural versus economic relations between the sexes and therefore do sometimes speak of head-covering as a symbol of the woman’s subjection on account the Fall. St. Paul himself refers to the Fall or the Law when setting limits on what women may do in church (1 Cor 14:34–35; 1 Tim 2:11–14), but he does not mention either in Eph 5 or 1 Cor 11. Instead, in 1 Cor 11, he mentions creation, saying, “For the man is not of the woman: but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man” (1 Cor 11:5–10). The Apostle is of course alluding to Genesis 2, which tells of the woman being created from and for the man as his “helper”—a helper in tending the garden and in bearing children after leaving the garden, but also in completing the image of God in man at creation, for only after the creation of the woman does man become a creature who relates to other creatures of his own kind through archic self-giving and eucharistic service—by which the many become one “even as we are one” (John 17:11, 22).

Here, it is worth noting that what our ancient Scriptures declare about the man being the source of the woman is still true today, not just as history but as a daily occurrence according to modern science, which tells us that the man indeed bears in him both X and Y chromosomes, whereas the woman bears only the X. It is the man’s gift of an X or a Y that determines the sex of the

¹⁰ *Oration on Holy Baptism*, NPNF2, 7 376.

¹¹ The identification of the Father as the *Archē* of the Son and Holy Spirit was common among Church Fathers. For example, St. Gregory Palamas writes, “The Father is called Father only in relation to His Son. In relation to both the Son and Spirit, He is called *Archē*, even as He is called *Archē* in relation to the creation.” (*Chapter 132*, PG 150, 1213B–C). For many more examples, see Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, 235.

¹² Pseudo-Dionysius has nearly nothing to say about relations among equals in his hierarchies, but in what he does say he does not attribute to them the functions of purification, illumination, and perfection that are the essence of hierarchy.

child, and so, biologically, a man is literally the source of every woman's womanhood as well as every man's manhood.¹³

But what does any of this have to do with ordination?

The archical partnering of the man and the woman is not the only human relationship mirroring the self-giving and thanksgiving of the Father and Son. The same can be said of many other relationships as they are meant to be. Parents and children are the most obvious example, which is why we worship God as Father and Son. Parents live their lives for their children, mothers especially. In caring for their children, mothers take the archic role as the self-giving source of life, and this, St. Paul tells us, can be her path to salvation, her opportunity to practice Christlike self-giving (1 Tim 2:15). So the man is not more Christlike than the woman: They both take the Christlike archic role toward their children as well as the equally Christlike eucharistic role toward God.

Toward children, both fathers and mothers are called to act as priests, teaching their children the Gospel, leading them in prayer, and demonstrating the self-giving love of God and Christ by living and giving their own lives for their children. Such self-giving is what sets Christian priesthood apart from pagan priesthood. Pagan priests were not expected to live much less die for their people; Christian priests are: "The good shepherd giveth his life for his sheep" (John 10:11).

Self-giving in the service of God is the supremely priestly act. It was the revelation of Christ's self-giving on the Cross—in the service of the Father but for our sake—that revealed the love of God to those in Hades, loosing the bonds and freeing the captives. That sacrifice is what makes Him our High Priest. Likewise, self-giving in the service of God for the sake of others is ultimately what distinguishes clergy from laity. The laity give of themselves in many ways to many people, but only the clergy are committed to living their lives for the whole flock. Being a parish priest is a very demanding job, and priests' families often suffer from it. Very few laymen have that problem. Very few families of laymen suffer because the father spends too much time in church.

Priests have an *administrative* role, deciding what's to be done and directing others to do it. They also have a *hieratic* role, being the one to say and do certain things in the celebration of the Sacraments. They also have a *hierarchical* role, enlightening others through preaching, teaching,

¹³ St. John Chrysostom speaks eloquently of the man's gift of "purest gold" in sexual intercourse, which the woman "nourisheth it and cherisheth it, and withal contributing her own share, restoreth it back a Man." *Homily 12 on Colossians*, NPNF1 13, 319.

counseling, and correction. But what sets them apart most as clergy—what makes them most Christlike as priests—is their *archic* role of self-giving. That is most essential. It is not necessary for a Christian priest to know more or be holier than others to be a priest to others; it *is* necessary that he be the “good shepherd,” living his life for his flock.

But why can’t women be priests?

Women can be priests in the way that every Christian is called to be a priest, taking Christ’s archic role toward creation. They share with men God’s grant of dominion in Genesis 1—the word for *dominion* being a derivative of *archē* (*archetōsan/archete*) in the Septuagint. Women can also take the archic role toward children, toward younger women, and toward those outside the Church, evangelizing even men outside the Church. But women cannot be *clergy* because the clergy are assigned the self-giving archic role toward the whole flock—everyone in the Church, male and female—whereas the woman is ordained to manifest the image of God by taking the eucharistic role toward the man. Having women take the archic role toward men in the Church disrespects the image of God and upsets the natural order based on that image.

This was the problem with the ancient order of deaconess. When the word *diakonos* meant simply someone helping out in church work, in some form of lay ministry, having women *diakonoi* was not a problem, but when the word *diakonos* came to mean a member of the clergy, an ordained rank in the hierarchy of the Church with real authority, the existence of women *diakonoi* became increasingly problematic. That’s why deaconesses were always extremely limited in what they were allowed to do, why they were never accepted in the West, why they eventually disappeared from those parts of the East where they had existed, and why we should not have them now.¹⁴

It was by disrespecting the image of God as male and female that the first man and woman fell—Eve turning away from her source to follow the serpent, and Adam then turning away from his source to follow Eve. To bring them back into right relation with each other and with God, God made the man responsible for the woman and made her dependent on him (Gen 3:16). One can hardly hold a man responsible for something beyond his control, so naturally this involves some loss of freedom for the woman, for which she receives children as well as a lifelong provider, protector, companion, and lover. That’s quite a lot for women to be thankful for.

¹⁴ See Brian Patrick Mitchell, *The Disappearing Deaconess: Why the Church Once Had Deaconesses and Then Stopped Having Them* (Alexandria, VA: Eremía, 2021).

Subjection is not expected only of women, for the woman's subjection is just the first (and the least) of all the subjections decreed by God for our own good, as St. John Chrysostom says in preaching on 1 Corinthians 11:

And from the beginning He made one sovereignty only, setting the man over the woman. But after our race ran headlong into extreme disorder, He appointed other sovereignties also, those of Masters, and those of Governors, and this too for love's sake.¹⁵

This is not how many Westerners think today because most Westerners have been taught to think not by the Apostles and Fathers but by Marx and Rousseau, who, like Satan, despised the subjection of themselves to others, taking offense at being cast in the role of the Son—as the one to give thanks by humbly submitting and obeying. But if Marx and Rousseau are our apostles, then we are in the wrong religion, because the Church of Christ has always taught humble acceptance of both our economic subjection to others and our natural archic and eucharistic responsibilities to others.

The economic subjection of the woman did make her exclusion from the clergy easy to argue for the Fathers, since women could hardly be bishops, priests, or deacons when forbidden to speak in church or rule over men (1 Cor 14:34, 1 Tim 2:12). But the woman's subjection is not by itself the reason for her exclusion from the clergy. The fundamental reason is that clergy are ordained to give their lives as good shepherds of their flocks, and between men and women God has ordained the man to take the Father's archic role of loving self-giving and has ordained the woman to take the Son's eucharistic role of grateful service. That is the only way we can be one as the Father and Son are one—through self-giving and thanksgiving in the order ordained by God.

This is how we should be explaining the difference of male and female to young and old. It makes more sense of what it means to be made in the image of God and “one even as we [the Father and the Son] are one.” It provides what feminists often say they don't see—a “theological” reason why women can't be priests. It explains how Christ can indeed be the Archetype of both the man and woman while not being a woman. It establishes the ontological equality of the woman on firmer theological ground, so the man doesn't look somehow more like God or Christ, as implied by arguments based on hierarchical symbolism or “iconic representation.” It supports and helps explains

¹⁵ St. John Chrysostom, Homily 34 on 1 Cor, NPNF1 12, 205. Cf. Homily 6 on Philipians, NPNF1, Vol. 13, 209.

both the natural order and the economic order, unlike vague appeals to “complementarity,” which are often purposely vague to avoid mentioning the woman’s economic subjection. Finally, it enables us to say, very simply, what it is in manhood and in womanhood that is distinctively like God without projecting our fallen, imperfect understanding of masculinity or femininity on God.

Long ago the late Fr. Thomas Hopko spoke of the man and the woman relating to each other as “giver” and “receiver.” What I’ve done here is carry such thinking much further, investing both roles with much more meaning. Having done that, I recommend that we stay away from using the word *receiver* in this context. It doesn’t say nearly enough and also takes us back to the ancient Greek notion of male and female as a difference of active and passive. There are three problems with that: (1) it’s not fair to men, who would seem to receive nothing, not even thanks, for their self-giving; (2) it’s not flattering to women, because it credits them with nothing but passively receiving; and (3) it cannot be said of God, because God is never passive—God is always active in either self-giving or thanksgiving. We should live likewise.

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