

# Discipleship of Equals or Nuptial Mystery?

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Fifty years ago, as a glance at standard textbooks would confirm, history as taught in school and university was mostly about battles and wars and the doings of kings and queens. Since then, however, there has been a massive shift of interest to the doings and sufferings of ordinary people—much more difficult as it of course is to reconstruct their lives. More recently still, historians have turned their attention to retrieving the experience of women—ordinary women, in different societies, but also (as in such recent books as *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended* edited by Alcuin Blamires or *Medieval English Prose for Women* edited by Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne) women who played a distinctive and much more significant part in history than has previously been acknowledged. Here too, it has become possible to read between the lines of familiar material to discover what was (no doubt inadvertently and unconsciously) played down, skewed, marginalized, concealed or so blatantly omitted that the silences themselves have become eloquent. Texts written, by men for men, although nobody realized that, inevitably operated with a male-oriented system of interests and values. Once the ‘androcentric’ agenda of a document or a cultural artefact is allowed for, we can begin, cautiously and tentatively of course, to look for the lacunae and distortions that might reveal the absent and unidentified women’s experience.

For once, work in Christian theology has not lagged far behind this much wider shift in cultural interest and awareness. There are, of course, always predecessors, belatedly discovered—above all Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) in this case. She stands as the precursor of Christian feminists for whom equal rights for women is the issue. Like many another woman who received an unusually good education for her day, she was the daughter who had to make up to her father for the loss of his sons. Her honeymoon trip with Henry Stanton included the Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840 in London (at which the women delegates remained in a curtained-off area for most of the time). Her abolitionist convictions

soon developed into concern for equality for women. She helped to organize the first women's rights convention in 1848, held in the small town of Seneca Falls (New York State) where she lived with her growing family. Brought up as a Presbyterian, she maintained an interest in theology. With the publication in 1881 of the Revised Version, she assembled a team of scholars to identify and comment on references to women in Scripture—which led to the appearance in 1895 of the first volume of *The Woman's Bible*, a fortnight after her eightieth birthday. From the outset, then, and now for over a century, what would become one line of feminist theology has been inseparable from the question of women's rights. (There is no entry on her in the second edition (1974) of the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, but Elisabeth Griffith's book, *In Her Own Right* (1984), is a fine study of Cady Stanton's life and work.)

In the vast spread of feminist reassessment of western culture, history and literature which has taken place since about 1960, theologians and biblical scholars have been quite prominent. Some who started out as Christians eventually despaired of ever liberating women from the 'misogynist' texts and institutions of traditional Christianity. Mary Daly, once a Catholic, with doctorates in theology and philosophy from the then Dominican-dominated University of Fribourg, came out with *Beyond God the Father* in 1973 and has now left Christianity far behind ('Since "God" is male, the male is God'). Daphne Hampson, with doctorates in church history and systematic theology, still believes in God but no longer regards Christianity as anything more than a myth (see her exchange with Rosemary Radcliffe Ruether in *New Blackfriars*, January 1987). But among the many who remain able to retain their Christian faith, however radical their criticisms of the 'patriarchal' structures of what they have inherited, none is more significant than the Catholic scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, now Krister Stendahl Professor of Divinity at the Harvard Divinity School.

Born and brought up in Germany, Schüssler Fiorenza is a New Testament scholar by training. Married to the theologian Francis Fiorenza and settled in the United States for many years, she established her reputation with *In Memory of Her* (1983). Nearly half of that book is taken up with a rigorous theoretical study of the methodology required for retrieving the women's presence in androcentric texts. The rest of the book offers selected readings of New Testament passages which (roughly speaking) show that, initially, all Christians, male and female, were equal, with women sharing power. With increasing fears of orgiastic behaviour in worship, however, structures of patriarchal control were gradually installed and women were eventually returned to the same kind of

complete subordination to men as may be found in almost every other known society.

Now, with *Discipleship of Equals* (SCM Press, 1993, 372 pages, £15), we have a very substantial collection of Schüssler Fiorenza's essays and working papers. The earliest, dating from 1964, and translated from German, comes from her licentiate thesis. Ironically, as she notes (page 13), she did not object at the time to the publication of a book about women's ministry in the Church under the grammatically masculine title *Der vergessene Partner* ('the forgotten partner'). She was the first woman ever to enroll for the full course in theology that students for the priesthood followed at the ancient University of Würzburg in Bavaria (a city almost totally destroyed by Allied air attacks on 16 March 1945). Ironically enough again, as she says, her enrolment as a theology student almost immediately seemed quite the wrong move in the light of 'the progressive theology that found its way into the documents of the Second Vatican Council'. Such celebrated theologians as Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, Cardinal Suenens and others, argued, as she says, 'that whereas the mission of the clergy, nuns, and brothers was to the church, the calling of the laity was to the world' (page 14). Her thesis, written in 1962, thus turned into clarification for herself as to 'whether I had missed my calling as a member of the laity when I decided to become a professional theologian'. She sought to show that the new 'progressive' ecclesiology of Vatican II, with which she was otherwise in sympathy, did not mean that women who were not in religious life should not work full-time as ministers within the institutional Church—including as theologians.

The idea that a lay person, man or woman, could not do theology properly must seem quite bizarre today. But thirty years ago people might have argued that the fruitful practice of Catholic theology depended so deeply on one's participation in the eucharist that, even if one was not a priest, one really needed the discipline of something like a monastic life. There was also a tendency, among 'progressive' theologians, to say that the theology of 'earthly realities' (work, the body, sport and so forth) was the privileged terrain of lay people, while supposedly internal ecclesiological matters should be left to the clergy as privileged servants of these mysteries.

From the beginning, her book read, as Schüssler Fiorenza says, like an argument for women's ordination to the priesthood. In fact, of course, she was not interested in what would (she thinks) simply be 'the clericalization of women', but rather in 'the declericalization of the church as the people of God' (or 'G-d', as she usually writes, hoping no doubt that the elided vowel will remind readers that God is gender-free). Her belief, then and since, is that ordination would amount to 'a clerical co-

optation of women'. What Catholic women must 'demand', then, is ordination first of all as bishops. Anything short of that would only entrench the present situation. At best, I think she means, ordaining women as priests would be tokenism. At worst, the women who would be chosen and trained in the existing system would soon be 'co-opted' and 'clericalized' (page 317).

It is not an absurd thesis. Think of how long it took for non-Europeans to be ordained priests—and then how much more 'Roman' and 'clerical' many of them finally became in comparison with the missionaries from Europe whom they replaced.

All through the essays in this collection the same theme reappears—the only way that women can help to change the Church into a 'discipleship of equals' would be by ordination to the episcopate. It is an issue of equal rights for women. Schüssler Fiorenza is essentially a descendant of Cady Stanton, in the tradition of the Enlightenment and the American Declaration of Independence.

But this is not the only way of regarding the question of women's ministry in the Church. A second issue that runs throughout the book has to do with understanding the nature of gender. As she worked on the history of the exclusion and subordination of women in Scripture and ecclesiastical institutions, Schüssler Fiorenza became aware that assumptions about women's inferiority were at last gradually being eroded and discredited—but only to give way to a whole new theology of the 'eternal feminine'.

We might put the shift like this. For medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas a woman could not be ordained because she could not be a leader—'her state is one of subordination' (*Summa Theologiae* Supplement 39, 1)—any more than a boy under the age of reason (article 2) or a slave (article 3) could be ordained. For that matter, murderers are also excluded (article 4); men born out of wedlock need a dispensation—'the baser their birth the harder it is to get' (article 5); and disabled men are not easily acceptable either (article 6). But essentially the point is that women are excluded simply because by nature they supposedly occupy a subordinate place in any social hierarchy.

More recently, however, as Schüssler Fiorenza says, a whole new cultural ideology of 'the feminine' has emerged, advocated by philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, biologists and others—few of whom have any interest in the question of ministry (or anything else) in the Catholic Church. Funnily enough, however, this is where Pope John Paul II sings not so far out of tune with such radical French feminist theorists as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, as she notes with some alarm: 'The theory of the maternal-feminine sometimes comes

dangerously close to reproducing in the language of deconstructivism the traditional cultural-religious ascriptions of femininity and motherhood so familiar from papal pronouncements' (page 340).

Of course Schüssler Fiorenza was writing before the publication at Pentecost 1994 of Pope John Paul II's letter to his fellow bishops in which, in virtue of his ministry of confirming the brethren, he declares 'that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women' (see *The Tablet*, 4 June 1994, pages 720-721). The Pope, and no doubt most of those good Catholics who pray for the ordination of women, clearly have ordination to the priesthood in mind. Schüssler Fiorenza, however, with her insistence that ordination to the episcopate is the only move that would make a difference, and her suspicion that women as priests would only strengthen clericalism, shifts the argument to another plane altogether.

The Orthodox often claim that it is the phenomenon of clericalism in the western Church which has generated the anger of many women and their anxiety about becoming priests. It would only be when the Catholic Church rediscovered the royal priesthood of lay people (hinted at in some Vatican II documents) that clericalism would die out and everybody would be happy with the relatively minor role played by bishops and priests in the economy of salvation—so the story goes. Whether the resurgent Orthodox Church in (say) Russia will escape charges of clericalism, sacerdotalism, patriarchalism, etc., remains to be seen. But it seems quite plausible, in the perspective of equal rights, to say that nothing would really change unless women were to become bishops.

It is Catch-22. Women will only 'declericalize' the Church if they have the plenitude of priestly ministry in the episcopate. But hardly anyone envisages them becoming bishops straightaway—even men never do nowadays. They would start in the ranks of male priests, which would soon lead to their 'clericalization'.

If Schüssler Fiorenza is right, then the whole issue may safely be postponed indefinitely. In any case, even without the Pope's recent letter, the question of women priests is not high on the agenda in many regions of the Catholic Church outside western Europe and especially North America. They have more pressing things to think about in Mexico, Brazil, Sicily, Rwanda and so on. Secondly, no bishop or episcopal conference in communion with Rome will ever ordain a woman as priest or bishop unless a decision by a general council has modified or reversed the position taken in the Pope's letter that is surely obvious. Thirdly, the Catholic Church would never move towards ordaining women independently of the Orthodox Church. Many Catholics do not realize this, but Rome has invested far too much in the prospect of reunion in the

foreseeable future (perhaps within fifty years) with the ancient churches of the east. These are pretty indisputable facts. It is an illusion to think that women will soon become priests or bishops in the Catholic Church. It is not just 'the present Pope' who is blocking it. By placing the emphasis on entry into the episcopate in the way she does, Schüssler Fiorenza sharpens our sense of how illusory hopes for women priests in the Church are.

Leaving these pragmatic considerations aside, let us turn to the principal theological argument—in effect to Schüssler Fiorenza's question about gender. She is certainly right about one thing—the 'theological anthropology' of the 'eternal feminine' is spreading fast in the Catholic Church. Arguments about the example of Christ, the constant practice of the Church, and so forth, to which the Pope appeals in his letter, obviously involve prior arguments about how binding Scripture is, how far doctrine may develop, and suchlike. It is highly unlikely that papal decrees will put a stop to such arguments. In about a hundred years, then, there might be a hermeneutic context for Catholics in which arguments from the example of Christ and the constant practice of the Church would look different. Another argument, however, common in Orthodox as well in Catholic theology, might remain in place. This one revolves around the idea of the celebrant at the eucharist as the one who acts *in persona Christi*—as sign or icon. What is at issue, in the end, is a whole notion of what a symbol is. The difference of view here has roots in the difference between the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement—far beyond mere theology. Symbols (it would be argued) are not just symbols—they effectively enact what they symbolize. It is hard to see how people with this conception of symbols could be persuaded to think otherwise. And the new argument about the inherent gender-specificity of Christian revelation is deepening this difference.

This argument is to be found in such texts as Cardinal Gerald Emmett Carter's famous pastoral letter on the sacrament of priestly orders (Toronto, 1983), in essays by North American theologians like Prudence Allen, Sara Butler and Mary Rousseau (in periodicals like *Communio*), in Pope John Paul II's prolific catechetical discourses (*The Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis*, for example, published in 1981) and above all in the increasingly influential writings of the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.

The story goes roughly as follows. Post-Christian feminists like Mary Daly and Daphne Hampson are absolutely right—Scripture and the Christian tradition cannot be freed of gender symbolism. God *is* male vis-à-vis his beloved creatures. Far from this being a reason for abandoning Christianity, however, it is on the contrary God's own way of enabling us to hold on to our sexual identities as women and men. The Covenant

between God and his people is (symbolically) a marital relationship, a nuptial mystery. Israel is the Lord God's spouse, fallen into harlotry right enough but restored to bridal virginity so that humanity (male and female) may be saved in marital union with him. Indeed, the nuptial relationship between Christ and the Church within the order of grace is envisaged as a confirmation and disclosure of the marital union between God as creator and the whole of creation. Ephesians 5 supplies the key text: 'Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present her to himself without spot or wrinkle'. The Church, in a medieval phrase retrieved by Balthasar, is *casta meretrix*—the 'holy whore'. Given the internal relationship between the dispensation of redeeming grace and the order of creation, the Church as immaculate bride of Christ becomes a sacrament and efficacious sign of the world in its proper responsiveness to the Lord of creation.

Far from being an objection to gender-bound Christianity, then, this argument shows how the natural-earthly-creaturely order of things may be saved from distortion and destruction precisely by the grace-given economy of God's husbandly nourishing and cherishing (Ephesians 5: 29) of the Church. A proper understanding of the nuptial relationship between Christ and the Church would, among other things, be a judgment on false views of human sexuality which violate the right order of creation.

The Church 'happens' most deeply in any celebration of the eucharist. We can all agree to that. On the theology I am outlining, however, the eucharist is regarded as how Christ becomes one flesh with his Church. The dialogue between the priest and the worshipping community is a realization, symbolically and sacramentally, of the encounter between the Bridegroom and the Bride. Obviously, then, Christ's masculinity must enter into creating the symbolism in which the nuptial mystery of his communion with his people is enacted. Masculinity is a prerequisite for anyone who is to take that part in the ritual which brings about the marital presence of the Lord to his New Creation. The Church (like the earth) is 'feminine'. Men and women together, we believers receive the gift of salvation from Christ and respond with answering love. In his encyclical letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), Pope John Paul II says that every human being in the Church, man or woman, is a bride—'in that he or she accepts the gift of the love of Christ the Redeemer, and seeks to respond to it with the gift of his or her own person' (section 25). The famous text which is so often quoted in favour of women's equality with men—'There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28)—is taken by the Pope to mean that we are all, men and women, equally brides of Christ. The

eucharist, he goes on to say, is 'the sacrament of the Bridegroom and the Bride'. In this recent papal teaching, then, the analogy of Christ as head and the Church as his body, so central in the theology of Thomas Aquinas, decisively interpreted by Pope Pius XII in a famous encyclical (1943) and part of every Catholic's faith before Vatican II, is now being subsumed into this analogy of Christ the bridegroom and the Church as his virgin bride. 'It is the eucharist above all that expresses the redemptive act of Christ the Bridegroom towards the Church the Bride' (*MD*, section 26).

It is a good deal more complicated, of course. The Church is also 'Marian'—so there is a sense (analogically!) in which the Church is 'maternal' as well as 'bridal': *mater ecclesia* as well as *sponsa Christi*. As Balthasar likes to say, just as Eve was 'born' from Adam's side, so too Christ's bride-mother was 'born' from his wounded side. But in another sense, historically this time, Christ was of course born from Mary's womb. The future bridegroom was born from the womb of the one who would (symbolically!) be born from his own wounded side. And this gender symbolism may be taken further, right into the doctrine of the Trinity itself. According to Hans Urs von Balthasar, Christ as Second Person of the Trinity, being open, receptive and submissive and so forth to the Father, is (symbolically) 'feminine'—but, as co-inspiring and donating the Holy Spirit with the Father, he is also 'masculine'. His mission into the world, in the Incarnation, being self-giving surrender in obedience to the Father's will, is 'feminine'. He is the one 'who, in the whole of his earthly existence, allow[s] himself to be led and "fertilized" [sic!] by the Father' (see Balthasar: *Credo*, 1990, page 78). But at the same time, as the one who actively does the will of the Father, he also represents his authority and initiative with respect to the world and history and is thus 'masculine'.

Much more could and indeed would need to be said. Few Catholics in our part of the world can have heard much from their parish priest about the eucharist as the nuptial union of Christ and the Church. Interestingly enough, it is not a prominent theme in the relevant section of the new Catechism. No doubt the earnest young admirers of papal thinking who are being ordained these days would not think of themselves in late 'sixties terminology as 'presidents of the assembly', but it seems improbable, on the other hand, that many of them would regard themselves as husbands of their congregations at the eucharistic feast—however symbolically.

There is an enormous and widening gulf between those who think ordaining women is a question of equal rights and those who accept some version of the gender symbolism argument. The former seldom have much acquaintance with the ideas of the latter. When they hear of them,



they tend to dismiss them as the last ditch baying of a pack of elderly Italian celibates. That is a great mistake. Rhetorically, the most powerful exponents of this gender-symbol theology are North American women who have demonstrated their scholarship and intellectual distinction in other areas of academia. Furthermore, for better or worse, Hans Urs von Balthasar (who died in 1988) is set to dominate Catholic theology for the next twenty years and the greatest influence on his thinking, as he often said, was his friend and collaborator Adrienne von Speyr. True, it is hard to believe that many bishops in the English-speaking world regard themselves in any very strong sense as taking their local church as their 'bride'. It is one of the many contradictions within the Catholic Church that most of the bishops in Rome itself have never had an episcopal relationship with any diocese whatsoever. Far from being 'bridegrooms' (in terms of theological gender symbolism), they have their status (quite pragmatically) as staff officers and senior managers. The common practice of moving a bishop from his first diocese to a more important one, against all the canons of the ancient Church, does not help to consolidate the 'marriage' between the bishop and his people. But, in the writings of such figures in the Church as Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Carter, the nuptial mystery theology has more than rhetorical power on its side.

In fact, the gulf in Catholic theology is so deep that it is hard to see how the two sides might even be brought into conversation. As Schüssler Fiorenza says, from her equal rights for women stance, the other side, with their emphasis on the rich symbolism of the binary gender system, have remarkable parallels with what clearly seem to her the wild women of 'so-called French feminist theory' (page 340). Speaking for 'liberal' feminist critique, she deplores the move towards an 'autonomous feminism' which holds that knowledge, theory and reason are indeed 'masculine'. Far from trying to get equal access to western institutions of rational discourse, a woman should simply recognize that they are irremediably 'phallocratic', leave them alone, and learn to speak and write with her own 'other' feminine voice.

Luce Irigaray, one of the French feminist theorists to whom Schüssler Fiorenza alludes with perceptible distaste, has been concerned with the question of gender for many years. Her first book, published in 1973 and untranslated, is the result of her work on linguistic collapse in cases of senile dementia.

She came to the fore as a philosopher in 1974 with the volume of essays on Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Freud and others which appeared in English in 1985 as *Speculum of the Other Woman*. She is a psychoanalyst and the book annoyed Jacques Lacan so much that she was

expelled from his *École Freudienne*. 'French Freud', as his work has been punningly called, includes much else that has fatefully infiltrated post-structuralist thought but it was his theorization of female sexuality in terms of a 'lack' that prompted Irigaray to break away.

According to Lacan, babies enjoy an illusory condition of unity and omnipotence which is lost as they enter the domain of language and culture. Thus, at the origin of every human being's self-constitution, there is a lack. But since, according to Lacan, the order of language and culture is phallocratic (unconsciously of course), a woman suffers from a second irremediable lack. Against this, Irigaray claims that, far from being a lack, women's otherness needs to be celebrated positively. Instead of seeking equality with men by playing down sexual difference (as a cultural product or whatever), she thinks that the status of women could be altered only by affirming and deepening their sexual difference from men.

Irigaray seems to be advocating a biological essentialism, many of her feminist critics say. She appears to withdraw femininity from the irretrievably phallogocentric order of culture and language in favour of what Schüssler Fiorenza calls 'autonomous feminism' (page 340). These attacks on Irigaray's 'biologism' from the equal rights side in feminist theory are, of course, very reminiscent of attacks on papal sexual ethics from 'liberal' moral theologians. Curiously enough, her uncompromising emphasis on sexual difference has brought her most sympathy from the lesbian wing in feminism.

Irigaray believes, of course, that freeing the radically other feminine voice to speak is an enormously difficult task. How she sets about it may be approached in her *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1980, recently well translated into English). Writing in a wonderful lyrical way, she re-reads this archetypically male philosopher's work in terms of what she detects as his fear of water. (She has another splendid book on Heidegger, so far untranslated, in which, hilariously, she finds a lack of *air* in his thinking!) What this amounts to, if we may go back to what Schüssler Fiorenza fears, is that she 'deconstructs' Nietzsche's surface raging about reason, order, death, control, paternity, deity and so on, in terms of his deeper yearning for the sea, nature, life, unboundedness, and (let's face it!) the Mother-Goddess.

Schüssler Fiorenza is very suspicious of Irigaray's interest in religion. Many allusions indicate that she has attended Catholic liturgies in her time, but her religion now is distinctly non-Christian. On the other hand, if we may quote the enigmatic concluding paragraph of *Marine Lover* it should become clear that she is much more in tune with Pope John Paul II than with Schüssler Fiorenza:

To 'go beyond'. Or decode the Christic symbol beyond any traditional morality. To read, in it, the fruit of the covenant between word and nature, between *logos* and *cosmos*. A marriage that has never been consummated and that the spirit, in Mary, would renew? The spirit? Not, this time, the product of the love between Father and son, but the universe already made flesh or capable of becoming flesh, and remaining in excess to the existing world. Grace that speaks silently through and beyond the word?

The strange affinity between Irigaray's metaphors and the gender symbolism of recent papal thinking certainly isolates the equal rights feminism of a self-styled 'liberal' Catholic like Schüssler Fiorenza. Whether any compromise is possible between her 'discipleship of equals' and the gender-centred vision of the Church as a nuptial mystery seems very unlikely.

## Ten Reasons why Thomas Aquinas is Important for Ethics Today

James F. Keenan SJ

Recently several works that study Thomas Aquinas's ethics have been published.<sup>1</sup> Why is it, too, that a return to Thomas's ethics yields insights into his writings that have escaped us for decades, even centuries? Why is he a perennial font of reflection that prompts new writers to find fresh insights at the end of the second millennium?

The answer rests, I believe, in the fact that he captures an understanding of the moral life that is enormously helpful in forming a vision of the type of people we ought to become. In an age that wants to respect the individual conscience while maintaining a sense of the objectively right and wrong, Thomas provides a framework in which we can achieve both. In order to demonstrate how Thomas accomplishes this,