

Père (Cardinal) Congar, O.P.,
on the Issue of Women's Ordination

Interview Conducted by Richard J. Beauchesne
(May 26, 1975, Couvent Saint-Jacques, Paris)

(with Reflections in the Footnotes by the Interviewer)

(N.B. The interview was taped. It has now been transferred to a CD and translated into text [Microsoft Word]. The entire interview, with footnoted commentaries that I added, has been submitted recently for publication at *Les Éditions du Cerf* in Paris.)

On May 26, 1975, I interviewed Père Congar on the issue of women's ordination at the Couvent St-Jacques in Paris. Among several questions, I asked about his view on the ordination of women. After great hesitations about approaching the subject, he began by affirming: "I am against a women presbyterate (priestly ordination): *solus vir baptizatus* [a baptized male only]." Congar then continued: "At any rate, I absolutely do not know whether [the *solus vir baptizatus*] is of divine right or not." He further explained: "There is but *the fact*: [namely,] Jesus did not make women apostles. The apostles did not make women apostles. In the Bible," Congar stated,

"authority is always masculine." I pressed Congar to explain: "There is no other explanation but the fact," he said.¹

"However," he added, "if I want to give a reason, and if I want to reason the fact, personally I do it according to the following line [of thought]. In Scripture, the relationship between God and his people -- between Christ and the Church -- is described as a spousal relationship. That does not sexualize God or Christ. Christ is not the spouse of the Church because he would have a penis, because he is male."²

¹ Congar interprets the Second Testament (NT) "institution of The Twelve" in a historical sense. For a nuanced interpretation of the institution of The Twelve, see Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Twelve," *Women Priests* (Arlene Swidler & Leonard Swidler [eds], Paulist Press, 1977), pp. 114-121. Republished on www.womenpriests.org

² That "Christ is not the spouse of the Church because he is male" is a point of disagreement between Congar (1975) and the 1976 Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood" ("Inter Insigniores," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 69 (1977), 98-116. *Origins*, "Vatican Declaration: Women in the Ministerial Priesthood" [issued 10/15/76], 2/3/77, Vol. 6, No. 33, p. 517, pp. 519-524.) The Declaration claims implicitly that Christ is spouse of the Church because he is male. It explains that, in the Eucharist, the priest does not act in *persona propria* (in his own name), but in *persona Christi* ("taking the role of Christ, to the point of becoming Christ's own image when he [the priest] pronounces the words of consecration.") Now, according to the Declaration, since factually, the Incarnation of the Word took place

So, since in the sacrament of the Alliance (the Eucharist), the priest represents Christ -- he also has a sacramental value of representation before the community as Christ has with the Church -- it seems to me," Congar concluded, "that if it were a woman [celebrating the Eucharist], there would be something disturbing (in French, *quelque chose de troublé*)."³

according to the male sex -- for the consecration 'to happen' -- the ordained priest must bear a 'natural [physical] resemblance' with Christ. Therefore, he must be male. (See *Origins*, pp. 522-523, under heading #5. "The Ministerial Priesthood in Light of the Mystery of Christ.")

It should be noted that Pope John Paul II's May 30, 1994 Apostolic Letter "Ordinatio sacerdotalis" (which bans women's ordination) does not appeal to the 'natural resemblance' with Christ. He simply refers to the "12 men" [apostles], without reference to their male sex, "as specifically and intimately associated with the mission of the Incarnate Word himself" and to those they chose as carrying on "the apostles' mission of representing Christ the Lord and Redeemer" (*National Catholic Reporter*, 6, 17, 94, p. 7, # 2).

³ A question? Might it be, however, that "this something somewhat disturbing" be (for Congar) the female/female (rather than the male/female correspondence) that would "disturb" the spousal analogy especially at Mass (the sacrament of the Alliance) were a woman priest be presiding? The analogy then, would be that of (1) *Christ/wife* (rather than *Christ/husband*) and (2) *Church/wife*. In other words, there would exist 'on both side' of the altar a *female signification*. Thus, during the Eucharist (the Church's celebration of its covenant [marriage] with Christ) the *Church/wife* would be consummating her relationship with the *Christ/wife* -- a ritual which would constitute (at least symbolically) a lesbian relationship -- a prospect all the more "disturbing" for

opponents of women's ordination since the Declaration goes *beyond the realm of the symbolic*. In fact, it verges on declaring the relationship between the *male Christ* and the *male priest* (during the sacrament of the Alliance) to be of a *physical nature*.

Personally, I consider the spousal analogy -- as used in the Declaration -- to be flawed. The reason: the analogy is internally inconsistent. On the one hand, the Declaration insists that the priest must have a 'natural resemblance' with Christ (i.e., that the priest must be male) and, therefore, that Christ as husband relates to the Church *in a physical and univocal sense* (not in a symbolic and analogical way); on the other hand, the Declaration considers the Church as Christ's wife in a *symbolic and analogical sense*. For as wife, the Church includes both men and women. In other words, in the Declaration, *the analogy of attribution* exists only on 'one side of the altar'; namely, the laity's side. On 'the other side' *univocity perdures*, not analogy. Ironically, consistent Vatican logic, were the analogy of attribution univocal on both 'sides of the altar,' such 'univocity' would erect an exclusive female 'laity' (in the same way that such logic erects an exclusive male 'ordained' priesthood). As a result, within the church, there would no place for 'non-ordained' males!