

Women Priests - History and Theology (Part I) (Fr. Patrick H. Reardon)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



Let it be said up front that those who would appeal to ancient precedent to justify the ordination of women to the ministry of presbyter in the Church are faced with a fairly daunting task. There is no canonical record of any office of woman presbyters: Indeed there is no literary record of any kind to that effect.



Oh, that all proponents of women's ordination were honest about the lack of literary evidence. For example, a 1987 article in the Priscilla Papers (Volume 1, no. 4) claimed that «St. Cyprian writes [in Epistle 75.10.5] of a female presbyter [elder] in Cappadocia [also part of modern Turkey] in the mid-230s.» If true, of course, that would seem to be game point and match, for what fool would contest the great African Father? A fine shade of doubt faintly shadows the mind at this point, nonetheless, and I wonder how, having studied St. Cyprian assiduously from my youth, I had failed to distinguish this fairly big detail. Well, I didn't. The letter in

question was actually sent to the saintly bishop of Carthage by Firmilian of Caesarea reporting on what he regarded as the pretentious (*deceperat . . . simularet . . . usurpans*), irregular (*ab ecclesiastica regula*), and even scandalous (*nequissimus daemon per mulierem*) activities of some local woman whom he managed to call just about everything but a presbyter. A delicate and gentle tact pleads that no more be said about this so-called evidence from the third century.

Getting slightly, but only slightly, more serious, we know that there are quite a few early epigraphic references to this or that *presbytera* (priestess), and there is no shortage of feminist archaeologists to make the most of them. These tomb inscriptions, found all around the Mediterranean basin, would perhaps make a cogent argument for women's ordination if we did not already know exactly what a *presbytera* was during the earliest centuries of Christianity: an elderly woman, often a widow, under the care of the Church. There is no evidence whatsoever that it referred to an ordained woman. Consequently, in calling St. Priscilla a «*presbytera officiating along with the presbyteroi in the central act of the worship of the church*,» Torrance employed the word in a sense unknown either in the Christian literature of the period or in any clear epigraphic examples. *Salva reverentia*, this was an unwarranted, eccentric and misleading liberty. (See Dr. Thomas Torrance, «The Ministry of Women,» *Touchstone*, 5.4, Fall, 1992.)

One finds also a few early epigraphic instances of the word *presbytis*, but once again we already know from Titus 2:3-5 and other canonical documents that this simply means an elderly woman. In the Apostolic Constitutions the term seems synonymous with *presbytera* in the sense of a widow or other older woman in the special care of the Church.

Torrance himself refers to *presbytides*, a title signifying women who had certain special functions in the worship of the Church, but he cites the testimony of Epiphanius that these women were not to be regarded as priestesses. Evidently because they functioned that way among the fourth-century Montanists, Canon 11 of the Council of Laodicea finally suppressed the title (Hopko, 61-74).

Something more must be said about the later history of *presbytera*, of which Torrance admits that it «was sometimes used (and still is in Greece) to refer to the wife of a presbyter.» Indeed, we should give this usage more serious attention. I am not aware of literary instances of it before the sixth century. The earliest witness I know of is Canon 19 of the First Council of Tours (ca 567), which speaks of a *presbyter cum sua presbytera* «priest with his priestess.» A nearly contemporary example of this usage is found in the Dialogues (4.11) of Pope St. Gregory I.

The origins of *presbytera* in reference to a priest's wife, nonetheless, were evidently quite a bit earlier. When our literature finally does bear witness to the custom in the sixth century, the masculine term *presbyter* was already in the process of being replaced in Greek by *hierous* and in Latin by *sacerdos*. It is very important to note, however, that these words, *hierous* and *sacerdos*, were not feminized by custom; only the older term *presbyter* was. That changing of the masculine noun *presbyter* reflected an alteration of accent in the theology of the priesthood during that period, but the significant fact for our investigation is that there was no corresponding change in the feminine form of the word. A *presbytera* was simply the wife of a priest; if I may express it so, the word had only a sociological, not a theological, reference. At no time was any woman ordained a *presbytera*; she became one when her husband was ordained a priest.

Furthermore, this very preservation of the word *presbytera* in reference to a priest's wife certainly bears witness to its antiquity and general acceptance. Some feminist archaeologists, as though they were proving something, actually present slide shows with perhaps a score of tomb inscriptions bearing the word *presbytera*. Well, there are doubtless thousands more such inscriptions to be found out there, but they add zero to the feminist case.

It is inadequate to say then, as Torrance does, that it «was sometimes used» to refer to the wife of a priest (as noted above). After the fifth century that was the most expected and normal meaning of the word in both Greek and Latin; the select references to this usage from the sixth century onward fill more than a column of Du Cange's standard lexicon of medieval Latin. From the earlier part of that same period there are still, to be sure, a few instances where the word refers to widows of the Church, and occasionally, but more especially among the Greeks, it designated an abbess. Still, the dominant meaning of *presbytera* after the fifth century was (and has remained) the wife of a priest. I am aware of no evidence, prior to the Slavic missions, that a priest's wife was ever called by any name other than *presbytera* or, after the seventh century Moslem conquest of Syria, the Arabic

precise equivalent, *khoureeye*. At absolutely no point in the first thousand years of Christian history do we find testimony of *presbytera* designating an ordained person in the Church.

Another remark is in order here with respect to the *presbytera*. She was very often the mother of a priest as well as a priest's wife. While I cannot speak for Italy or Gaul, where efforts were being made to force celibacy on the clergy, we know that in many villages of Greece and Syria (and later among the Slavs), the priesthood tended to stay in the same family for a number of generations. A *presbytera* in such a situation acquired a twofold claim to the name. One observes even today the common Arabic title of address: «mother of the priest,» *um-l-khoury*.

Essaying candor at the risk of appearing haughty, let me submit that the exegetical problem here is one of historical continuity. For practical purposes, only the Eastern Orthodox Christians nowadays know by immediate social experience what a *presbytera* is, whether she is called a *popadija* (Serbian), a *panyi* (Carpathian and Ukrainian), a *matushka* (Russian), a *khoureeye* (Syrian), or a *presvytera* (Greek). (My parishioners are proud to address my wife as *khoureeye*, «priestess,» but I fear she would do damage to the hands that tried to ordain her.) This specific sociological creature called the *presbytera* almost does not exist today outside of Orthodoxy, even when, as among the Anglicans, the parish priest is a married man. During the first 1,000 years, however, she was an ordinary and anticipated phenomenon in thousands of parish churches.

Because she is culturally alien to them, Western Christians today sometimes fail to identify the *presbytera* when they find evidence of her in history. If I am permitted to say it abruptly and with no desire to find fault, my meaning is this: the Roman Catholics got rid of the priest's wife, and then the Protestants got rid of the priest. So at the present moment Western Christians, who are still very deeply divided among themselves as to what ordination theologically means or what exactly a person is being ordained to, are simultaneously speculating whether women themselves should be ordained. Thus, every time another tomb is discovered bearing the inscription *presbytera*, a certain number of them stand around congratulating one another on how their evidence is piling up, while the others wring their hands and wonder how to dam the tidal wave. It is a waste of time.

Back to the Catacombs

So Torrance and other proponents of women's ordination, deprived of the faintest filament of support for their case in either literary or monumental sources, turn to the iconography of the early Church, a move that this Eastern Orthodox Christian

would frankly like to see become a trend. Torrance takes us to Rome, there to examine a very early mural in the Catacomb of St. Priscilla. It depicts seven figures seated at a table, and these he describes as seven presbyters celebrating the Eucharist in the catacomb. Torrance, whose eyesight must be infinitely keener than mine, went so far as to identify two of these figures («presumably») as the biblical Aquila and Priscilla, and Touchstone reproduced the picture. (As noted above).

Well, right now I am recalling some wonderfully enjoyable afternoons of yesteryear when, after a long northbound bus ride on the Via Nomentana, I would stand in reverence before that mural and the other fascinating examples of primitive iconography in the Catacomb of St. Priscilla. Doubtless my respect for him over the years may prompt me to regard Torrance as a visionary of sorts, but let me tell you that I never during those afternoons detected anything on that wall comparable to what he claims to behold there.

Even now, looking at a photograph of that fresco over and over again, I discern no trace of what he and some other people say they see. Not terribly clear in every respect, the picture has been the subject of numerous conjectures and, since Davin in 1892, even caricatures. Some viewers could find no male figures in the picture at all (Irvin, 6f.), while Henri Leclercq, who describes them more generally as personages, sees a bearded male, évidemment le président, to our left (Dictionnaire 2.2092). It was the presence of at least one woman at the table that ruled out an early interpretation that the portrayal was of the seven disciples eating at the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:12-23).

Even if this were a realistic picture of the early Eucharist at Rome, it would add nothing to Torrance's argument for women's ordination. Even on that conjecture, it is just not possible to say that anyone at that table is a female presbyter «concelebrating» the Eucharist. That notion cannot be dated prior to some two decades ago, I think, when feminism began its intense feeding frenzy. The world's most eminent liturgical archaeologists since 1885, including Rossi, Wilpert, and Leclercq, studied the fresco from every angle without spotting anything of the sort. That was the year, by the way, that this catacomb was first named for St. Priscilla, largely because scholars believed that she was in Rome (see Romans 16:3) when the catacomb was originally dug on the property of the senator Pudens. To my knowledge, Torrance is the first viewer to spot both Aquila and Priscilla in the mural itself, a feat in whose emulation I have contracted severe eye strain.

But is this supposed to be a realistic portrayal of an actual celebration of the Eucharist? There are reasons for thinking that it is not. According to Justin Martyr,

the Eucharist at Rome was celebrated standing and in prayer, whereas in this scene we are presented with seven figures sitting there at a table talking and gesticulating to one another in what appear to be three separate conversations. (One admits readily that random discourse and other spontaneous pleasantries have also been known to break out from time to time among the less devout during the Eucharist itself, even in some of the local parishes of my area, but we rarely memorialize the event in a mural.)

There are scores of extant catacomb icons showing Christians at prayer, and those all conform to what we know about the usual posture of Christian prayer from several literary sources: figures standing, arms elevated and extended in cruciform, eyes raised. Two good examples are the pictures from the Septuagint Book of Daniel—the praying Susanna and the three boys in the furnace—which are found right there in the same Capella Graeca as the table scene we are talking about. In this latter icon, however, there is no resemblance whatsoever to those other artistic and literary witnesses. All the figures are seated, not one eye in the painting is cast upward, not a single hand raised even to shoulder height.

If we are not looking at a realistic portrait of the Eucharist, still it would be rash to conclude that there is nothing eucharistic about it. The picture is somewhat complex. We observe that its imagery is drawn in part from the Last Supper, in part from the Multiplication of the Loaves; one notes the fish along with the bread and chalice at the table, as well as the seven baskets of fragments (see Mark 8:8 and 20) off to the sides. This all suggests a combining, a «compenetration» if you will, of images from two Gospel scenes. Indeed, the later presence of *elevatis oculis in coelum* («with eyes raised to heaven»), a direct quotation from the Multiplication narrative in Mark 6:41, within the actual Institution Account in the venerable Roman Liturgy, is a striking testimony of how easily the Roman Christians combined the two Gospel scenes.

I believe that this is an icon of the Messianic Banquet, of which the Multiplication of the Loaves was a foreshadowing, and the Eucharist an anticipation. The seven figures, whom I take to be symbolic of the Church in her eschatological fullness, are doing exactly what Jesus said his disciples would do in the kingdom—they are sitting and feasting. The picture is less a portrayal of how early second-century Christians conducted themselves at the Eucharist than of how they hoped to behave themselves in heaven.