

Presidency at the Eucharist in the Context of the Theology of Icons: Questions about the Ecclesial Representation of Christ by the Priesthood

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Among the churches that have safeguarded the faith and order of the old, undivided church, and to a certain extent also within the ecumenical movement,¹ there is a consensus that the bishop or priest when presiding at the eucharist symbolically refers to Christ who is invisibly present and effective at the celebration. In the East this has found expression in the idea that the priest is the icon of Christ. In the West this form of expression is not usual. But if we understand the term "icon" theologically, this formula corresponds to the Old Catholic position.

In the subheading to this paper I use the expression "representation of Christ." The significance of the term "representation" that is often used in this connection in the West, especially in Roman Catholic theology, is not fundamentally clear. In the context of the theology of icons, "representation" means "making visibly present." But the same word is used differently in Roman Catholic theology. Recent Roman Catholic thought, for example, which has accepted insights from the early church tradition, emphasizes that the priest is representative both of Christ and the church.² In the second case, that of the church, we are clearly dealing not with a visible making present

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¹ Cf. *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry. Faith and Order Paper No. 111* (Geneva: WCC, 1982) 16, para. 29: "In the celebration of the eucharist, Christ gathers, teaches and nourishes the Church. It is Christ who invites to the meal and who presides at it. . . . In most churches, this presidency is signified by an ordained minister. The one who presides at the eucharistic celebration in the name of Christ makes clear that the rite is not the assembly's own creation or possession; the eucharist is received as a gift from Christ living in his Church. The minister of the eucharist is the ambassador who represents the divine initiative."

² Josef Freitag, "Amt 4. Systematisch theologisch," LThK, 3 1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1993) 550.

because the congregation is visibly there, unlike the invisible presence of Christ. Because of this failure in clarity of the term “representation,” I prefer here to speak of “icon” and “iconic presentation.”

Before I begin properly on the theme before us, I must also indicate that the idea of “representation of Christ by the priest” at the eucharist in any case means something quite different here from the usual way of thinking that developed in Western Europe since the High Middle Ages. According to that way of thinking, the representation of Christ takes place in the so-called “words of institution” spoken by the priest *in persona Christi*. This understanding is not in keeping with the common understanding of the early church in both East and West, in which the words of institution stand in the context of the entire eucharistic prayer and are said by the priest in the we-form, in other words in the name of the church.³ The iconic nature of the priest consists for us therefore not in the recitation of the words of institution, but in the eucharistic presidency. Even so, we must add that the iconic nature of priesthood is not limited to the eucharist, but applies also to the other sacraments and even to pastoral efficacy. In this paper we can discuss it, however, only in reference to the eucharist.

If we say that the priest is an icon of Christ, we have to raise the question of course as to how *this* type of icon relates to the *painted*

³ Cf. the common statement on the eucharist of the Joint Orthodox-Old Catholic Theological Commission: “The consecration of bread and wine in the Eucharist takes place through the entire eucharistic prayer. The words of the Lord ‘Take, eat . . . drink ye all of it’ in the eucharistic prayer, which has a consecratory character as the whole, do not themselves effect the transformation of the bread and the wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. The transformation is effected by the Holy Spirit whose descending is being prayed for in the epiclesis.” (Urs von Arx [ed.], *Koinonia auf altkirchlicher Basis: Deutsche Gesamtausgabe der gemeinsamen Texte des orthodox-alkatholischen Dialogs 1975–1987 mit französischer und englischer Übersetzung*, Beiheft zur IKZ 79, 1989, 216, Nr. 7. Cf. also Herwig Aldenhoven, “Darbringung und Epiklese im Eucharistiegebet,” IKZ 70, 1980, 212–225, here 220: “If the words of the Lord are abstracted from the context of the early church structure and brought emphatically into the foreground, then their recitation becomes an immediate action in which Christ speaks and consecrates through the celebrating priest. The *priest* acts in an *unmediated way in persona Christi*—he stands immediately in the place of Christ. In the *early church structure* the priest is certainly also in the service of Christ and not some sort of delegate of the congregation, but he does not stand in this *unmediated way* in the place of Christ. The words of consecration are spoken consciously by him (in the name of the church) as an account of the foundation of what the church does in oblation, and of what the church prays the Holy Spirit to effect. Both the *offerimus* and the epiclesis are formulated as *words of the church*. The priest stands in the place of Christ only insofar as he presides at the eucharistic gathering of the church.”

icon of Christ. Common to both is the fact that they are both copies of the original prototype (πρωτότυπον), that is, of Christ, and that they make visible this invisibly present prototype. On the other hand it is not to be forgotten that the way in which the prototype is represented is different, depending on whether it is conveyed by a person—the priest—or by a painted picture. Because in the West the term “icon” has normally been used only in the traditional sense for a painted picture or in the context of iconography, we in the West can only speak of the priest as an icon of Christ if we say what we mean by this.

It seems at first self-evident that the way in which Christ is represented by a person occurs differently from the way he is represented by a painted picture. But before we can attempt to make the difference clear, we have to state emphatically that there are some quite decisive common characteristics. I refer to three that seem to be the most important.

Neither the painted icon of Christ nor the representation of Christ in a person constitutes a natural presentation, like a photograph or the truest possible performance of an actor. In both cases it has far more to do with a representation that makes visible the characteristics of the person represented. In the case of a painted icon this occurs above all through symbolic elements and qualities. We could think, for example, of the very widespread image of Christ in the earliest times, as a youthful shepherd. This image can be understood only in terms of its symbolic character. The representation of Christ as the *pantokrator*, which is connected in terms of the history of art with the portraits of the Roman emperors, lends itself also, however, properly only to a symbolic, non-naturalistic interpretation.

The second common characteristic of the representation of Christ by a picture and by a priest consists in the fact that both refer to the risen one, who now sits at the right hand of the Father and will come again. In other words, both refer to the eschatological Christ and not simply to the earthly Christ of the past. Certainly the eschatological Christ should not be separated from the historical. The risen one, who will come again, is the one who lived on earth and was crucified. But it is also important to be aware that with every sort of icon it is the presence of the risen and exalted one that is made visible.

A third common characteristic of every sort of icon is that its relationship to a particular person becomes unequivocal only through the Word. This occurs either by words written on the icon itself, or else in some other way the picture is accompanied by the written or spoken

word. In the celebration of the eucharist it is the words of the liturgy that make unequivocal the relationship with Christ.

So now to the differences between the representation of Christ through the painted icon and through the priest. I have already said a little about the representation through the painted icon and this will have to suffice here. But to what extent does the priest represent Christ? Rather more must be said about this. Fundamental is the fact that the priest as a human being represents the Son of God who has come as a human being.

“As a human being” here means of course “as a human person.” Further, it is essential that the priest be a baptized member of the church, because it is only as a member of the body of Christ that he can represent Christ. The priest’s status as a baptized person is not directly visible in the eucharistic celebration. What is visible, however, is that the priest is recognized by the church as a person who has been baptized by the church, and recognized also as an ordained agent of Christ. For this reason he takes a particular position and carries out particular tasks. The liturgical vestments worn by the priest also indicate this. Finally, it is essential for the representation of Christ by the priest in the eucharistic celebration that he makes clear by word and action that everything refers to Christ and that Christ invisibly leads and is active in the eucharistic presiding. This corresponds to what has been said above with regard to the significance of the word for the unequivocality of the representation. And naturally the Christ to which this refers is the one and only Christ who once lived and died on earth, who rose and who now lives with the Father, and who at the end will come again.

The representation of Christ by the priest can only be correctly understood when we remember at the same time that all Christians are called to be icons of Christ, as it is especially dynamically expressed in 2 Cor. 3:18, “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” The image of Christ in all the believers and his image in the priest, especially in the celebration of the eucharist, are related to one another just as the general priesthood of the whole people of God is related to the priesthood as a special ministry.

It is undisputed that the imaging of Christ takes place as much through women as through men. This is true for the general priest-

hood in which women as well as men are participants. So how is it with the imaging of Christ by ordained priests? Does gender, understood theologically, play a role here? Can this imaging take place, on theological grounds, only in a man? It could be that in the history of the church this has occurred only through men for entirely non-theological reasons.

First of all it has to be said that, according to patristics experts, the iconic nature of priesthood is never used by the church fathers as an argument against the ordination of women as priests. This question was very rarely an issue for the church fathers, and then only as a side issue. And where this occurs at all, the major argument in most cases is that a woman could not take a position of leadership and exercise authority.⁴ This reflects predominant social assumptions and Roman law. It was also, however, understood as corresponding to the order of creation. To this extent the argument carried not only a purely social and cultural character but also a theological element. But we should not overlook just how conditioned this line of argument was, just like many other statements in the church fathers, by its context. It is especially important to notice that the tradition, in turn conditioned by context, can gradually begin to speak otherwise. Admittedly this happens only rarely, but in view of the social conditions of the time, it is highly significant that it happens at all. This shows in any case that the traditional arguments, on the basis of the order of creation, about the impossibility of a woman taking a leadership position must be relativized. The papers presented to this consultation on New Testament and patristic themes have already pointed in this direction. I refer here only to two points. The first is concerned with a passage in John Chrysostom, who in many places speaks entirely in accordance with the traditional position, but who in exegeting Phil. 4:2f. can say of Evodia and Syntyche: "I am of the opinion that these women constitute the leadership of the church in that place" (δοκοῦσι δὲ μοι αὐταὶ αἱ γυναικες τὸ κεφάλαιον εἶναι τῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ἐκεῖ).⁵ The sec-

⁴ Because this paper was presented in the context of an Orthodox-Old Catholic consultation, reference is made especially to the paper by John Erickson at the Inter-Orthodox Consultation in Rhodes 1988 (John Erickson, "The Priesthood in Patristic Teaching," in Gennadios Limouris [ed.], *The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of Ordination of Women: Interorthodox Symposium, Rhodes, Greece, 30 October–7 November 1988* [Katerini: Tertios, 1992] 103–115, esp. 113–115).

⁵ John Chrysostom, *hom. 13, 3 in Phil.* (PG 62, 279).

ond point to which I wish to refer is the fact that, at least in the East, at a later time but still in the time of the as yet undivided church, there were several reigning empresses.⁶ Because the order of creation carried weight not only in the church but also for the Christian Orthodox Byzantine state, this fact suggests that the tradition is by no means as totally unequivocal on the issue before us as is so often suggested.

Indeed, we occasionally meet other arguments in the tradition against the ordination of women to the priesthood. These arguments that women are not capable of leadership, however, cannot be understood as the voice of the tradition as such—not only because they appear so infrequently, but far more importantly because they are not organically bound to the totality of the tradition. An example of this is the argument that Christ, if he had wanted to, could have allowed women to perform baptism (understood here as a priestly function). He could have allowed himself to be baptized by his mother and not by John. But there are many assumptions here that are supported by neither the Scriptures nor the tradition. Among other things, it is assumed that if Mary was not called to a particular ministry, then neither can any other woman be thus called. But both the Scriptures and the tradition know very clearly that women are called to a variety of tasks. We have only to think of all the women coworkers mentioned by the apostle Paul, or in later times of all the women who have worked as missionaries and whom the Orthodox Church venerates as “equal to the apostles,” for example St. Nino of Georgia.

⁶ The first woman in the Byzantine Empire to rule as sole ruler, not merely as regent for an emperor who had not come of age, or as a consort, was Irene. She was regent for her son Constantine VI, with whom she officially shared the throne, from 780 to 797, and sole ruler from 797 to 802. During her reign the veneration of icons was reintroduced, and in 787 the seventh ecumenical council was held in Nicaea. Empress Irene enjoyed the support of the Orthodox party during her reign, and in the official documents always characterized herself as βασιλεύς, not as βασίλισσα. This indicates that for her, everything that characterized a male emperor was also applied to her, undiminished. Her sole rule gave the Franks under the rule of Charlemagne and the Roman papacy the excuse to regard the imperial throne as vacant because a woman could not be sole empress. So the coronation of Charles as emperor by Pope Leo III was legitimated in Rome in 800, but regarded in the East as a usurpation and division of the empire (for this, see Georg Ostrogorsky, *Geschichte des byzantinischen Staates*, HAW 12.1.2 [Munich: Beck, 3rd ed., 1963] 141–155). At a later time—in the mid-eleventh century—Zoe and Theodora are to be mentioned as sole reigning empresses. I wish to express my gratitude to Prof. K. Bourdara (Athens) for the information that the reigning empress in Byzantium was regarded not merely as the anointed servant of God, but also as the image of the heavenly king and ruler of all.

It may appear that I have strayed far from the theme of the theology of icons. But precisely when we acknowledge that the theology of icons was never in the patristic period brought to bear as an argument against the priesthood of women, we have to address this line of argument when it occasionally comes to be used in this way.

We have already seen that a woman can be an "icon" of Christ in the sense of the general priesthood. But can she be an icon in the sense of priesthood as a particular ministry? Here the priest is not only an "icon" of Christ in the general sense, but in a specific sense as presider at the eucharistic gathering. It is here that the question arises in relation to the theology of icons, whether a woman can exercise the functions of leadership and presidency. If she, for theologically compelling reasons, could not, then neither could she be the icon of Christ as a priest at the eucharistic celebration. But we have already seen that the tradition has not really consistently excluded women from positions of leadership. Though the tradition has indeed done just this in the majority of cases, the very lack of consistency shows just how conditioned by situation is the witness of the tradition from case to case.

This means, however, that when we ask whether women can be the icons of Christ in the particular ministry of the priesthood, the answer must also be conditioned by situation. Where women are fundamentally accepted into leadership positions, there they can also, from this perspective, be icons of Christ as priests. Where, in particular cultural and social situations it is unthinkable for women to hold positions of leadership, there because of the confusion of leadership and the theology of icons, it may also be unthinkable for them to be icons of Christ in the office of the priesthood.

It has to be acknowledged in any case that in religions generally there is a widespread tendency, especially in matters of worship, to preserve older forms of expression and elements that belong to earlier forms of social life. One only has to think of the phenomenon in many religions, especially in cultic or quasi-cultic matters, to make use of older speech-forms that have long since fallen out of use in everyday life. It can also easily happen that such older forms that have been preserved in the cult are so instinctively identified with the corresponding religion that for many adherents, and even for outsiders, anything else is quite unthinkable.

This can, however, also differ from country to country, as we see in the Orthodox churches' usage of contemporary or archaic speech-forms as liturgical language (archaic, historical speech-forms in the

Greek-speaking and Russian churches, contemporary literary speech-forms in the Romanian and Finnish churches, and in other Orthodox churches one or the other or a mixture of both).

If there can be differences in the preservation of older cultic forms from one country to another, then it is just as much the case or even more so with regard to different historical periods. We have to expect it to be the case that this phenomenon, widespread, as we have mentioned, in the most diverse of religions, will also have an effect in the question as to whether a woman can be accepted as a priest and in this sense as an icon of Christ. It should not surprise us then to find that even where, as a result of social development, it is regarded as quite normal for women to be accepted in positions of leadership, this is not instinctively everywhere the case in cultic matters. We may not, however, attribute any theological or dogmatic value to this or regard these differences between times and places as bases for a separation of churches.

Two perspectives still need to be mentioned. The first of these is the relationship between the priest as icon and Christ as the eternal high priest. Does gender play a role here? Certainly the Son of God became human as a man. And because of the connection between the Old and the New Testaments we may well say that this was necessary to God's history of salvation.⁷ To argue that it was ontologically necessary to salvation would not be in accord with the tradition that places all the weight on the Logos, assuming the fullness of human nature as a means to the salvation of humanity. Gender is simply specific to the way in which a person possesses and lives out a human life, and carries no theological significance here. For soteriology, and that means the central dimension, everything depends upon the incarnation of God and the fully human nature of this incarnation. Nothing in the whole tradition has anything to say in this regard about gender. And this is not a mere coincidence, because otherwise a division would be introduced where in Christ the salvation of the whole of humanity is at

⁷ That Christ had to come into the world as a man, because of the biblical history of salvation, can only rightly be understood, however, if we at the same time recognize that on the same grounds he had to come into the world as a Jew and in obedience to the Jewish, Old Testament law (cf. Gal. 4:4f.). Quite rightly, no one draws the conclusion from this that a priest must be of Jewish descent and circumcised. This conclusion would have to be contested, however, if a priest were the icon of the earthly Jesus. There is just as little basis to conclude that a priest must be male.

stake. In relation to our question this means that we are dealing with *one* human nature common to women and men alike.

Christ appears eternally as high priest before the Father with his once-and-for-all sacrifice, for us. From this perspective also, as in general, the priest as presider at the eucharistic celebration is the icon of the exalted Christ. But this means that he is the icon of the Christ who has in the eschatological dimension united male and female. As is well known, the Eastern fathers generally represent the opinion that in the resurrection life gender differences are done away with. Generally the Western fathers understand this differently. Jerome especially polemicized against the position that there is no longer male or female in the resurrection. Augustine, who in his youth was of the former opinion, moved away from it in his later years. In the Western fathers this depends on a different understanding of the creation of human beings as male and female together. For them it is not just because of the fall, but belongs, without reference to the fall, to the original good creation of God, even though the use of sexuality for procreation begins only after the fall.

This difference between these two views of gender in the one ancient church tradition is not so deep, in my opinion, that they have to be placed in radical opposition to one another. The Western understanding also has to do with the one human nature in Christ, common to women and men alike, and thus with the overcoming of any division between the sexes. The priesthood of Christ is neither male nor female, but theanthropic. It has to be remarked here that the view found in many recent theologians that the Logos has a particular relation to the masculine and the Holy Spirit to the feminine—so that the priesthood of the incarnate Word must be male—finds no support in the tradition but a great deal that contradicts it. Thus we may not ascribe any such divisive effects to the gender of the exalted Christ as high priest, such that he could be visibly represented in the presidency of the eucharist only by individuals of one gender.

The second perspective that still has to be discussed concerns the images of the church as the bride of Christ, and of Christ as the bridegroom of the church. Naturally these images cannot be arbitrarily reversed. But to what extent is this dependant upon the natural gender of human beings? However true it is that Christ has come into the world as a man, he is also the exalted one and thus also the eschatological bridegroom of the church, not the representative of natural male sexuality. And the church as the bride of Christ is not the representa-

tive of natural female sexuality. If this were not already clear, we would only need to look at 2 Cor. 11:2: "I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." Here the reference is to men as well as women. The impossibility of viewing Christ as the representative of the male gender and the church as representative of the female gender corresponds to the impossibility of viewing Christ as the paradigm for men and the Mother of God as the paradigm for women. The tradition and Orthodox soteriology contradict any tendency to such a viewpoint because it implies a tearing apart of human nature. In fact, both Mary and Christ are paradigms for men and women alike, although in different ways.

Just how little the Bible's use of gender-related images has to correspond to natural gender is apparent, *inter alia*, from Gal. 4:19, where the apostle Paul speaks of the labor pains he suffers for the Galatians in order that Christ take form in them.

If all this is to be taken seriously, then the bridegroom-bride relationship between Christ and the church can offer no theological basis to declare it fundamentally impossible for a woman as a priest to be the visible representation of Christ at the eucharist.

It is, however, to be recognized that this representation can carry different accents in differing situations. Fundamentally the priest is icon of the risen and exalted Christ. But because this Christ is one and the same as the one who lived and died for us on earth, the priest as icon of Christ is not unrelated to the earthly Jesus—though of course always in the light of the heavenly Jesus. If this connection with the earthly Jesus is more strongly emphasized, the conclusion can be drawn—not necessarily theologically, but not to be ruled out as impossible—that a man appears more fitting to be the icon of Christ in the priestly office. Similar differences of accentuation are to be seen with painted icons. While, as mentioned earlier, the representation of Christ as a shepherd and as the *pantokrator* is totally symbolic and points strongly to the eschatological dimension, the image "not painted by hands," that is, the image of the face that is traced back to the gravecloths, offers a far stronger accent on the relationship to the earthly Jesus—though again here, of course, only in relation to the risen Jesus. Similar differences of accentuation among priests as icons of Christ do not harm the faith and should constitute no impediment to the unity of the churches.