

Did St. Therese want to be a priest?

Those who are unwilling to accept the Church's teaching about the essential maleness of the priesthood sometimes claim St. Therese of Lisieux as an ally. They say that she wished to be a priest. If a woman of her sanctity could desire ordination (they imply), there can be no real theological objection to it, and it is high time the male-dominated Church took another look at the question.

Did St. Therese ever say that she wanted to be a priest? Yes, she did. But her words are often quoted out of context. Here is a recent example. [1] A quotation from St. Therese is followed by this:

She died at the age of twenty-four and herself observed that this was the age at which, in other circumstances, she would have been ordained. There are other women with the same desires, the same sense of vocation; women who are instances and places of where the city of God is. What will the Churches do about this?

This gives the impression that "the Churches" ought to be doing something for women who have the same desires, the same sense of vocation as St. Therese. The quotation from St. Therese is given as:

To be betrothed to You, Jesus, to be a Carmelite, to become, through my union with You, a mother of souls — surely that ought to be enough for anybody? But somehow, not for me. I seem to have so many other vocations as well! I feel as if I were called to be a fighter, a priest, an apostle, a doctor, a martyr. . . . I want to be a priest. [2]

How literally are we intended to take this? Indeed, how literally did St. Therese take it herself? No one, man or woman, can at the same time be all the things she listed. Indeed, on choosing to become a contemplative, one chooses not to become (save in the figurative sense in which Therese herself did become them) a fighter, a doctor, an apostle, a martyr. (One is always a priest, even if not ordained: for as the Pope says in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, para. 27: "All the baptized share in the one priesthood of Christ, both men and women.")

The dots near the end of the quotation indicate that words have been omitted. So let us look at the full passage. I have italicized in it the words which were missed out of the quotation from it. The restored passage runs:

I feel as if I were called to be a fighter, a priest, an apostle, a doctor, a martyr; as if I could never satisfy the needs of my nature without performing, for Your sake, every kind of heroic action at once. I feel as if I'd got the courage to be a Crusader, a Pontifical Zouave, dying on the battlefield in defence of the Church. And at the same time I want to be a priest; how lovingly I'd carry You in my hands when you came down from heaven at my call; how lovingly I'd bestow You on men's souls! And yet, with all this desire to be a priest, I've nothing but admiration and envy for the humility of St. Francis; I'd willingly imitate him in refusing the honour of the priesthood."

Now the italicized words emphasize a point which destroys the case of those who want to present St. Therese as a champion of "women priests." They prove that the Saint does not intend this list of desires to be taken literally. How, for instance, can she die of wounds, yet simultaneously be carrying the Host to communicants? Since priests are forbidden to bear arms, how could she also be a Crusader or a Zouave? How could she, at one and the same time, be a priest (like St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance) and (like St. Francis) not be a priest after all? The saint was well aware that she was not dealing with realities. Indeed, immediately after the passage we have just quoted she says:

Dear Jesus, how am I to reconcile these conflicting ambitions, how am I to give substance to the dreams of one insignificant soul?

Not many lines later she calls them "fond imaginations." Conflicting ambitions? Dreams? Fond imaginations? She well knew that, humanly speaking, her longings were fantasies; indeed some were mutually contradictory. The whole thrust of this part of her work is revealed when she stretches her imagination just a little further:

I'd like to travel all over the world, making your name known and planting your cross on heathen soil; only I shouldn't be content with one particular mission, I would want to be preaching the gospel on all five continents and in the most distant islands, all at once. And even then it wouldn't do, carrying on my mission for a limited number of years; I should want to have been a missionary ever since the creation, and go on being a missionary till the world came to an end. [3]

St. Therese knew that these ambitions could never be satisfied in this life in the terms in which she expressed them. It is therefore wrong to isolate one of them (the wish to be, a priest) and treat it as if it justified those who maintain, against the Magisterium, that it is possible to confer valid priestly orders on a woman. Her list must be taken as a whole. It is irresponsible to argue that because St. Therese said she wanted to be a priest, she must have seen no theological reasons against it.

One might as well argue that because she says she wanted to be a missionary from creation until the end of time, and in five continents simultaneously, she saw no scientific reason against it.

Speaking the language of love

Why would she speak in such exaggerated terms? Robert Burns was no saint. But he shared with the saint a love for roses. The man who said his love was like a red, red rose, and promised to love her until "all the seas gang dry" and "rocks melt i' the sun" would not have taken the saint's words literally. He would have recognized that she was speaking the language of love. The "ambitions" she lists were not desired for their own sake, were never even faintly in contemplation as possibilities. It was simply that she wanted more and more ways of sacrificing herself to her Lord. They were part of a protestation of love which knows no bounds . . . even of logic. "But above all I long to shed my blood for you, my Saviour, to the last drop," she says. And then, as though to emphasize the point we have just made:

I realise that the dream I cherish is an extravagant one . . . a single form of martyrdom would never be enough for me, I would want to experience them all. I should want to be scourged and crucified as You were; to be flayed alive like St. Bartholomew, to be dipped in boiling oil like St. John, to undergo all that martyr ever underwent; offering my neck to the executioner like St. Agnes and St. Cecily, and, like my favourite St. Joan of Arc, whispering Your name as I was tied to the stake.

Take *all* the ambitions she lists (not just the one about being a priest). And then ask: "Are there *really* 'other women with the same desires, the same sense of vocation'?" And, if so, what *will* the Churches do about them? What would they have done about St. Therese? Interpret her word literally and label her a lunatic, or a masochist, or both? Or see her as she was, a lover wild with love, seeking ever more extravagant words to express what is beyond description? The answer is obvious. She certainly cannot be called as a witness for the thesis that every spiritually minded lady should be allowed to be a soldier, or a doctor, or a priest.

A way better than all others

These considerations hit us forcibly when we read *Mulieris Dignitatem*. Indeed one wonders if the Holy Father, whilst he was drafting it, had St. Therese's words in mind. Let us read a little more of her letter to Sister Marie. Still tormented by her desire to give more than she could ever give, she turned to St. Paul. The 12th and 13th chapters of his first epistle to the Corinthians claimed her attention. In the former he speaks about the diversities of ministries within the Church, and how all its members are still part of the same Body. This is how St. Therese described it:

The first of these told me that we can't all of us be apostles, all of us be prophets, all of us doctors, and so on; the Church is composed of members which differ in their use; the eye is one thing and the hand is another.

It was a clear enough answer, she says, but it neither satisfied her aspirations nor set her heart at rest. Then towards the end of the chapter she meets "this comforting phrase": "Prize the best gifts of heaven. Meanwhile, I can show you a way which is better than any other." is better than any other."

What was it? The Apostle goes on, to explain that all the gifts of heaven, even the most perfect of them, without love, are absolutely nothing; charity is the best way of all, because it leads straight to God. Now I was at peace; when St. Paul was talking about the different members of the Mystical Body I couldn't recognize myself in any of them: or rather I could recognise myself in all of them. But charity — that was the key to my vocation. If the Church was a body composed of different members, it couldn't lack the noblest of all: it must have a heart, and a heart burning with love.

She realized that this love was the true motive force which enabled all the other members of the Church to act, that if it ceased to function, apostles would forget to preach, martyrs would refuse to shed their blood. She says:

Love, in fact, is the vocation which includes all others; it's a universe of its own, comprising all time and space — it's eternal. Beside myself with joy, I cried out 'Jesus, my Love! I've found my vocation, and my vocation is love!' I had discovered where it is that I belong in the Church, the place God has appointed for me. To be nothing else than love, deep down in the heart of Mother Church; that's to be everything at once — my dream wasn't a dream after all.

Here is no frustrated nun, bitter about the "male-dominated" Church. St. Therese wanted to die, not merely as a soldier, but "in defense of the Church." A couple of pages later she writes: "Yes, Jesus, I do love You; I do love the Church, my Mother," and "Here am I, a child, the child of Holy Church, that Mother who is also a Queen because she is a King's bride."

Chapter VII of *Mulieris Dignitatem* is headed "The Church — the Bride of Christ." St. Therese would have known precisely what this meant. For her, the doctrine of the Mystical Body did not obscure the image of the Church as Bride; she knew that Bridegroom has to love Bride as his own body, because he who loves his wife loves himself. [4] The Pope's Apostolic Letter, even before it was issued, was regarded by many as the document which said "No" to women-priests.

In fact, the section on that subject consists of less than 20 lines in one column of the text. [5] But in it the Holy Father says: "It is the Eucharist above all that expresses the redemptive act of Christ the Bridegroom towards the Church the Bride."

Chapter VIII of the Letter is headed "The Greatest of These Is Love." That, of course, is taken from the 13th Chapter of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, one of the chapters which gave St. Therese the answer to her wish for a vocation to include all vocations. The Pope links love in a special way with the vocation of woman. "In God's eternal plan, woman is the one in whom the order of love in the created world of persons takes first root." He refers to the "unity of the two" and how St. Paul, in calling Christ "the Bridegroom" and the Church "the Bride," "indirectly confirms through this analogy *the truth about woman as bride*. The Bridegroom is the one who loves. The Bride is loved: *it is she who receives love, in order to love in return*" (his emphasis). St. Therese expressed exactly the same thought. "I know well, Jesus," she writes, "that love can only be repaid by love; what I've always looked for and found at last is some way of satisfying my feelings by returning love for Your love."

Love is woman's vocation

"The dignity of women," the Pope writes, "is measured by the order of love." "While the dignity of woman witnesses to the love which she receives in order to love in return, the biblical 'exemplar' of the Woman also seems to reveal *the true order of love which constitutes woman's own vocation*." "Vocation," he adds, as if having St. Therese's words before him, "is meant here in its fundamental, and one may say universal significance, a significance which is then actualized and expressed in women's many different 'vocations' in the Church and the world."

All that we have quoted from her works shows that St. Therese was no advocate of women priests. The wishes she expressed were not to be taken literally. She loved the Church as a Mother and would have agreed with all the Holy Father has said. And perhaps, for his part, the Pope would be glad to accept, as a summary of all he says in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, St. Therese's own insight: that it is a woman's vocation to be nothing else than love, deep down in the heart of Mother Church.

1. From *Women before God*; Lavinia Byrne, IBVM; (SPCK; 1988).
2. She uses Mgr. Ronald Knox's translation of St. Therese's autobiography in the Fontana series.
3. Book Two; in the form of a letter addressed to Sister Marie of the Sacred Heart (her own sister, Marie-Louise Martin).

4. *Cf. Ephesians, 5:28.*

5. *L'Osservatore Romano*; English language edition; 3/10/88.

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