

Unique Bodies, Unique Gifts: Towards a Liturgy that Deifies

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Abstract: Current discussion of the full liturgical participation of women rarely focuses on bodies and capabilities as they are. Opposition presumes both a sexual binary which genders roles, and that ordained roles are essentially gendered. Support often focuses on speculative theories regarding the eschatological body rather than bodies as they are. Ordination and its scope of service involves real bodies, and real capabilities. Likewise, *theosis* is an ongoing practice of embodied virtue in which one's capabilities are used to better love God and neighbor. Orthodox doctrinal commitments which shape our understanding of the Incarnation and Icon support a liturgical practice which recognize the unique capabilities and gifts of embodied human persons. In short, the ordination of women and the allowance of their full liturgical service flows from Orthodox incarnational theology, and allows the liturgy to better serve as a locus for *theosis*.

This short paper argues that ordaining women to the full ministries of the church is essential to the shared deification of the Orthodox sacramental and liturgical life. Deification, or divine-human communion, is here understood as the ongoing practice of embodied virtue in which one's capabilities are used to love God and neighbor. The liturgical support of deification requires first and foremost that we are able to see uniquely embodied persons as materially diverse. According to Theodore the Studite this diversity is to the greater honor and glory of God.

I will begin by highlighting Theodore the Studite's emphasis on bodily diversity as a reason to praise God more magnificently. From this, I posit three principles of embodiment central to understanding deification. I then note the integral connection between deification and the exercise of embodied virtue and capacities. Finally, I conclude by arguing that the current liturgical exclusion of women is a failure to recognize the creative material diversity of the deifying presence of God. This failure limits the ways in which the church can effectively fulfill its calling to encourage its members towards a more full love of God and neighbor.

Theodore the Studite's (759-826) defense of icons against the second wave of iconoclasm recognizes bodily differences, including sex, as constituent elements of human uniqueness. In accord with Gregory of Nazianzus' principle that "what is not assumed is not saved," Theodore the Studite argues that Christ assumes the entirety of our human nature (*Ref.* III.A.4).¹ Human nature can only be recognized "with the mind and thought" because it is seen in a particular, embodied individual (*Ref.* III. A. 16, 4).² Physical traits help us distinguish individuals, recognizing each person as distinct. Theodore, in a rare patristic reference to Christ's maleness,

¹ Theodore's work is a series of *Refutations*, thus the abbreviated use of "Ref." followed by the number, section and paragraph. The volume referenced here is Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, trans. Catherine Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001).

² Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, 83, 78.

views biological sex as one of many distinguishing marks that help us recognize a particular person (*Ref. III.A.4*).³

Valerie Karras notes that Theodore's arguments make it impossible to extrapolate the maleness of Christ into the second person of the Trinity.⁴ It is likewise impossible to extrapolate from Theodore any assertion that either biological characteristics or icons show us archetypal masculinity and femininity. Biological sex is not, for Theodore, a window into a shared common nature from which we can then extrapolate a set of expected inclinations, capacities, or social roles. Rather, biological sex is one of many physical traits that make it possible to circumscribe Christ as distinct from other persons.

Having established the necessity of physical attributes in which we see unique persons, Theodore then makes two crucial points: first, a seal which is not stamped into wax *fails*, it is ineffective. Christ without an image *fails* as a prototype (*Ref. III.D.9*).⁵ Here, Theodore argues for the necessity of icons. From this, Theodore declares:

The seal shows its desire for honor when it makes itself available for impression in many different materials. In the same way, although we believe that Christ's own image is in Him as He has a human form, nevertheless when we see His image materially depicted in different ways, we praise His greatness more magnificently. For the failure to go forth into a material imprint eliminates His existence in human form (*Ref. III.D.10*).⁶

Here is the second crucial point. Not only must Christ's image be portrayed in icons,⁷ but the diverse materials with which Christ is portrayed results in greater glory given to God. Variety and diversity from person to person, body to body, is a reason for praise and delight.

Theodore's emphasis on the importance of bodily particularity leads to three essential points for an Orthodox theology of bodies which aligns with the 20th century personalism's commitment to understanding persons irreducible, unique, and free.⁸ First, bodies themselves are an essential factor in unique human personhood. Second, bodily characteristics contribute to uniqueness. Third, bodily diversity expands our vision of the magnificent creativity of God.

³ Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, 94. Theodore is not the only theologian to refer to the maleness of Christ. Nonna Harrison discusses other examples, among them Gregory the Theologian in *Or.* 45, 13. Harrison's article is a careful and thorough discussion of the nuanced use of gendered language, imagery and allegory in patristic sources. See Nonna Verna Harrison, "The Maleness of Christ," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 2 (1998).

⁴ Valerie A. Karras, "The Incarnational and Hypostatic Significance of the Maleness of Jesus Christ According to Theodore of Stoudios," *Studia Patristica* 32 (1997).

⁵ Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, 112.

⁶ Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, 112. Patrick Henry points out that Theodore's terminology is Aristotelian even as he retains the Neoplatonic commitments of both Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and John of Damascus. Patrick Henry, "What Was the Iconoclastic Controversy About," *Church History* 45, no. 1 (1976), 27.

⁷ A central concern of second wave iconoclasm was not whether icons could be 'written.' This point had long been conceded, and icons were displayed in churches. However, they were displayed out of reach, that is, where they could not be 'touched' with gestures of worship. They could be seen but not "used" since the issue was not their existence but improper worship. Here, the Studite counters his opponents assertion that icons were not necessary. See Patrick Henry, "The Formulators of Icon Doctrine.," *Schools of thought in the Christian Tradition* (1984), 78-79.

⁸ See especially John Zizioulas, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Vladimir Lossky, and Olivier Clement.

Taking bodies into account as essential to unique personhood is affirmed by the Incarnation. Our bodies are a part of what makes each of us an unique image of God. Biological sex is an essential aspect of this uniqueness. Orthodox who discuss biological essentialism often rely on the hope of eschatological freedom from bodily particularity and the degree to which this future hope can be lived out in the present. Karras highlights how answers depend very much on how one views the relationships between fall, redemption and resurrection.⁹ Yet I think we must take the role of our bodies in personhood seriously without then becoming gender essentialists. Our bodies, the way they serve us, fail us, garner us honor or rejection, are not natures we must overcome but an essential aspect of our unique and irreducible personhood. Rather than decrease diversity via eschatological speculation, we ought to increase diversity beyond simple and inaccurate binaries.

This is possible in light of the second point: bodies are unique. The assumption of natural law, a form of reasoning quite common among opponents of female ordination, is that biological sex provides a uniform ground from which principles can be derived. These principles then delineate the acceptable capacities of sexed persons. Yet this assertion is not only undermined by very different cultural assumptions regarding what is natural to sexed bodies and the obvious reality that capabilities do not seem so neatly restricted to the appropriate body, but also the growing recognition that sex distinctions in the body are not neatly binary.¹⁰ Further, the growing field of epigenetics reveals the body and its genetics to be fluid, changing over a single lifetime and passing down genetic shifts to subsequent generations. This should caution us against making universal assumptions from particular characteristics. Acknowledging the diversity and fluidity of bodies works against the temptation to reduce a person, her gifts, or her expression, to archetypes or stereotypes that do not correspond to who she is as a unique, embodied person.

Finally, the response to this disturbance of our supposedly defined natural world ought to be one of delight. The certainty that the body is a stable ground for reasoning is more comfortable than it is true, and so we often react in fear to the prospect of losing such a stable ground of theological reflection. But why are we taken aback at the realization that the body might be as surprising and unexpected as the One in whose image it is made? In light of this reasoning, bodily diversity does not demand conformity as a means to end division. Rather, bodily diversity reorients us towards the far more important question, how do we better love God and neighbor by embodying virtue towards one another?

This is, after all, the central invitation of our shared participation in divine-human communion: to become better lovers of God and neighbor in and through our bodies. Recent work in ethics and theology emphasizes an Orthodox framework for understanding human flourishing as the progressive realization of deification, marked by embodying the full range of human virtues and capabilities.¹¹ Deification is not simply something that happens to us, but a

⁹ Valerie A. Karras, "Orthodox Theologies of Women and Ordained Ministry," in *Thinking Through Faith: New Perspectives From Orthodox Christian Scholars*, ed. Aristotle Papanikolaou and Elizabeth H. Prodrromou (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008).

¹⁰ For instance, see the work of Anne Faust-Sterling.

¹¹ See the August 2013 Special Issue of *Studies in Christian Ethics*,

process in which we participate, with our bodies, by relating to one another in virtue according to our capacities.

I do not mean that we only practice the virtues of which we are capable, though this is certainly true. Rather, I am referring capabilities as those internal capacities which can be exercised provided a willing environment and situation.¹² All human persons are called to practice all the virtues, the fruits of the Spirit. However, these virtues are practiced via our particular capacities, those gifts or charisms granted by God for the building up of the community. The manner in which we love one another is shaped by these particular, unique, capacities and gifts. Thus we can say that the man who bakes bread for the community, and the woman who preaches the gospel are both loving their neighbors, but they are doing so according to their gifts.

1 Corinthians argues that the same God gives a diversity of gifts for the building up of the body of Christ. It is this bodily metaphor that allows Paul to argue that the many gifts required by a flourishing community are both distinct and essential. Just as a seal that is not stamped into wax fails so too does a gift or capability that is not exercised. This point cannot be overemphasized: gifts must be exercised, that is their purpose. Without exercise they fail. Indeed, 1 Peter reminds us that good stewardship *requires* that we serve one another with whatever gift we have been given (1 Peter 4:10).

Our sex, gender, race, class, citizenship or family status will certainly color the way we love one another since all of these factors affect and shape our bodies which in turn shape our capacities and their reception. Just as the diverse materials in which we see icons of Christ portrayed manifest the creative glory of God, so too does the diverse material of human bodies with which we love and serve one another. Failing to exercise the capacities of our embodied personhood is a failure to practice virtue according to our unique capacity. It is a failure to pursue an aspect of deification perhaps uniquely granted to us by God.

However, deification is not an individual pursuit as we share in one another's struggle and failure.¹³ Human flourishing as growth into virtue is cultivated through liturgy as well as individual *askesis*. The ability to exercise one's capabilities requires both that one has the capacity, but also that one lives and worships in an environment and situation where one is able to exercise and cultivate one's capacity. Does a liturgy which excludes female bodies from the exercise of certain capacities actually cultivate the full range of possible human flourishing?

Certainly the first, and most ancient, objection to women priests is that women lack the capacity. Yet women are indeed able to preach, teach, pastorally care for others, administrate, and serve the sacraments. Nothing about their bodies excludes these capacities. Arguments which dismiss the capacity of women typically rely on metaphorical descriptions of the priesthood, mistaking a metaphorical description for a delimiter of capacity. Emphasizing the priest as a 'father' appears to rule out women. But this literalizes the metaphor, and misses its essential, relational point. Gregory of Nazianzus describes his tongue as the nipple of nursing

¹² Martha Nussbaum argues that the ability and freedom to exercise one's capability is essential to human flourishing.

¹³ See especially the work of Dumitru Staniloae who consistently emphasizes the shared nature of deification.

mother, and his Trinitarian teaching its life-giving milk.¹⁴ If Gregory can be a mother, surely a woman can be a father, both in the metaphorical sense. Priestly metaphors describe the essential virtues, skills and functions necessary for the relationship in which ordination places the ordinand.¹⁵ The many gendered metaphors used in scripture hardly emphasize conformity to their ‘material’ reference. Rather, these “verbal icons”¹⁶ point to the diversity and fluidity of the ways in which God is present to our bodies, in our bodies, and through our bodies. Misusing these “verbal icons” results in an emphasis on physical resemblance, forgetting that icons point to unique persons whose relationships particularly demonstrative of God’s love.

Yet current liturgical practice is built around the exclusion of female bodies whether due to lack of capacity, insufficient sacrality or iconic ability. The liturgy as it is currently practiced jeopardizes our understanding of both icon and incarnation.¹⁷ Or, perhaps it is more accurate to say such exclusion has already diminished our ability to truly incarnate God to one another. The liturgy teaches us, among many good things, that to preach and teach publicly, to lead in worship, to prepare and distribute the body of Christ, one must be a man. Surely Miriam wonders at our unwillingness to be led in song and dance by a woman. Surely Thecla does not understand why the church fails to eagerly welcome enthusiastic preachers of the gospel. Surely the Theotokos wonders why hers is the only female body able to prepare and offer the body of the Lord. Women’s bodies stand in our altars, but only in wood and paint, not flesh and blood.

All arguments against female priests ultimately reduce the capacities of women. Most arguments rise from an attempt to explain or defend existing practice. It makes sense that reductive arguments derive from a reductive practice. The question that should drive the conversation regarding women’s participation in the church is the same question that should drive the participation of anyone: how can this unique person serve the church according to her embodied capacities and virtues? Further, as members of the church, how ought we receive, encourage and be taught by such a person? A church, and a liturgy, that excludes the real capacities of embodied women and men can only ever hope to encourage in its midst a partial deification, a partial human flourishing. At worst, it may frustrate the work of God in and through a particular person and community.

Salvation as deification may not entirely be dependent on the community of God as it is, ultimately, God who deifies. Yet the church is called to participate in this work. When it fails to even see the work of God in a unique person, it fails, in that moment and to that person, to be church. Met. John Zizioulas’ point that private Eucharistic services “which exclude in one way or another those of a different race or sex or age or profession is a false Eucharist” should be

¹⁴ Suzanne Abrams Rebillard, “Speaking for Salvation: Gregory of Nazianzus and Poet and Priest in His Autobiographical Poems,” (PhD Diss diss., Brown University, 2003), 23. For an extended discussion of Gregory of Nazianzus’ use of female metaphors to describe his priesthood, see Maria Gwyn McDowell, “The Joy of Embodied Virtue: Toward the Ordination of Women to the Eastern Orthodox Priesthood,” (PhD Diss diss., Boston College, 2010); Maria Gwyn McDowell, “The Iconicity of the Priesthood: Male Bodies or Embodied Virtue?,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 26, no. 3 (2013).

¹⁵ See in particular Sarah Coakley, “The Woman At the Alter: Cosmological Disturbance or Gender Subversion?,” *Anglican Theological Review* 86, no. 1 (2004); Sarah Coakley, “‘In Persona Christi’: Gender, Priesthood and the Nuptial Metaphor,” *Svensk teologisk kvartalskrift* 82, no. 4 (2006). For a longer discussion of priesthood and virtue, see McDowell, “Iconicity of Priesthood.”

¹⁶ Nonna Harrison

¹⁷ For a more lengthy discussion, see Maria Gwyn McDowell, “Virtuous Ordinations: Gender, Priesthood and Virtue,” *Journal for the Study of Christian Ethics* 33, no. 2 (2013).

extended exclusionary liturgical practices: a church which fails to invite participation based on real embodied capacities risks losing her catholicity.¹⁸ She is a church only for those she chooses to recognize as bearers of God, not those in whom God chooses to be borne.

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¹⁸ John Zizioulas, "Communion and Otherness," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (1994), 355.