

The Liturgical Novelty of Female Doctors of the Church

By Dorothea Ludwig-Wang, 1 August 2022

Prior to 1970, no female saint had ever been declared a Doctor of the Church, but today, there are four: St. Teresa of Avila, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and St. Hildegard of Bingen. While there is no doubt that their writings are exceptional and ought to be honored as treasures of the Church, there are questions regarding the liturgical propriety of conferring the title of Doctor upon them. According to the traditional calendar, these four saints are Virgins, while the Mass and Office for the feast day of a Doctor are those for Confessors, so it is already impossible to incorporate these new titles into the traditional liturgy. While these four women fulfill the requirements for being Doctors, which include sanctity, orthodoxy of faith, eminent learning, and the declaration of the Church, the way in which the post-conciliar hierarchy went about conferring this title upon them appears to run afoul of the principle *lex orandi, lex credendi* by implicitly undermining the Church's teachings on male and female vocations.

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that in addition to the essential reward of heaven, which is the Beatific Vision, there are three accidental rewards, called *aureoles* or “special crowns,” which may be added on account of “a notable kind of victory.”¹ Virgins receive a crown due to their victory over the flesh,² Martyrs over the world, and Doctors over the devil.³ Both men and women are eligible for these *aureoles*, provided that they experience the relevant conflict and gain victory over the flesh, the world, or the devil, and it is traditionally believed that St. John the Evangelist received all three. Regarding the *aureole* due to Doctors, St. Thomas explains that everyone who teaches lawfully in any capacity is eligible for this reward, not only prelates “who are competent to preach and teach by virtue of their office,” and that even prelates are not entitled to it if they do not actually preach.⁴

Despite this fact, the Church has consistently only commemorated female virgin saints as such in the liturgy, and prior to 1970, the only Doctors were bishops and priests. It appears that the liturgy is conveying a vocational message here, and a vocation is not solely about what one is capable of doing, but about one's very *identity*, in which sex plays an integral role. While martyrdom is the same for both sexes, which is why the Church names both men and women as Martyrs, virginity belongs to a specific feminine vocation and public preaching to a specific masculine vocation. A man can possess the virtue of virginity which makes him eligible for the *aureole* in heaven, but this does not change the fact that he cannot dedicate his virginity to Christ and become His Spouse. A woman can possess eminence in learning and teach in many contexts, whether she be a mother, a schoolteacher, or a professor, but her expertise does not change the fact that the public teaching of the faith belongs to the bishops, members of the *Ecclesia docens*.

Although both men and women can acquire the virtue of virginity and become learned theologians, what they are capable of *doing* cannot change their very *being* as male or as female. Further, just as not every female saint is eligible for the title of Virgin, which would logically

1 ST Suppl., q. 96, art. 5, co.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*, art. 7, co.

4 *Ibid.*

exclude those who were called to the married state, not every male saint is eligible for the title of Doctor. In fact, the latter has historically been restricted to bishops alone, who exercise the official teaching function of the Church, and it was later extended to priests, their helpers in this task. Commemorating female saints as Doctors is bizarre in the same way that commemorating male saints as Virgins would be absurd, despite the fact that men can possess the virtue of virginity along with women. The aforementioned female Doctors certainly possessed eminence in learning, and they most likely do possess the *aureole* for Doctors in heaven, but this does not necessarily mean that they should be recognized as such in the liturgy.

The primary purpose of asking for the saints' intercession is to help members of the Church Militant on earth save their souls, and God intends to save each individual through his or her vocation. Thus, the Church's liturgy very appropriately emphasizes particular qualities in certain saints to demonstrate this principle, giving the faithful examples of how to live out their different states of life. The commemoration of Virgins encourages women who are Spouses of Christ to persevere in their commitment to purity and chastity, the commemoration of Doctors encourages bishops and priests to persevere in their duty of teaching the faith, and the commemoration of Martyrs encourages all Catholics to persevere in the spiritual battle of good against evil. Although there is nothing theologically incorrect *per se* about conferring the title of Virgin upon men or Doctor upon women, this would destroy a long-standing liturgical custom that expresses the Church's teachings on male and female vocations, thus running afoul of the principle *lex orandi, lex credendi*.

Although the four female saints recently given the title of Doctor are to be honored for their great theological works, orthodoxy of faith, and eminence in learning, the way in which the post-conciliar hierarchy has attempted to do this has only succeeded in causing confusion about the proper roles of men and women. They are equal in dignity as human beings and often capable of performing the same tasks; however, the very concepts of "being male" and "being female" extend far beyond what a person does. Today, there are women questioning why they cannot be priests and men questioning why they cannot be consecrated virgins, forgetting that they are members of the same Body of Christ as parts directed to a whole. There is nothing unorthodox about conferring the title of Doctor upon female saints, but it does undermine a long-standing liturgical practice and dishonor the traditional means by which the faith was transmitted throughout the generations.