

## A Thomist Critiques St. Thomas' Philosophy of Woman

By Dorothea Ludwig-Wang, 30 July 2022

### Part I: An Overview of St. Thomas' Position

St. Thomas Aquinas' unfavorable statements on the female sex have long been used by anti-Catholic scholars to discredit the Church's teachings on the proper roles of men and women. In response, those who wish to defend the Church's teachings often point out that Aquinas' statements largely relied on incorrect and now-disproven Aristotelian assumptions about reproductive biology, but a further discussion on how those assumptions affected Aquinas' thinking needs to be undertaken. To what extent did scientific errors lead to erroneous philosophical conclusions, and are there other flaws in his reasoning unrelated to biology? How do mistaken philosophical ideas go on to affect his theological teachings on the roles of men and women in the domestic, civil, and ecclesiastical societies, if at all?

Any critique of another's position necessitates a proper understanding of that position, so a summary of St. Thomas' reasoning will be conducted first. Prior to any distinction of sex, he begins with the truth that men and women are both human beings and not two separate species. A human being is the union of soul and body, with the soul being the form of the body, and it is the form that determines the nature or essence of something and makes it part of a species. Sexual difference pertains primarily to the body, and a difference in matter alone does not produce two different species. Therefore, men and women share the same human nature, enjoying a fundamental and essential equality before God. Sex is an inseparable accident of the human person, and so human nature appears in two forms, the masculine and feminine, which means that there are male and female persons.

In opposition to those who viewed sexual differentiation and the generation of offspring as effects of the fall, St. Thomas argues that the creation of the woman was necessary so that she may be "a helper [to man] in the work of generation."<sup>1</sup> In response to Aristotle's infamous "*femina est mas occasionatus*," Aquinas explains that the woman is only "caused accidentally" if the *individual* nature is considered: the intention of the male sperm is to generate another male, and when something interferes with this process, a female is generated instead, contrary to the intent of nature. However, when the *universal* (human) nature is considered, the existence of the woman was intended so that the human race may continue, and so "God formed not only the male but also the female."<sup>2</sup> To put it simply, the process of generation was designed to "fail" in approximately fifty percent of cases so that both sexes would be generated.

In addition, St. Thomas argues that if the generation of offspring had taken place in the primitive state of innocence, female as well as male children would have been generated, because the "diversity of sex belongs to the perfection of human nature."<sup>3</sup> He reiterates that there is a distinction between considering the woman as unintended depending on whether one is referring

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1 ST I, q. 92, art. 1, co.

2 ST I, q. 92, art. 1, ad. 1.

3 ST I, q. 99, art. 2, co.

to the individual or universal nature,<sup>4</sup> but he also entertains the possibility of causes behind the production of female offspring other than defect. Following Aristotle, he speculates that a north wind leads to the generation of males, and a south wind to the generation of females; perhaps females could also be generated due to the parents desiring a female child, particularly “in the state of innocence, when the body was more subject to the soul.”<sup>5</sup>

The nature of masculinity and femininity themselves must be examined before turning to the particular differences between men and women, which are simply consequences of the different functions they serve in the act of reproduction. Sexual intercourse is that “to which the distinction of sex is ordained” by God,<sup>6</sup> because “generation by coition” is the only activity in which people participate *as males* and *as females*. Every act of generation requires an active and a passive principle; citing Aristotle, Aquinas argues that “the active force is in the semen of the male...but the foetal matter is provided by the female.”<sup>7</sup> The existence of the female ovum was unknown at the time; rather, it was assumed that some part of the menstrual blood supplied the matter for conception.<sup>8</sup>

Given the maxim that the agent is nobler than the patient, Aquinas concludes from this that masculinity is superior to femininity; however, he disagrees with Aristotle’s characterization of the latter as a defect, as though it were an incomplete version of masculinity. He argues that femininity is itself a perfection, albeit a lesser one, because despite its inferiority, the perfection of human nature requires it, just as “the foot would be a more worthy part if it possessed the beauty and power of the eye, but the whole body would be more imperfect if it lacked the functioning of the foot.”<sup>9</sup> Consequently, both males and females will exist after the Resurrection. If females were simply incomplete males, such imperfection would presumably be rectified upon the restoration of all things; on the contrary, their “frailty is not due to a shortcoming of nature, but to an intention of nature.”<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that St. Thomas considers masculinity to be a greater perfection than femininity, he reiterates the teaching of the Church that both men and women are made in the image of God. Souls do not possess sex, and because men and women share the same nature, they both bear the image of God *essentially*, as that image is found in the soul.<sup>11</sup> When the image of God is defined *accidentally*, however, St. Thomas argues that men conform to this image more perfectly than women. God is the first principle of all creation, and everything is made for Him, just as the man was the first principle of the woman, who was created for him.<sup>12</sup> This idea of being first principle relates to the concept of masculinity being active in generation; compared to woman, man is more like God due to his greater activity.

Sex is an inseparable accident of the human person that belongs primarily to the body, and as explained earlier, a difference in matter does not produce a difference in species. But while

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4 ST I, q. 99, art. 2, ad. 1.

5 ST I, q. 99, art. 2, ad. 2.

6 ST I, q. 98, art. 2, sc.

7 ST I, q. 118, art. 1, ad. 4.

8 ST III, q. 31, art. 5, ad. 3.

9 SCG III, chap. 94, 11.

10 SCG IV, chap. 88, 3.

11 ST I, q. 93, art. 3, co.

12 ST I, q. 93, art. 4, ad. 1.

men and women are equal as human beings, it does not follow that their souls are identical. Matter is the principle of individuation, and so the body individuates the soul; each soul animates a *particular* body and not any other. St. Thomas concludes that because men's bodies are stronger than those of women—and here he refers not to physical strength in terms of muscle mass, but the ability to produce sperm and thereby constitute the active principle in generation—, they must receive more perfect and stronger souls. Men's bodies are more noble because they are active, while women's are passive, and thus, souls proportioned to the active male bodies are more noble than the souls proportioned to the passive female bodies.

Because rational ability is a power of the soul, Aquinas concludes that women, compared to men, are deficient in reason due to the weakness of their bodies. In Thomistic language, the reason and intellect are not distinct powers, as they both pertain to the cognitive faculty; but the process of “reasoning” is that by which intelligible truth becomes known to human beings, as opposed to angels whose knowledge of truth is perfect without the need for “mental discussion.”<sup>13</sup> Intelligence is not a distinct power from the intellect but simply “divided against intellect as act against power.”<sup>14</sup> St. Thomas regards women as deficient in reason or intelligence, possessing inferior intellectual power to men, which is why they are “usually not perfect in wisdom”<sup>15</sup> and should remain silent instead of exercising authority.

Aquinas does not consider women to completely lack the use of reason, as the rational nature they share with men is what makes them human, but he argues that they primarily use their *lower* reason, which focuses on temporal things and is directed to action.<sup>16</sup> Women are less fit for contemplation due to their deficiency in *higher* reason, which is directed to eternal things,<sup>17</sup> and St. Thomas explicitly compares the relationship between the higher and lower reason to a husband and wife, the former ruling over the latter, in his comparison of the contemplative life and the active life.<sup>18</sup> Because women are deficient in higher reason, this means that they are also inferior to men in those virtues that require subjecting the passions to reason: Aquinas once again cites Aristotle, who “speaks of women as though they had not the firm judgment of reason, the result of which is “that they follow their passions readily.”<sup>19</sup>

In summary, St. Thomas believes that masculinity is a greater perfection than femininity because the act of generation, the reason why sexual differentiation exists, requires an active and passive principle, and the male as agent is more noble than the female as patient. Although both man and woman bear the image of God essentially, when this image is defined in a secondary or accidental way, man is more like God due to his greater generative activity, and this is shown by his greater physical strength. And because souls are proportioned to individual bodies, men's souls are stronger than women's, thus making them superior in reason, especially the higher reason given to contemplation, and those virtues that require governing the passions. Despite the

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13 ST I, q. 79, art. 8, co.

14 ST I, q. 79, art. 10, ad. 1.

15 ST II-II, q. 177, art. 2, co.

16 ST I, q. 79, art. 9, co.

17 *Ibid.*

18 ST II-II, q. 182, art. 4, co.

19 ST II-II, q. 156, art. 1, ad. 1.

fundamental equality between men and women as human beings, men *as males* are superior to women *as females*.

## *Part II: A Critique of St. Thomas' Position*

The infamous “*femina est mas occasionatus*” has been given much more attention than it deserves, especially because it holds little importance in St. Thomas’ overall philosophy of woman. Aquinas can hardly be faulted for agreeing with an erroneous biological theory on this point, given the scientific information available at the time; in fact, he was quite generous, speculating that the generation of female offspring might simply be the natural result of a south wind or the will of the parents, and not necessarily a defect in conception. These theories, absurd as they may be, are only mentioned by Aquinas to refute the erroneous proposition that women were not intended by God to exist: regardless of *how* female offspring are generated, the fact is that God desires *that* they be generated.

In this particular case, which has been given undue attention, the errors of Aristotelian biology have no impact on the ultimate theological conclusion that St. Thomas draws. Aristotle’s characterization of the act of generation as being composed of an active and passive principle, however, has a direct bearing on Aquinas’ theory on the nature and function of masculinity and femininity. Even taking into account the fact that the sperm carries either an X or Y chromosome to determine the sex of the child and does not always intend to generate a male, the active-passive relationship is not entirely devoid of merit. It can still apply in a limited sense: the man actively deposits sperm into the woman’s womb, while she passively receives it. The fact that the ovum was unknown at the time is also of little consequence, as the same pattern is seen here: the sperm *fertilizes* the ovum and determines the sex of the resulting child, while the latter *is fertilized*.

There is nothing wrong with this analysis in itself, but using the single act of intercourse as the sole basis upon which the nature and function of masculinity and femininity ought to be determined is reductionistic and lends itself to an incomplete assessment of sexual differentiation. St. Thomas rightly points out that generation by coition is the immediate end to which sexual difference, which resides primarily in the body, is directed—but human beings are composed of body and soul, and this single act is hardly the only one in which people participate as males and as females. The act of generation among human beings, unlike among irrational animals, serves not only the primary purpose of procreation, but also the secondary purpose of expressing mutual love. As St. Thomas recognizes, men and women come together not simply to procreate, but also “to live together for life; which is not the case with other animals.”<sup>20</sup>

God created Eve from Adam’s rib so “that man might love woman all the more, and cleave to her more closely, knowing her to be fashioned from himself.”<sup>21</sup> Relations between members of the opposite sex do not exclusively involve the body and bodily acts, but also the soul; and because human beings are the union of body *and* soul, a lack of attraction in the psychological order makes it impossible to perform the physiological act. Attraction is an act of generation—in this case generating mutual love—and likewise, it requires an active and passive principle: here, the woman *attracts* the man as the agent, while he *is attracted* as the patient, so

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20 ST I, q. 92, art. 2, co.

21 *Ibid.*

the order is reversed compared to the physiological order.<sup>22</sup> Because this attraction can only exist between a man and a woman, it follows that the physical act of intercourse itself cannot suffice to determine what masculinity and femininity are and what function they serve.

Although Aristotle's framework is not without merit in its limited context, St. Thomas errs in predicating his assessment of masculinity and femininity upon this act alone. Further, it is astonishing that pregnancy and childbirth do not factor into his position on femininity at all, as these events are arguably more significant in a woman's life than the single act of coition, which lasts but a short time. As an expectant mother, she not only acts *as a female*, but she also does this completely apart from any intervention of man. After fertilization occurs, God Himself, without the involvement of any other human being, ensouls the newly conceived child within the womb and gives the woman the responsibility of bringing forth new life. God blessed his creation at the beginning of time, telling them to be fruitful and multiply so that they may fill the earth (Gen. 1:28), and He conferred upon women, not men, the ability to bear fruit, a concept essential to a proper Catholic understanding of femininity.

The agent is indeed nobler than the patient, but describing male-female relations as active-passive only applies in one very limited sense and does not encompass all situations that require sexual differentiation. The passivity by which St. Thomas defines femininity can hardly be consistent with the concept of bearing fruit, which requires receptivity *and* active cooperation. Considering the woman as the "contemplative" to the man's "active," on the contrary, more fully explains the entire *process* of generation, rather than the single, momentary act of intercourse. The ultimate natural end of sexual differentiation is not the act of generation itself but the bringing forth of new life, and the feminine is more immediately directed to this end than the masculine, as the very name Eve shows. Likewise, the ultimate supernatural end of human existence is supernatural life, and the contemplative is more immediately directed to this end than the active life.

While individual men and women are free to choose vocations in either the active or the contemplative state, there is a clear parallel between femininity's relationship to bringing forth natural life and the contemplative's relationship to bringing forth supernatural life. Aquinas argues that the contemplative life is more meritorious because "the root of merit is charity," and it "pertains directly and immediately to the love of God."<sup>23</sup> Nothing stops a person who chooses the active life from gaining more merit than one who chooses the contemplative life, but the latter *itself* and what it signifies is more excellent. When things are analyzed according to their end, as is characteristic of the Thomistic method, it becomes clear that femininity is more excellent than masculinity with respect to the ultimate natural end of sexual differentiation, which is the bearing of fruit in the form of new human life—and this excellence of femininity in the natural order parallels the excellence of the contemplative life in the supernatural order.

However, the active precedes the contemplative, just as masculinity precedes femininity, because it "comes first in the order of generation"<sup>24</sup> and helps to order the internal passions.<sup>25</sup>

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22 R. Amerio, *Iota Unum: A Study of Changes in the Catholic Church in the XXth Century* (Kansas City, MO: Sarto House, 2012), 210.

23 ST II-II, q. 182, art. 2, co.

24 ST II-II, q. 182, art. 4, co.

25 ST II-II, q. 182, art. 3, co.

This is exactly the pattern seen in a family, in which the husband and father establishes order through authority and directs his energy to actions outside the home to provide for his family, after which the wife and mother can direct herself to the interior life of the home. This is the significance of Adam having been created outside of the Garden of Eden and then placed in it to till the earth, while Eve was created inside the Garden to be a bearer of life. This arrangement also extends to the Church, in which the active principle exercises the jurisdiction which pertains to those of higher rank.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, the contemplative is subject to the active for the purpose of bearing the fruit that it intends, dedicating itself to the interior life so that the soul may arrive at its eternal home, of which the domestic home is a temporal representation.

St. Thomas' assertion that masculinity more closely images God in the sense of being first principle is not incorrect, but this line of reasoning is incomplete because it only considers authority and neglects other attributes. A finite creature cannot image an infinite Being by himself, which is why the diversity of sexes is required: "...as man a human being is able to image certain attributes of God, while as woman a human being can image other contrasting attributes: for example a man images God's justice, a woman — God's mercy."<sup>27</sup> Justice precedes mercy, as the latter is a certain "fullness" of the former and something more than it; Aquinas teaches that "God acts mercifully, not indeed by going against His justice, but by doing something more than justice."<sup>28</sup>

Mercy also results from charity, which is more perfectly signified by the contemplative than the active,<sup>29</sup> and so while virtues themselves are neither masculine nor feminine, the feminine principle more perfectly represents this virtue. In the same way that the contemplative is more excellent than the active, mercy is more excellent than justice, as the moral theologians McHugh and Callan explain:

Mercy, if taken for an act of the will disliking the misery of another and moving one to remove that misery, surpasses the other moral virtues; indeed, it may be said to be something divine, and hence more than a virtue. Certainly, it is the greatest of the virtues that have to do with the neighbor, for of its nature it implies freedom from some defect and the relief of that defect in others, which is not the case with other virtues.<sup>30</sup>

While a man images God as One, in his "most definite personality," a woman images God as All, as "a boundless ocean, an inexhaustible light, infinite universality which carries everything in itself and causes everything to rest."<sup>31</sup> Although the man signifies God's "specific personal creative activity,"<sup>32</sup> the woman "represents instead the calm waters of the divine ocean," possessing the duty to "receive noble values and to carry them along from generation to

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26 ST II-II, q. 182, art. 1, co.

27 K. Stehlin, *The Nature, Dignity and Mission of Woman* (Singapore: Kolbe Publications, 2018), 13.

28 ST I-II, q. 21, art. 3, ad. 2.

29 ST II-II, q. 182, art. 2, co.

30 J. McHugh and C. Callan, *Moral Theology* (New York: Wagner, 1929), 1:1207b.

31 Stehlin, 19.

32 Stehlin, 21.

generation like a subterranean stream.” It is “this element in woman that transcends personality, this timeless power that bears life and passes it on,”<sup>33</sup> which demands the reverence of man. Traditional etiquette manuals—etiquette being the daughter of charity—have always given women this respect and reverence simply because they were women, while a man had to obtain civil or ecclesiastical positions before being given the same type of treatment.

While a woman possesses the power within her own body to nourish life, a man must look outside himself and provide external resources to provide for his family; the feminine demands reverence simply because it *is*, while the masculine has to find some way to *become* before gaining the same respect. All civilized cultures throughout history have recognized this fact and sought to protect women more so than men, even if this sometimes led to excessive and unjust restrictions on their freedom of movement. The reason why men are expected to sacrifice themselves and prioritize saving women’s lives in life-threatening situations is because while both a man and a woman are absolutely necessary for reproduction, the latter is, in a relative sense, more necessary for the continuation of the human race. Femininity is more immediately directed to sustaining natural life, just as the contemplative is more immediately directed than the active to sustaining supernatural life.

Having established the relative excellence of femininity compared to masculinity with respect to the ultimate natural end of sexual differentiation, Aquinas’ theory on women’s deficiency in reason and moral virtue must be questioned. On this point, it would be short-sighted to simply invert Aquinas’ conclusions, as his very reasoning suffers from a logical flaw. He argues that it is the inherent *activity* of male bodies that render them greater in nobility and dignity, and the *passivity* of female bodies that render them inferior. The intellectual and moral superiority of man, as well as his greater physical strength, are consequences of his masculinity itself. But while the difference between the masculine and feminine principles in the sexual act are absolute, the consequences are not: despite the passive *nature* of their femininity (as Aquinas claims), some women are physically, intellectually, or morally superior to some men in their *attributes*.

Even if one were to set aside the active-contemplative framework expounded above and continue relying on Aristotle’s active-passive framework, this would still not necessarily imply that men are superior to women in reason and virtue. An *absolute* distinction between activity and passivity as principles cannot give rise to *relative* differences between individuals, with many exceptions lying outside the mean. In fact, St. Thomas himself addresses such exceptions at length, such as the Samaritan woman at the well, who came from a culture in which the frequent discussion of religious issues caused her to become more educated than others. While sex itself is an inseparable accident of the human person, many other accidents, such as physical strength, are separable and subject to variation. The correlation between sex and certain characteristics thus does not illustrate a causal relationship between the two, and so the woman at the well is not so much an exception as she was simply an individual person.

St. Thomas’ theory that men excel by nature in reason and virtue is simply unprovable because it cannot be tested in any kind of empirical manner, unlike physical differences such as muscle mass which may be quantified. Even if such intellectual and moral qualities could be tested in an objective and quantifiable manner, one cannot conclusively determine whether such

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33 Stehlin, 22.



differences arise from nature, grace, or external factors such as education and upbringing. The nature versus nurture debate, which from an Aristotelian-Thomistic perspective can be viewed as the extent to which potency is actualized, thus remains unresolved with respect to this matter. Nevertheless, some general observations may be made, not about men and women as persons, but about how the masculine and feminine forms of human nature are differently ordered.

Generally speaking, the average man is stronger than the average woman, but women live longer than men because “testosterone has an immunosuppressive effect while estrogen has an immunoenhancing effect on the immune system.”<sup>34</sup> Far from a relatively meaningless physical difference, the longevity of women and the greater robustness of their bodies over time appears to have a spiritual significance as well: the man represents what is individual and expends his energy in his work, while the woman represents that which is generational, thus preserving her strength to pass it on.<sup>35</sup> This can be seen with respect to the act of generation itself, as the man often quite literally falls asleep after performing the act, while the woman, instead of exhausting herself, conserves her strength for the nine months ahead to pass that strength onto her child.

As for the use of reason, no statistically significant differences in general intelligence between men and women have been successfully demonstrated. However, particular differences in verbal ability, which favors women, and spatial ability, which favors men, have been discerned.<sup>36</sup> The female brain usually possesses a thicker *corpus callosum*, which is correlated with the fact “that the females’ brains consistently showed more strongly coordinated activity between hemispheres, while the males’ brain activity was more tightly coordinated within local brain regions.”<sup>37</sup> This provides a physiological explanation for the observation that a woman’s thinking is characterized by greater connectivity, making her better at multitasking and memorization, while a man’s thinking tends to focus intently on a few things at a time.

While the Aristotelian-Thomistic framework posits that women are primarily action-oriented, common experience actually shows that men are more practical than women. A young man living alone might decide, in the name of practicality, to stand next to the kitchen stove and eat directly out of the pot, whereas a husband and wife are more likely to sit down at the dinner table and eat a proper meal, observing the standards of etiquette. In situations that require one to focus on utility, men typically excel, which is why they are the builders of civilization—whereas women excel in the recognition and appreciation of beauty, which pertains to that part of reason reserved for contemplation, and thus perfect and elevate the foundation built by men. Even the common faults found in men and women reflect this: men are more likely to fall into utilitarianism, while women are more likely to fall into frivolity.

As for properly governing the passions, there is likewise no clear superiority of one over the other when specific passions are considered. For example, femininity is ordered toward temperance to a greater extent than masculinity, which is why intemperate, especially unchaste,

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34 V. Taneja, “Sex Hormones Determine Immune Response.” *Front Immunol.* 2018;9:1931. doi:10.3389/fimmu.2018.01931.

35 Stehlin, 22.

36 E. Barel and O. Tzischinsky, “Age and Sex Differences in Verbal and Visuospatial Abilities.” *Adv Cogn Psychol.* 2018; 2(14): 51–61. 10.5709/acp-0238-x.

37 B. Goldman, “Two Minds: The Cognitive Differences between Men and Women.” *Stanford.edu*, 2017, <https://stanmed.stanford.edu/2017spring/how-mens-and-womens-brains-are-different.html>.



women are regarded as more repulsive than men who exhibit such characteristics. The mind instinctively regards women who are alcoholics, drug addicts, or promiscuous in a more negative light than men who fall into these categories. Concerning chastity, which is that part of temperance that moderates sexual behavior, the sexual revolution targeted young women, who naturally possess a stronger instinct to modesty, to a greater extent than young men, for whom the widespread availability of obscene materials has been more than sufficient to corrupt.

The relationship of femininity to the virtue of temperance is mirrored in the relationship between masculinity and the virtue of fortitude. A cowardly man is much more repulsive than a cowardly woman: such behavior, though inexcusable in everyone, is more contrary to masculinity. There is also a social necessity for male and female members of society to be ordered in such a way by nature: while men constitute the physical defenses of society and have a greater need to conquer their fears in battle, women set the moral standards within society and have a greater need to moderate desire. It is an observable phenomenon that women have higher standards for their partners than men, so it is natural that they be the moral guardians of marriage and family life, and by extension, society itself.

A man's courage is more important than a woman's when a society is at risk of invasion, while a woman's temperance, especially chastity, is more important than a man's in guaranteeing the legitimacy of the children, their proper moral formation, and good order in the family. While the behaviors exhibited by individual persons may be influenced by a wide variety of factors, such as education, upbringing, and free will, there is no doubt that the two forms of human nature are ordered differently for the sake of the common good.

### *Part III: Practical Consequences*

For St. Thomas, the differences between masculinity and femininity—and consequently, between male and female persons—translate into social relations of authority and subordination: woman is subject to man in the domestic, civil, and ecclesiastical societies due to her alleged deficiency in higher reason. Every society requires someone to govern it, and this is not the result of sin but simply part of the human condition: "...man is naturally a social being, and so in the state of innocence he would have led a social life."<sup>38</sup> However, this kind of subjection of one to another is not the same as slavery, which only began after the fall and exists for the benefit of the ruler; by contrast, natural rulers govern for the sake of the subjects themselves and direct everything to the common good.<sup>39</sup>

In Catholic teaching, the family is a true society, albeit an imperfect one. As a society, it requires a ruler, and Aquinas argues that because men are superior to women in reason and virtue, they are ordered to rule in the family.<sup>40</sup> Concerning the possession of civil authority by women, however, Aquinas seems to have changed his opinion over time, perhaps due to his correspondence with female political leaders. Originally, he argued that women cannot be civil rulers due to weakness of reason, the same reason for which they cannot be citizens "absolutely

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38 ST I, q. 96, art. 4, co.

39 *Ibid.*

40 ST I, q. 92, art. 1, ad 2.

speaking.”<sup>41</sup> (It should be recalled that during that time period, citizenship was not predicated upon the simple possession of rights, but rather the ability to publicly participate in political life.) In the supplement to the *Summa Theologica*, however, Aquinas writes that women may have civil power, but not ecclesiastical jurisdiction.<sup>42</sup>

In the churches, women may not teach publicly due to their deficiency in reason, but they may teach privately.<sup>43</sup> Despite this, St. Thomas holds that women can be spiritual equals or even superiors to men, which is why both sexes are able to receive the sacrament of confirmation and be sponsors to each other,<sup>44</sup> even if canon law prefers for men to be men’s sponsors and women to be women’s sponsors for practical reasons. Unlike the attitudes found in oppressive pagan cultures, Aquinas rejects the notion that women as a whole are subject to men as a whole; although they are subject upon entering into certain relationships with men, this is by virtue of the relationship and not simply their sex. In certain contexts, women are capable of exercising authority over men, such as in those religious orders with congregations of men and women who are subject to the same superior.<sup>45</sup>

This raises a question: if women are supposedly deficient in reason compared to men, and this is—despite Aquinas’ recognition of many exceptions—a *universal* consequence of the inferiority of femininity itself, then why are women not *universally* subject to men, but only in particular relationships? This indicates that the reason for women’s subordinate role is not an alleged lack of intelligence (which has already been refuted), but the significance of those relationships; for example, St. Thomas is insistent on headship in marriage and the reservation of ecclesiastical jurisdiction to men, but he is more ambivalent about the question of women as civil leaders. Further, if the reason for woman’s subjection is her supposed deficiency in reason, then why is she allowed to teach outside the liturgy, or privately, at all? After all, the location or audience has no impact on the ability of the teacher himself or herself.

Perhaps the philosophical considerations on men’s and women’s respective abilities are ultimately vain and unnecessary, as the Church has always made one point clear: the roles of men and women are predicated upon what the sexes signify spiritually, and not an individual’s merit or qualifications. A man does not merit his own authority as a husband by some personal ability or quality any more than a woman merits her capacity to bring forth life; these differences simply distinguish the functions that each person serves in marriage and family life. Marriage, after all, is a representation of the union between Christ and the Church; the body is of the same nature as the head and consequently cannot be deemed inferior by nature, even if its *function* or *position* exists under the head and ought to be governed by it.

While merit—which depends on one’s level of perfection in charity and cooperation with divine grace—determines a person’s standing in heaven, there is no such meritocracy on earth. A vocation is not fundamentally about what a person is capable of *doing*, but about one’s very *identity*. There is a tendency in the modern world to regard so-called “role-playing” as something fundamentally dangerous to the so-called “true self,” which is alleged to be completely free from

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41 ST I-II, q. 105, art. 3, ad. 1.

42 ST Suppl., q. 39, art. 1, ad 2.

43 ST II-II, q. 177, art. 2, co.

44 ST III, q. 72, art. 8, ad. 3; art. 10, ad. 3.

45 Amerio, 216.

external influences, and this simply is not true. A person's "true self" is not the self he is currently, but the self that God wants him to become, and He intends to bring about this conversion through assigning each individual a role and helping him to perform it well. These roles can correspond with sex, showing why God created the human race male and female.

The fact that only a woman can consecrate her virginity to God as a Spouse of Our Lord, and that only a man can be ordained, suffices to demonstrate this point. Some proponents of female ordination have argued that women are just as capable of performing the physical acts in celebrating the sacraments and might actually be more skilled in pastoral things—but though cake is sweeter than bread, Our Lord chose bread for the Eucharist, and He chose men for the priesthood. Had He wanted female priests, He could have easily chosen His own mother, who could quite literally say "*hoc est enim corpus meum*," but He did not. Because the Church Herself is feminine, those who exercise jurisdiction—which is at the service of Her feminine love—ought to be male. Because husband and wife represent Christ and the Church, it follows that he should be the head of the society, and she be its heart.

As explained above, it is clear that vocations cannot be understood in light of the concept of meritocracy, as though one can "earn" a vocation to the priesthood, to consecrated virginity, to marriage, etc. It is God who does the calling, and it is He who decides what role each individual shall occupy in the grand scheme of things; the duty of a human being is to follow that call and conform himself to God's will. For one who embraces a meritocratic mindset, however, it is logical to assume that if men are given headship and authority in the domestic and ecclesiastical societies, then it must be because men are superior in reason and virtue to women. Such a conclusion, as explained earlier, enjoys no support in theology, philosophy, or biology—and yet, even if it were true, it still would not suffice to explain the roles given to men and women.

God is not limited by human failings. A man does not merit his office as a husband and father due to his superior qualities in leadership; he might very well be a less effective and qualified leader than his wife. Nevertheless, he still is the head of the family, and if he lacks the necessary qualities by nature to live out his vocation, then he must trust God to grant him the graces necessary and willingly cooperate with them. Likewise, a woman does not merit her office as a wife and mother due to her tender and empathetic nature; even a woman who lacks such qualities can be called to this vocation, and she must cooperate with grace to develop the virtues necessary for her state. Thus, the subordinate role of woman in certain relationships has nothing to do with an alleged inferiority in reason or moral virtue, but the signification of supernatural realities within domestic and ecclesiastical society.

Aquinas is insistent on male leadership in domestic and ecclesiastical life, but he permits women to have civil power. This is more than sufficient to indicate that the role of women in the family and in the Church has nothing to do with intelligence or virtue, but rather with what the sexes represent theologically. If, in a marriage, the wife represents the Church, and the husband represents Christ, then it is only logical that she should submit to him, and he should love her as his own body. And because the liturgy is a foretaste of the eternal wedding feast in heaven, the idea of women serving a feminine Church in that context is grotesque and destroys the spousal signification that helps the mind grasp supernatural realities. However, a woman being a civil leader is not grotesque, because while countries are often referred to as "she" as a form of patriotic expression, there is no real theological point to be made here.

In civil life, women “traditionally had voted in their local communities in Austria, Switzerland and indeed the Papal States.”<sup>46</sup> Women often sat on communal assemblies alongside male citizens, both being subject to the same property qualifications, a practice that continued up until the nineteenth century and only ended due to “the lowering of their status caused by the advent of a utilitarian, industrial society and the consequent secularization of the masses.”<sup>47</sup> When called upon to govern, Catholic rulers such as Isabella I of Castile and Mary I of England, both of whom are looked down upon in the modern age for their very Catholic policies, proved themselves to be competent leaders.

The Church has never regarded women as deficient in higher reason: on the contrary, Our Lord Himself used the example of Mary, the sister of Martha, to illustrate the excellence of contemplation, to which the higher reason is directed (Luke 10:41-42). Although women may teach in many contexts, they cannot teach in *one* specific context for the same reason why they cannot be clerics. Their level of intelligence or virtue is not relevant to this prohibition: in fact, throughout Church history, women such as St. Catherine of Siena have demonstrated intellectual and moral superiority over the corrupt clerics of their day and even rebuked popes. Women taught catechumens in the early Church (Acts 18:26) and went on to establish religious orders dedicated to education. In the Middle Ages, there were female university professors<sup>48</sup> as well as canon and civil lawyers, as demonstrated by the examples of Novella and Bettina d’Andrea.<sup>49</sup>

### *Conclusion*

While St. Thomas’ philosophy of woman is more generous than what his detractors have granted him, he does argue that despite the essential equality of men and women as human beings, masculinity is superior to femininity and responsible for endowing men with superior qualities to women. He argues that sexual differentiation is directed to the act of coition, the only act in which men and women act as males and as females, which determines the nature and function of masculinity and femininity themselves. Every act of generation requires an active and a passive principle, and in this case, the male is active and the female is passive. Because the agent is nobler than the patient, masculinity is nobler than femininity—and because souls are proportioned to particular bodies, the souls of men, whose bodies are active, are nobler than the souls of women, whose bodies are passive. This causes woman’s deficiency in higher reason and moral virtue, which accounts for her subordinate role in society.

St. Thomas’ over-reliance on Aristotelian biology notwithstanding, his fundamental error is actually philosophical, not biological. Aristotle’s characterization of the male as active in the act of generation and the female as passive is correct; however, the single act of intercourse is not the only situation in which men and women act according to their respective sexual identities. In the psychological order of attraction antecedent to coition itself, the woman is active, while the man is passive, so the Aristotelian framework of male activity and female passivity does not hold

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46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*

48 J. Walsh, *The Thirteenth: Greatest of Centuries* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1952), 254-57.

49 “D’Andrea, Novella (d. 1333).” *Encyclopedia.com*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/dandrea-novella-d-1333>.

true for all circumstances. Further, the woman also acts according to her nature as a female during pregnancy and childbirth, which brings to fruition what was begun during the act of sexual intercourse, and these two events do not factor into Aquinas' thought at all.

While the act of coition is the immediate end of sexual differentiation, its *ultimate* natural end is the bringing forth of new life, and the concept of bringing something to fruition is essential to a proper Catholic understanding of the feminine. Femininity is more immediately directed to the generation of natural life, and it is analogous to the contemplative, which—compared to the active—is more immediately directed to mankind's supernatural end, eternal life. Considering the woman as the “contemplative” to the man's “active” more completely reflects the *process* of generation, as opposed to the single act, and it shows that femininity, with respect to the ultimate natural end of sexual differentiation, is actually more excellent than masculinity. The evaluation of things according to their end is essential to the Thomistic method, which makes it even more astonishing that Aquinas himself argued that femininity was inferior to masculinity.

St. Thomas' arguments concerning women's deficiency in higher reason and moral virtue do not logically follow from his premise, as an *absolute* distinction between the masculine and feminine principles cannot give rise to *relative* differences in qualities. General observations can be made about how individual men and women behave, but it cannot be determined precisely whether differences in behavior are due to nature, grace, free choice, or other factors. Nevertheless, there are certain observable differences on average, such as the greater muscle mass of the male, or the longevity of the female, and how the two sexes differ in spatial and verbal ability. However, there is no clear superiority of one over the other in physical, intellectual, and moral characteristics; consequently, the different roles of men and women in society are not based on meritocracy but simply divine ordinance.

Far from demeaning to the dignity of woman, her subordinate role in the domestic and ecclesiastical societies is actually a testament to the excellence of femininity, the principle which perfects human nature and elevates civilization, being more immediately directed to the generation of new life. This superordination necessitates the existence of something to precede it, and because masculinity precedes femininity in the same way that the active precedes the contemplative, the greater excellence of the latter can only be realized in the subordinate role established for her by God. Despite St. Thomas' erroneous biological and philosophical conclusions on the nature of woman, his theological teaching on her position in family life and in the Church remains perfectly in accordance with Catholic doctrine.

The natural function of sexual differentiation is the generation of offspring, but its supernatural function is to image different attributes of God and to assist the human mind in understanding truths of the faith. In this context, which is ultimately the most important one, masculinity and femininity—as well as men and women—are absolutely equal in dignity.

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