CHAPTER 7

Women and Men at the Last Supper: Reception

Gender parallel officiants at the ritual meal, as witnessed by the *Life of the Virgin*'s last supper scene, comports with actual reported Christian practice into the sixth century, and occasionally beyond. Both positive and adverse reports evince that some communities of Jesus followers around the Mediterranean followed a tradition of men and women presiding together at the ritual meal. This meal was called by many names depending in part upon the community: the agape, the blessing, the offering, the Eucharist, the sacrifice, the Body, and Blood. Similarly, the officiants of the ritual were variously known as presidents, ministers, deacons, priests, presbyters, bishops, and other titles.

FEMALE AND MALE CHRISTIAN PRESIDERS FROM THE SECOND CENTURY ONWARDS

The oldest datable account of female and male co-officiants was written in Gaul by Irenaeus of Lyon (ca. 155–205). Like the scribe behind the *Apostolic Church Order*, Irenaeus opposed a competing community of Christ followers where men and women presided together. Irenaeus

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used the transitive verb *eucharistein* when referring to the woman's consecration of the ritual wine, and this community's practice almost certainly was archaic, not innovative.¹ Furthermore, just as the scribe of the *Acts of Philip* described opponents sexually slandering male and female priests and other clergy in that community, Irenaeus sexually slandered the women officiants in this community.² Embedded in his complaints, however slanted, Irenaeus unwittingly left a record of this community's Eucharistic ritual:

Handing mixed cups to the women, he bids them consecrate these in his presence. When this has been done, he himself produces another cup of much larger size than that which the deluded woman has consecrated, and pouring from the smaller one consecrated by the woman into that which has been brought forward by himself.³

Irenaeus was merely the first of many writers in this region to record female officiants. Apparently, the early tradition was strong, because it persisted for centuries. For example, two centuries later, just south of Lyon, at the Council of Nîmes (ca. 394), some bishops were still complaining about women ordained into Levitical ministry.⁴ A century later, Pope Gelasius (r. 492–496) likewise complained that in southern Italy “women are encouraged to serve [minister] at the sacred altars (*ministrare sacris altaribus*) and to perform all the other tasks (*cunctaque*) that are assigned only to the service of men.”⁵ The term *cuncta* here signified all related things and thus appears to have included all liturgical, juridical, and magisterial work of the ordained ministry.⁶

In similar fashion in 511, bishops north of Lyon chastised priests in Brittany for officiating masses with women “employed in the divine sacrifice; so that, while you are distributing the Eucharist, they hold the chalices and presume to administer the blood of Christ to the people.”⁷ As late as 829, bishops in this region are on record complaining about women performing this sacrament. “We have attempted in every way possible,” they wrote Louis the Pious, “to prevent women from approaching the altar ... and—more monstrous, improper, and inappropriate than all else—giv[ing] the people the Body and Blood of the Lord.”⁸ These adverse reports indicate that the Council of Laodicea's late fourth-century admonition against women approaching the altar had little impact, at least in some communities.

WRITINGS THAT PAIRED MALE AND FEMALE CLERICAL TITLES

Various writers paired male and female clergy. Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis, writing around 370 in the Eastern Mediterranean, reported in the present tense regarding New Prophecy churches: "They ordain [*kathistantai*] women to the episcopate and presbyterate."⁹ The *Martyrdom of Matthew* likewise described men and women who were ordained as both priests and deacons. Composed in Greek, the dating of this martyrdom has not been well studied and is uncertain, but the fourth century would probably be conservative.¹⁰ While Epiphanius of Salamis complained about the practice of ordaining women priests and bishops, this author positively paralleled their ordination, as well as the church titles for men and women, including *presbuteros* and *presbutis*, which different modern translators have translated as priest and priestess, or presbyter (m.) and presbyter (f.). According to the *Martyrdom of Matthew*, Matthew ordained/appointed King Bulphamnus a "priest", Queen Ziphagia a "priestess," their son a deacon, and his wife a deaconess.¹¹ Here, different Greek scribes used *echeirotoneō* (ordain) or *katestēsan* (appoint), and in the Latin translation, *ordinavit* (ordain).¹²

Passages in manuscript *Xenophontos* 32, which preserves the longest text of the *Acts of Philip*, describe similar gender parallelism in the clergy. For example, one passage, in Act 14, reads, "Philip was baptizing the men and Mariamne the women."¹³ This gendered division of responsibility is also specified in the Syriac *Didascalia Apostolorum*, which pairs the male and female deacons standing in for Christ and the Holy Spirit (f.) at the offering table, and with other duties of these deacons, including baptism, the *Didascalia* says: "A woman should be devoted to ministry among women, and a male deacon to ministry among men."¹⁴ Most likely this gender division of clerical duties was limited to situations where both male and female clergy were present, such as in established churches, or in scenarios such as that of the *Acts of Philip*, which specifies that Mariamne and Philip evangelized together. By contrast, the long narratives about Thecla, Irene and Nino specify that they evangelized alone, and that they baptized both men and women.

Act 1 in *Xenophontos* 32's text of the *Acts of Philip* again lists gender-parallel church titles. In one instance, these titles are listed in a scene that describes blasphemers being tortured in hell, and the archangel

Michael explains that these people were in hell because, when they were alive, they had “blasphemed against male and female priests, eunuchs, deacons, deaconesses, and virgins with lies about debauchery and adultery.”¹⁵ In this list of church titles, which parallels male priest and female priest, Bovon translated the Greek *presbuteros* and *presbutidas* with gender equivalence, as male and female priests.¹⁶ He gave considerable thought as to why he did so, and a significant piece of evidence that he cited in support of his translation was the similar passage in the *Martyrdom of Matthew*, where that author also paralleled masculine and feminine church titles. Bovon concluded that when there is a list of gender-parallel church titles, then the titles for both men and women must be translated with parallel meaning.¹⁷

WOMEN OVERSEERS OR BISHOPS

Almost all the house churches named in the New Testament are identified by the name of the women who apparently oversaw them: Chloe, Nympha, Apphia, Priscilla, Lydia, Mary the mother of Mark, as well as an unnamed woman.¹⁸ Additional evidence suggests that women continued for several centuries in the role of overseer, or bishop, of churches in various communities around the Mediterranean. For example, as mentioned above, in the late fourth century in the East, Epiphanius of Salamis reported that some Christians ordained women bishops.

Some communities in the West also appear to have had women clergy with the title of bishop—not the masculine *episcopus*, but the feminine *episcopa*. For example, a funerary inscription from near the city of Rome, most likely dated to the late fourth/early fifth century, gave a woman the title of *episcopa*.¹⁹ As with the other clergy, we sometimes find the *episcopa* paired with the *episcopus*, for example, Canon 14 of the second Council of Tours (567) instructed, “A bishop (male) who has no bishop (female) may have no women in his entourage”—*Episcopum episcop(i)am non habentem nulla sequatur turba mulierum*.²⁰ Canon 14 seems to signify that the *episcopus* was the overseer of the men and the *episcopa* the overseer of the women. If so, their responsibilities would be similar to the gender parallel responsibilities that the *Didascalia* ascribed for male and female deacons, as well as the way that the *Acts of Philip* says Philip baptized the men and Mariamne the women.

It seems likely that in some cases the *episcopa* might be the spouse of a male bishop, but the meaning of the term *episcopa* did not necessarily mean that she was a wife. For example, Canon 13 of the Council of Tours, which immediately preceded the abovementioned Canon 14, specifically addressed the bishop's wife, and called her *coniux*, not *episcopa*.²¹ Other Latin writers likewise did not call a bishop's wife an *episcopa*. For example, Gregory of Tours, who wrote about the wives of various bishops, referred to each as *coniux*, as in Canon 13 of the Council of Tours, not an *episcopa* as in Canon 14.²² The understanding that an *episcopa* was not necessarily married to an *episcopus* is consistent with the way Epiphanius of Salamis described women who were ordained bishops. Epiphanius complained that women bishops were *not* under the authority of their husbands.²³

A fascinating inscription on a nave pier near the Chapel of San Zeno inside the Church of Santa Prassede in Rome pairs the *episcopus* of Rome at that time, Pope Paschal I (r. 817–824), with his mother, the *episcopa* Theodora.²⁴ Notably, this is the same pope who commissioned the apse mosaic of Mary holding the Eucharistic cloth, by then called the maniple, in Santa Maria in Dominica (Fig. 4.15). Paschal also commissioned a full-length mosaic portrait of his mother in the Chapel of San Zeno inside Santa Prassede, with her title *EPISCOPA* written in black tesserae horizontally above her head and her name *THEODORA* vertically beside it. Theodora could have been portrayed wearing the episcopal pallium in her portrait, just as Mary was portrayed wearing it 150 years earlier in the San Venantius apse, but we can never know for sure because sometime after 1630 the lower wall, with the mosaic of Theodora's body, was removed to make a doorway. Perhaps that was when the last two letters of her name were destroyed and replaced with gold tesserae instead of the black letters *RA*.²⁵ This rendered her name into an otherwise unattested masculine name, *THEODO*, as if to suggest that the *EPISCOPA* was somehow masculine gendered. Ute E. Eisen provides detailed research regarding *Theodora episcopa* and points out that the *Liber Pontificalis* named Paschal's father, Bonosus, without any official title, so he was not a bishop. Paschal's mother Theodora therefore was not titled *episcopa* because of her husband.²⁶ There appears to be no good reason to assume that a woman was called an *episcopa* because of her marital relationship. More likely, just as with a male bishop, her title had to do with merit and responsibility.

CERULA AND BITALIA, ORDAINED BISHOPS

Given the trajectory of redaction with respect to markers of female liturgical leadership, it seems likely that other epigraphs and evidence of ordained women bishops may have been defaced or destroyed. The late fifth- or early sixth-century grave portraits of two women church leaders, Cerula and Bitalia, probably survived only because they were underground, in the San Gennaro Catacomb in Naples. Various scholars have suggested that one or both may have been a deacon, a priest, or some other kind of clergy in the Naples church.²⁷ Their portraits suggest they were ordained bishops.

Cerula's portrait was doubly hidden. A marble slab concealed her arcosolium, a rare phenomenon in the Naples catacombs, according to Antonio Ciavolino, who discovered it in 1977.²⁸ The catacomb's local management, the Società Cooperativa La Paranza—Catacombe di Napoli, took over management of the catacombs in 2009 and in 2011 oversaw the restoration of the fresco. For Cerula's portrait, see Fig. 7.1.

Fig. 7.1 Cerula and the open gospel books. Fresco dated late 400s/early 500s. San Gennaro Catacomb, Naples. © Società Cooperativa La Paranza - Catacombe di Napoli

Cerula's portrait is inside an arcosolium that was cut into the center of the main wall of an underground gallery, a gallery down a corridor from the underground basilica. When viewers enter this long room, Cerula's portrait is immediately visible as it and its decoration take up virtually the entire wall at other end, with the arcosolium the focal point. The top of the wall has a *tabula*, or banner, today blank, but it originally may have had an inscription. That Cerula's role was religious is unmistakably suggested by the large amount of Christian symbolism. Both the *alpha omega* and the *chi rho* cross were delicately painted in red above her head. Two open codices, with the names of the four evangelists written on their pages, were painted floating on either side of her head. Her arms are raised. *CERULA* and *IN PACE*, meaning "Cerula, rest in peace," was at the base of her portrait. The intrada, the inside arch, is painted with five large green wreaths that encircle more alpha-omegas and chi rho crosses.²⁹ Finally, wall frescos of Paul, seen gesturing toward Cerula as if blessing or acclaiming her, and probably also a fresco of either Peter or some other saint (which has not survived) originally flanked her arcosolium.³⁰

The portrait of Bitalia was painted in a smaller niche, nearby on the long side wall of the same chapel. Bitalia's portrait was painted with less detail, but in a similar composition to Cerula's—her arms are raised, open gospel books flank her head, and a red *chi rho* cross is above her head.³¹ The symbols used in both of their grave portraits were consistently Christian and highly auspicious. For comparison, neither the *chi rho* nor the *alpha omega* symbols are seen with the men in the nearby so-called crypt of the bishops, but both symbols are inside the halo of Saint Gennaro, the important martyr bishop for whom these catacombs were named, who himself is painted nearby, and with his arms raised, like the women.³²

Neither Cerula nor Bitalia were depicted wearing any sort of jewelry, providing an austere contrast, for example, to the portrait of a young girl painted wearing pendant earrings, a small crown of pearls, a jeweled collar, and a huge jewel on her belt in the nearby arcosolium of Theotecnus.³³ Both Cerula and Bitalia were portrayed wearing an overgarment, a *penula* which Mary M. Schaefer likens to a short chasuble.³⁴ Indeed, this vestment is almost identical in style to Pope Clement's ornately embroidered blue and white chasuble (Fig. 4.8), which he is depicted wearing while performing the Eucharist, his arms also raised. It is also similar to the vestment worn by the women processing to the

altar on the sixth-century ivory pyx, three of whom were arms-raised, and each of whom wore the Eucharistic cloth (Figs. 2.8a, b and 4.18). Cerula and Bitalia's portraits were bust portraits and do not show any insignia below, but they also resemble Mary, who a century or so later was depicted arms-raised and wearing the archiepiscopal pallium hanging from below her *maphorion* in her mosaic portrait in the Lateran baptistery in Rome (Fig. 4.11a, b). Bitalia's chasuble is a plain deep red, but Cerula's, like Clement's, has an ornate design. After the recent restoration, a Greek cross is visible inside one of the circles in its red-on-white pattern, and originally other crosses may have been inside other circles.³⁵ The design itself suggests a joyful procession of people, some arms-raised like Cerula, such as the procession of women approaching the Anastasis altar on the ivory pyx. Another similar procession may have been in the lost second register of mosaics of the Parousia of Christ in the fourth- or fifth-century Rotunda Church in Thessaloniki, where the outline of Christ is inside a circle at the apex of the dome, and the procession of "dancing" celebrants³⁶—only their feet remain today—encircled the dome below him.³⁷ A joyful procession, whether in memory of Christ's resurrection or in anticipation of his return, would be an appropriate design for the chasuble of a woman bishop in a catacomb setting, for the motif would remind the viewer of Christ's promise that the beloved dead would be raised again.

The rarest and most unusual element of Cerula and Bitalia's portraits is a symbol that signifies they were bishops. This symbol is the books, which were painted on either side of their heads. These books are clearly identified as gospel books, for Mark, John, Luke, and Matthew are written in Latin on the open pages. This composition of open gospel books flanking the deceased person's head is extremely unusual, and to my knowledge, no other such compositions have survived besides theirs.³⁸

In Christian art of this era, books were typically associated with bishops. The association between bishops and books is so powerful that in another room in this same catacomb, Vatican specialists identify portraits of unnamed men depicted holding a closed book as bishops. These men are identified as bishops despite that their portraits typically do not include a name, a title, or any episcopal or Christian insignia—not even a *chi rho* or *alpha omega* to identify them as a Christian instead of a philosopher or magistrate—only the book.³⁹ Artists in Rome around the time that Cerula and Bitalia's portraits were painted associated open books with bishops. For example, in the

Maria Maggiore Basilica dated 432–440, Peter and Paul are depicted holding open books on either side of the empty bishop’s throne in the center of the triumphal arch mosaics, as if waiting to ordain the new bishop of Rome, Pope Sixtus III, after Pope Celestine died. As previously mentioned with respect to Fig. 4.16, ten years earlier, in the basilica of Santa Sabina dated 420–430, two women were portrayed holding open books, with the woman holding the book with Greek letters also holding the Eucharistic cloth like Pope Clement several centuries later (Fig. 4.8). Even earlier, in an apse mosaic in Saint Pudianza Church in Rome dated ca. 400, Jesus himself was portrayed holding a large open book. Earliest of all, in a fourth-century fresco in the Domitilla catacomb, an open book was painted floating in the air adjacent two women. Originally, a second book may have been painted on the other side of them to balance the composition, but today that half of the fresco is destroyed. One of the women is titled “Veneranda”—which some scholars have suggested may have referenced the title of a woman bishop.⁴⁰ The other woman is titled “Petronella,” and a century ago, the famous Vatican art historian Josef Wilpert argued that Petronella was painted wearing the oldest example of the episcopal pallium, *il pallio sacro*.⁴¹ In this geographical area, thus, the open books, such as associated with Cerula and Bitalia, appear to have symbolized high ecclesial authority, including women’s.

The way the artist painted the gospel books—open on either side of their heads—further associates Cerula and Bitalia with the episcopacy. Bishops—and *bishops only*—were, and still are, ordained with the open gospel book held over their head.⁴² This ordination ritual appears to be what Peter and Paul are waiting to perform while holding open books on either side of the empty episcopal throne, as seen in the Maria Maggiore triumphal apse mosaic.⁴³ The open gospel books on either side of Cerula’s and Bitalia’s heads appear to signify that they had undergone the same episcopal ordination ritual. If they were men, no doubt they already would have been identified as bishops.

Twenty years ago before Cerula’s portrait was restored, Catharine Kroeger inspected Bitalia’s portrait and identified her as a priest, although she also mused whether the dark red color of Bitalia’s chasuble signified that she also had been a bishop. Kroeger regarded the red pendants around the books in Bitalia’s portrait as “bookmarks placed in special readings” for Bitalia’s preaching, so that she could “minister the word of God.”⁴⁴

These red pendants could signify bookmarks, or even book ties or straps—especially if there were not such an excessive number of them—but based on the images in J. A. Szirmai’s *Archeology of Medieval Bookbinding*, as well as depictions of codices from this era, books sometimes had long wrapping straps, triangular flaps, toggles or other clasps, and/or bookmarks, but none survived with this excessive number of pendants. More pendants are seen emanating from these books than on any other codice, or representation of a codice, from this era. In addition, the shape of these wavy red tendrils is rather uniform, as well as specific, and does not mirror any combination of straps, flaps, ties, markers, or toggles reconstructed in Szirmai’s study. The portrait painter’s skill suggests that something specific was intended to be represented. The closest in iconography, as well as in time and place, are the smaller number of rather uniform red tendrils that descend from each of the two open books that Peter and Paul hold while waiting on either side of the vacant episcopal throne in Maria Maggiore, and from the two open books that the two women titled “Church” hold while flanking the inscription to Celestine as the foremost bishop of the world in Santa Sabina (Fig. 4.16). Worthy of consideration is that the red tendrils may have represented tongues of fire descending from the open books.⁴⁵ According to the popular preacher and bishop, Severian of Gabala (ca. 380–425), the reason the gospels were held over the episcopal ordinand’s head during the ordination rite was so that, as in the upper room at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit’s tongues of fire would *descend* from the book and ordain the new bishop and inspire their preaching.⁴⁶ The wavy red tendrils emanating from the sides and bottom of the two open books on either side of Cerula and Bitalia’s heads even more clearly suggest flames or tongues of fire. The absence of flames *rising* in similar fashion from the top of the books is explained by Severian’s description that the tongues of fire *descended*. Additionally, Severian said that during this part of the ritual, a flame would be visible above the episcopal ordinand’s head⁴⁷—and the delicate red *alpha omega* and *chi rho* painted above Cerula and Bitalia’s heads resemble, in shape and color, the delicate flames of the Holy Spirit painted above the heads of Mary and the male apostles in the Rabbula Gospels illumination of Pentecost.⁴⁸

Cerula and Bitalia’s grave portraits were painted at the end of the fifth century or the beginning of the sixth century. They therefore may have been contemporaneous with Pope Gelasius’ letter, detailed above, wherein he complained that in southern Italy women were ministering at the sacred altars and performing all associated liturgical, magisterial,

and juridical tasks—that is, performing the duties of bishop. Cerula and Bitalia's portraits appear to identify two of these women. Whoever commissioned Cerula and Bitalia's portraits, quite likely their own church community, may have specified that flaming open gospel books be painted next to their heads to proclaim that Cerula and Bitalia were *ordained* bishops—and that their community rejected Gelasius's view.

What did the liturgy look like when women and men had parallel church titles and authority? The two very oldest surviving iconographic artifacts to depict people at an altar table inside a real church portray men and women in parallel. Both artifacts are usually dated within decades of the year 430. Signifying that this gender parallel liturgy was vibrant and widespread, to my knowledge, zero iconographic artifacts have survived from the fifth century or earlier that depict a Christian man alone at an altar table in a church, that is, without a woman also there.⁴⁹

These two iconographic artifacts depict a gender parallel liturgy at the altar table in the consecrated sanctuaries of two of the most important orthodox basilicas in the Roman Empire. One portrays the sanctuary of the second Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. The other portrays the sanctuary of Old Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome

HISTORICITY OF PULCHERIA INSIDE THE HOLY OF HOLIES OF THE SECOND HAGIA SOPHIA

The first of the two artifacts that depict a gender parallel liturgy at the altar table was carved on the massive stone front of a sarcophagus. It was discovered in 1988 in an underground hypogeum adjacent the Theodosian walls in Istanbul. The stone panel's large size—approximately 3½ feet by 6½ feet—as well as the dress of the people carved on it, signified that the sculptor's patron or patroness was of high rank⁵⁰ (see Fig. 7.2).

The sculptor carved a man and a woman flanking the altar table with its cross and curtains beneath the canopy of the ciborium. Next to the woman, a boy, not yet a man, stands closest to the altar, sculpted holding an open book, presumably the gospels, and lifting his right hand in the gesture of speech, as if he were the bishop.⁵¹ Significantly, the woman and man have almost mirror symmetrical poses—raised arms, solemn gazes, the curve of their torsos, and even the pointing of their feet.

Art historian Johannes Deckers and archeologist Ümit Serdaroğlu published this find in 1993, pointing out that the column capitals carved on this sarcophagus panel were the same as those of the nearby second Hagia Sophia, completed in 415. The second Hagia Sophia burned

Fig. 7.2 Liturgical scene in the second Hagia Sophia. Constantinople, ca. 430. Courtesy Author and Archeological Museum of Istanbul

during the Nika riots under Justinian, who built the third Hagia Sophia, which still stands. Based on the hypogeum's site, the early Christian cross, and the style of the man's clothing and bulb clasp, they dated the sarcophagus front tightly to the end of the first third of the fifth century, that is, just prior to the year 434.⁵²

Deckers and Serdaroğlu's dating makes this carving almost precisely contemporary with a reported conflict in 428 at the door to the Holy of Holies in the second Hagia Sophia—a conflict between the virgin Augusta Pulcheria (399–453) and Nestorius, the new patriarch of Constantinople. At the age of fifteen, Pulcheria had become regent for her seven-year-old younger brother, Theodosius II, and, according to the church historian Sozomen, not long after, with a rich new altar table in the newly consecrated second Hagia Sophia, Pulcheria consecrated herself as a virgin in a spectacular ceremony before all the priests and people.⁵³

According to two adverse reports, the Augusta Pulcheria's portrait was above the altar table in the second Hagia Sophia. Her portrait may have been much like that of the Augusta Theodora, who a century later was depicted above the altar table holding the Eucharistic chalice (Fig. 4.17). Signaling an impending conflict in Constantinople, both sources say Nestorius removed Pulcheria's portrait.⁵⁴

The most violent conflict between the princess and the patriarch was preserved in only one source, an adverse report in the *Letter to Cosmas*. The historicity of this letter has sometimes been challenged,⁵⁵ but to date no one previously has considered it in context with the liturgical scene on the sarcophagus front, which has a strong correspondence to the liturgical traditions described in the letter. The author of the *Letter to Cosmas* said that Pulcheria was accustomed to taking communion inside the Holy of Holies with her younger brother.⁵⁶ The sculptor of the massive sarcophagus front carved a liturgical scene in the second Hagia Sophia that comports with what the *Letter to Cosmas* said was Pulcheria's custom: a young woman standing next to a boy who had a very important role at the altar table in the second Hagia Sophia. Certainly Roman emperors had traditionally taken the title of *pontifex maximus*, or chief priest, but acceptance of the title is usually thought to have ended at least with Gratian (r. 375–383),⁵⁷ although Canon 69 of the Council of Quinisext in 692 explicitly affirmed the emperor's right to enter the Holy of Holies and later sources continued to describe Byzantine emperors taking communion with their own hands at the altar "as the priest."⁵⁸ The *Letter to Cosmas* did not specify what the Eucharistic ritual looked like, only that when the previous patriarch Sisinnius was alive, Pulcheria took communion in the Holy of Holies with her brother. But the letter also said that the new patriarch Nestorius disagreed with Pulcheria's practice and attempted to end it. Just before the Easter service in 428, Nestorius heard about Pulcheria's custom. He ran to the door of the Holy of Holies to physically stop her and her women from entering.

Pulcheria ordered, "Let me enter as is my custom."

He answered, "Only priests can walk in this place."

She asked him, "Why have I not given birth to God?"

He said, "You, you have given birth to Satan," and he drove her away from the Holy of Holies.⁵⁹

Scholars debate why Pulcheria claimed to have given birth to God, essentially invoking Mary the Theotokos, the God-bearer, to justify her own entry as a priest into the Holy of Holies.⁶⁰ One explanation is that influential theologians taught that virgins gave birth to Christ like Mary.⁶¹ For example, an earlier patriarch of Constantinople, Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390), preached: "Practice virginity, women, in order to become mothers of Christ!"⁶² This teaching for virgins explains the virgin Pulcheria's question, "Why have I not given birth to God?" Another

explanation might be that Pulcheria was familiar with the *Gospel of Bartholomew*, where the apostles themselves told Mary that because she gave birth to the Lord she had more right than they to lead the prayer.⁶³ Pulcheria, asking Nestorius this particular question as she demanded entry to the Holy of Holies, suggests that she was accustomed to following Mary's example—in the Holy of Holies, at the altar table, and as the liturgical leader of the male apostles through whom Nestorius claimed his own authority.

One thing is certain. We may assume that Pulcheria soon resumed her custom, because not long after the conflict, the Council of Ephesus exiled Nestorius. In this Nestorius followed the humiliating trajectory of an earlier patriarch of Constantinople, John Chrysostom (ca. 349–407), who also opposed women in the priesthood.⁶⁴ After Chrysostom became patriarch, he came into conflict with Pulcheria's mother, the empress Aelia Eudoxia—and he too was expelled from Constantinople.⁶⁵ The sacral basileía of these imperial women appears to have been considerably greater than that of the patriarchs.

Regarding the design of the mosaics installed in the huge Maria Maggiore basilica after the Council of Ephesus, the reason the papal patron—whether Sixtus or the future Pope Leo—demoted Mary's motherhood may have been fear of Mary's liturgical authority as a role model for women, including fear of the Augustas. Is there evidence that during this period some women in the city of Rome were entering the Holy of Holies as priests like Pulcheria did in Constantinople?

FEMALE AND MALE CLERGY AT THE ALTAR TABLE IN OLD SAINT PETER'S BASILICA

A delicate carving on an ivory reliquary box known as the Pola Ivory is the second of the two oldest iconographic artifacts to illustrate Christians at the altar table in a liturgical scene inside a real church. Subsequent excavations beneath the high altar of the modern basilica of Saint Peter's proved that this carving depicted the liturgy inside the sanctuary of Old Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. As such, it provides substantial evidence that, like their sisters in Constantinople, women in the city of Rome had parallel roles in the liturgy.

This reliquary box most often dated to the second quarter of the fifth century⁶⁶—essentially contemporary with the sarcophagus front, as well as Pulcheria, who lived until 453. Due to its quality and as well as

a papal motif, some art historians have hypothesized that it was a papal commission, perhaps for an imperial patron.⁶⁷ Like the sarcophagus front, this ivory box was also dug up in the twentieth century, discovered in 1906 buried beneath the altar area of a church near Pola, Croatia. Nonetheless, the ivory box was carved elsewhere, with the most common suggestions Rome or Milan⁶⁸ (see Fig. 7.3).

Anton Gnirs, the first scholar to publish an article about the exquisite ivory box, described this as a liturgical scene inside a church presbytery. The sculptor carved two men and two women, their arms raised, standing on either side of the ciborium, the beautiful columned structure around the altar. Inside the sacred space beneath the ciborium, the

Fig. 7.3 Liturgical scene in Old Saint Peter's Basilica, Rome. Ivory reliquary box, ca. 425–450. Discovered near Pola, Croatia. Museo Archeologico, Venice. © Alinari Archives-Alinari Archive, Florence

sculptor carved a man and a woman facing each other across the altar. Gnirs assumed that the man and woman at the altar must have represented spouses at a marriage liturgy, although, as he pointed out, where was the third party, the priest?⁶⁹ The three women were sculpted with veils, and there is virtually no controversy that they are women.⁷⁰ Cerula and Bitalia, also portrayed arms-raised as well as dressed like these arms-raised women, could have performed in a liturgy like this one inside Old Saint Peter's sanctuary. They even may have traveled to Rome and performed in the liturgy in Old Saint Peter's itself.

In a significant resonance with the liturgy of the first-century Therapeutae, a close-up of this liturgical scene on the Pola Ivory shows that the arms-raised men and women outside the ciborium were sculpted with open mouths, as if singing. The closest documented parallel to these two gender-divided choirs is the Therapeutae's divided choirs of men and women. Philo said that during their sacred all-night festival these two choirs sang like the Israelites, with "Moses the prophet leading the men, and Miriam the prophetess leading the women." They sang all night, and "when they saw the sun rising, *they raised their hands to heaven*."⁷¹ For the arms-raised women singing, see Fig. 7.4.

Fig. 7.4 Arms-raised women singing. © Alinari Archives-Alinari Archive, Florence

THE CIBORIUM IN OLD SAINT PETER'S BASILICA

The six spiral columns carved on the ivory panel closely resembled the six famous columns that Constantine reputedly originally donated to Old Saint Peter's. These six spiral columns still exist and were reused in the modern Saint Peter's galleries. In 1939, the well-known early Christian art historian Henri Leclercq pointed to the spiral columns and proposed that the ivory scene depicted a liturgy in Old Saint Peter's. Leclercq, like virtually all previous scholars, identified both a man and women at the altar. Instead of a marriage ceremony, Leclercq wondered if possibly they were venerating the True Cross—but then pointed out that no relic of the True Cross had been reported in Old Saint Peter's. He described the scene as whimsical and unexplainable.⁷²

The very next year, ignoring the outbreak of World War II, the Vatican began excavations beneath the high altar in the modern basilica of Saint Peter's. These excavations were purportedly to discover Peter's tomb, despite that this entailed breaking the Vatican's own rule that such holy places were inviolable. Due to pilgrim traffic in the Confessio (the large marble pit in front of the altar), excavators were not permitted to dig there, so they excavated behind the altar, through the underground Clementine chapel.⁷³ Beneath the modern altar, they discovered a stack of medieval altars. At the bottom of the stack, they found the approximately eight-foot by eight-foot wall of a second-century Roman *aedicule*, or shrine. Embedded in the shrine wall was a horizontal travertine slab with long stone legs holding up each outside corner⁷⁴—a stone *mensa*, or table, where since the second century followers of Jesus may have made offerings.⁷⁵

As seen on the Pola Ivory, a rounded wall niche behind the stone tabletop, still present in the ruins, once held a cross. On each side of the stone tabletop the sculptor carved what has been suggested as steps, steps that would have permitted even the shortest woman access to the four-foot high tabletop.⁷⁶ Below the stone tabletop, excavators found the remains of an underground grave structure, which they speculated had at one time contained Peter's bones.⁷⁷ The ivory sculptor had illustrated two doors beneath the stone tabletop, doors that had opened to provide access to the underground tomb structure, such as Gregory of Tours (538–594) had described.⁷⁸

Gregory of Tours, whose deacon, Agiulf, had lived in Rome for ten years, was one of two well-known ancient witnesses who had reported

that the old basilica's altar had been over Peter's tomb. Gregory reported, "The tomb is located beneath the altar"—*sub altare*.⁷⁹ Even earlier, at the end of the fourth century, Jerome, who himself was from Rome, said that the bishop of Rome offered sacrifices over Peter's bones and that Peter's tomb was worthy of being that altar.⁸⁰ When excavators found a grave structure under a stone table in Old Saint Peter's, they seemed to have confirmed a long Catholic tradition that Old Saint Peter's altar was above Peter's tomb, a tradition detailed in the 1907 *Catholic Encyclopedia*.⁸¹

According to Jocelyn Toynbee and John Ward Perkins, the excavators discovered that construction for Pope Gregory the Great's (r. 590–604) raised presbytery had resulted in "obliterating all trace of the Constantinian shrine except for the small central edifice."⁸² The second-century shrine was all that remained. Fortunately, the ivory sculptor had accurately reproduced the second-century shrine, so much so that Vatican excavator Engelbert Kirschbaum conceded the ivory was "so striking even in its details as to confirm conclusively its interpretation as the Constantinian apse in Saint Peter's." He added, "This ancient representation is therefore our authority for the interpretation and reconstruction of the missing portions."⁸³

The excavators' most important "missing portion" to be reconstructed from the ivory was the ciborium that had been above the second-century shrine and its mensa. Today, virtually every ciborium is square, but during the fourth century, some were not. For example, the famous monument over Christ's tomb inside the Anastasis rotunda in Jerusalem was multi-sided, perhaps hexagonal. Various types of souvenirs that pilgrims brought back from Jerusalem depicted the front of the monument with four staggered front columns, or three triangular roof panels, which is how the front columns and roof panels would look if it were a hexagon. This shape is seen on the ampoules shown in Figs. 2.6 and 2.7, as well as the top left frame painted on the reliquary box in Fig. 4.3, and also on six-sided glass vessels for holy oil that imitated the shape of the shrine.⁸⁴ Many artifacts, including the ampoule and ivory pyx seen in Figs. 2.6 and 2.8, identified spiral columns on the monument over Christ's tomb.⁸⁵ The altar areas of these two famous fourth-century churches are in fact so strong that the curators of the Metropolitan Museum of Art point out the similarity in their description of the Anastasis altar area sculpted on the ivory pyx: "The iconography of the altar area is familiar from the fifth-century Pola Ivory (Museo Archeologico, Venice), a representation of the sanctuary area of Old Saint Peter's in Rome."⁸⁶

Galit Noga-Banai has demonstrated how the visual motif of Jerusalem was employed during the Christianization of Rome.⁸⁷ The ciborium in Old Saint Peter's, which visually imitates the monument over Christ's tomb inside the Anastasis, may be an example of this. The eight-foot high wall of the second-century shrine may have been too tall to aesthetically accommodate a hexagon around it, because, as seen on the ivory, the ciborium instead was constructed as a half-hexagon. The two extra columns were placed on the sides of the apse. The second-century shrine is on the half-hexagon's longer back face, demarked by columns. Two more columns formed the shorter front face and framed the shrine behind. Worshippers in the nave saw a hexagon profile with spiral columns over Peter's tomb, beneath the half dome of the apse—a vision that evoked the famous multi-sided monument with spiral columns over Christ's tomb beneath the rotunda dome of the Anastasis.⁸⁸

THE ALTAR IN OLD SAINT PETER'S BASILICA

The Vatican excavators took nearly a decade to write their final report, yet still neglected to mention that prior scholars had repeatedly concluded that the fifth-century sculptor had portrayed a man and a woman at a church altar. When published, the Vatican report contained two new drawings, both of which illustrated the ciborium as a square. Like the ivory sculptor, the Vatican illustrators drew the second-century shrine with its stone table in the middle of the back face of the ciborium—but instead of drawing the ciborium as a half-hexagon, they incorrectly drew it as a 20' × 20' *square*.⁸⁹

What was the point of the square ciborium? A few years later, Vatican excavator Kirschbaum clearly explained the point in his 1957 book on the excavations. The overhead ribs of a square ciborium, he said, intersect in the middle. The big lamp, he said, would have hung from that midpoint, i.e., over vacant floor, ten feet in front of the shrine. The altar, Kirschbaum added, would have been under the lamp's light. He concluded, "We have to suppose a *portable* altar table."⁹⁰

For a side-by-side comparison of the two ciboria, see Fig. 7.5a, b. Figure 7.5a is taken from the ivory. Figure 7.5b is taken from one of the Vatican drawings.⁹¹

As seen in Fig. 7.5a, the ivory sculptor carved a half-hexagon ciborium that is beautifully proportionate to the apse and wonderfully lights it. This half-hexagon ciborium's rear face was wider than its front

Fig. 7.5 **a** Half-hexagon ciborium per ivory sculptor (*left*). **b** Hypothetical square ciborium per Vatican (*right*). © Author

face—so the sculptor carved the side beams angling *in* toward the front. Finally, the sculptor carved the overhead ribs intersecting in the middle of the back face, which was on the chord of the apse, and sculpted the big lamp hanging over the second-century shrine—exactly where one would expect the light to be focused when the shrine had been “the architectural focus of the whole building.”⁹²

In comparison, as seen in Fig. 7.5b, the Vatican illustrator’s hypothetical square ciborium would have jugged awkwardly out into the transept. Artistic perspective meant that the Vatican illustrator drew this square ciborium’s front face wider than its rear face—and so turned the side beams angling *out*. The illustrator drew the overhead ribs intersecting in the middle of the square, where the big hanging lamp would have lit up vacant floor—ten feet in front of the shrine.

Some prominent scholars contradicted the Vatican report and said that the stone table above Peter’s tomb had been the basilica’s altar, just as Jerome and Gregory of Tours had reported. André Grabar made that case.⁹³ So did the Vatican Apostolic Library scholar José Ruyschaert,

who in 1954 rebutted each tortured reason the excavation team gave for why the stone table could not be the altar, such as that it was too tall, or too small.⁹⁴

The Vatican proposal that the second-century shrine's stone mensa had not been the basilica's altar table, however, became reified after 1957, when Kirschbaum collaborated with Toynbee and Perkins to publish two books, both oriented to wider audiences. Two examples serve to demonstrate their extraordinary collaboration. First, in circular fashion, these scholars cited each other for the portable altar theory. Toynbee and Perkins credited Kirschbaum for the portable altar theory, and Kirschbaum credited them for it.⁹⁵ Second, they divided and conquered the two ancient witnesses. In this, their censorship of the two ancient witnesses is almost humorous once one realizes what was at stake. Kirschbaum purported to quote the relevant passage from Gregory of Tours—but started his quote one sentence *after* Gregory said the tomb was below the altar.⁹⁶ Kirschbaum then paraphrased Jerome, saying that the sacrifice was “at” (instead of “over”) Peter's tomb, and then, in an astonishing feat of defensiveness, in his footnote for his paraphrase, Kirschbaum referred the reader to a *second* footnote, where, at the very bottom of a long excursus, he finally quoted Jerome—in Latin.⁹⁷ Toynbee and Perkins did the opposite. They ignored Jerome. His name is not even in their book's Index. They quoted Gregory—in English until the key phrase which said the tomb was below the altar, at which point they inserted the Latin, *sub altare*.⁹⁸

While Toynbee moved onto other projects, Perkins appears to have remained deeply invested in debate about the location of the altar in Old Saint Peter's. For example, during the Anglican infighting prior to the 1968 Lambeth Conference over female ordination, Perkins, an Anglican, vigorously argued that Old Saint Peter's altar could have been anywhere—except where Jerome and Gregory of Tours had said it was. His final shot was in his opening address for the Seventh International Congress of Christian Archeology in 1965, which was published in the 1966 *Journal of Theological Studies*. Without giving any hint as to why the location of the basilica's altar mattered, he stated: “Wherever the altar may have been (presumably in the nave and very possibly of a portable nature) it was certainly not over the grave of the Apostle.”⁹⁹

Twenty-two years later, in 1988, the huge stone sarcophagus front that depicts a gender parallel liturgy at the altar was discovered in

Istanbul. This artifact debunks the underlying false premise of the portable altar theory, that is, that the altar could not have been where the ancient authorities said it was because that would mean both a man and a woman were at the altar. A man and a woman flank the altar on this carving, too. Unfortunately, the sarcophagus front remains relatively obscure in the Archeological Museum of Istanbul, where it did not even have a plaque when I saw it a few years ago.

Some scholars, without much fanfare, have continued to assert the obvious, just as Grabar and Ruysschaert did. Peter Brown in his *Cult of the Saints*, for example, quoted Jerome, then bluntly stated, “Tomb and altar were joined.”¹⁰⁰ Likewise, in 2000, John Crook quoted Jerome and then described “the tomb beneath the altar.”¹⁰¹ Most recently, experts in early Christian sacred space have identified the altar on the Pola Ivory as the altar, just as scholars from Gnirs onwards identified it as the altar until the Vatican intervened. Jelena Bogdanović, an expert on the earliest ciboria, or canopies, over altars, in her 2017 *The Framing of Sacred Space*, details the ivory. She mentions the portable altar theory, but then describes the two people under the ciborium as “leaning towards the altar.”¹⁰² Similarly, Noga-Banai describes the man and woman standing under the ciborium and then mentions the “altar between them.”¹⁰³ For scholars who study ancient iconography, the altar in Old Saint Peter’s looks like other altars. Clearly, it is high time to re-engage with the Vatican excavators’ “reconstruction” of Old Saint Peter’s sanctuary.

POSSIBLE IDENTIFICATION OF THE MALE AND FEMALE OFFICIANTS AT THE ALTAR TABLE

Quite arguably neither the Vatican’s excavations nor the subsequent defensive scholarship would have occurred had the ivory sculptor carved the liturgical scene in Old Saint Peter’s with two men at the altar instead of a man and a woman. Somewhat humorously, on the rare occasion when the sex of the woman goes unnoticed, the assumption is that both are priests.¹⁰⁴ Almost all art historians, however, identify the veiled woman on the right-hand side as a woman¹⁰⁵—sometimes without further comment,¹⁰⁶ often as the spouse of the man opposite, but sometimes as the empress in an imperial pair, usually a mother and son.¹⁰⁷ For detail of the scene under the ciborium, see Fig. 7.6.

Fig. 7.6 Man (*left*) and woman (*right*) flank the altar. Old Saint Peter's Basilica. © Alinari Archives-Alinari Archive, Florence

Who was this woman? Margherita Guarducci in her 1978 book on the box proposed that this couple was Emperor Constantine and his mother, the Empress Helena. According to the book of popes, the *Liber Pontificalis*, Constantine and Helena donated a massive gold cross engraved with their names for the basilica's altar—perhaps the very cross shown in the niche just above the altar. Guarducci suggested that they could have been depicted at the mass that consecrated the basilica, most

likely in 326, the last time they were in Rome together.¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, more recent research demonstrates that the first section of the *Liber Pontificalis*, which includes the erection of Old Saint Peter's, was probably compiled around 535¹⁰⁹—and it is remarkably unreliable regarding Old Saint Peter's construction. For example, its claim that Constantine completed the basilica may be a false later attribution intended to retroactively burnish Constantine's reputation.¹¹⁰

Daide Longhi, in his 2006 book about the ivory box, alternatively proposed that the woman was the western Augusta Galla Placidia (392–450) and that the man on the opposite side of the altar was her son, Valentinian III, the Augustus.¹¹¹ These Augusti lived during the period that the box was carved. Perhaps, like her niece Pulcheria, Galla Placidia modeled herself after Mary, because Bishop Ambrose himself instructed her as a child that empress mothers should follow Mary's example.¹¹² Supporting Longhi's identification of this woman as Galla Placidia, both Longhi and Guarducci identified Galla Placidia and Valentinian in one of the scenes on the other sides of the ivory box.¹¹³ Another connection to Galla Placidia is that she built several churches in Ravenna, which is the box's most probable original destination.¹¹⁴ A century later, Bishop Maximianus of Ravenna (499–556), who had been a deacon in Pola, is the best candidate to have re-donated the ivory reliquary box to the church near Pola, where it was then buried beneath the altar. Most importantly, both Augusti are known to have attended the annual all-night masses commemorating Peter in Old Saint Peter's.¹¹⁵ And, after one of those rituals, Galla Placidia herself wrote in a letter that she and Valentinian had been “at the martyr's very altar.”¹¹⁶

Various art historians have noticed that this woman was sculpted lifting some kind of container with both hands.¹¹⁷ This container is sometimes hypothesized a pyxide holding a *brandea* or cloth strip, such as Gregory the Great described a hundred and fifty years later.¹¹⁸ Bogdanović suggested that the container lifted was a *patera*, a bowl of liquid.¹¹⁹ Indeed, if the sculptor had carved this woman as a man, then almost certainly from the beginning other scholars also would have identified her as the priest, the stone table as the altar in Old Saint Peter's, and the bowl she lifted with both hands the bowl of Eucharistic wine—a bowl like the jeweled bowl of the chalice that a century later the Augusta Theodora is seen lifting with both hands inside the Holy of Holies of San Vitale. The sculptor of this beautiful ivory box, therefore, potentially carved an imperial mother and son reprising the scene of Mary and her son at the Last Supper.

THEODORA AND JUSTINIAN IN SAN VITALE: MODELING MARY AND JESUS AT THE LAST SUPPER

A century later, around the year 547, huge mosaic portraits of the Augusti Justinian and Theodora were installed flanking the altar inside the Holy of Holies of the orthodox Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, at that time the Western Empire's capital.¹²⁰ These mosaics suggest that Pulcheria's custom of participating at the communion in the Holy of Holies continued for at least a hundred years in Constantinople. The designer of these mosaics portrayed the Augusti, Theodora and Justinian, holding the chalice and paten on either side of the altar, apparently modeling the gender-parallel liturgy in the Hagia Sophia that they built, which still exists today. See the San Vitale apse in Fig. 7.7.

Almost all the art of this era has been lost in the East due to successive iconoclasm there, but here in the Western capital, on the left side of the altar, Justinian (483–564) was shown holding a large gold paten for the bread. He is flanked (if tops of heads are counted) by twelve men, including Bishop Maximianus (see Fig. 7.8). On the right side of the altar, Theodora (500–548) was shown lifting the large jeweled bowl of a Eucharistic chalice with both hands.¹²¹ She is flanked by seven women, and also, two eunuchs, not quite men. They stand next to a curtained doorway, which may have meant that Theodora waited in the church vestibule to enter the altar area after Justinian, since she is also depicted inside the Holy of Holies with him.¹²² See Theodora and her entourage in Fig. 7.9.

In addition to the chalice and paten, another motif of liturgical gender parallelism between these two mosaics is the way Justinian and Theodora are portrayed as the leaders of men and women clergy on each side. Most art historians note that to Justinian's left is Bishop Maximianus, who holds a large gold cross and whose name is written above his head. He has the episcopal pallium over his shoulder, one of the oldest representations in art of a man wearing the pallium, made in the same decade as the mosaics of Mary and Elizabeth wearing the episcopal pallium in the altar apse of the Euphrasiana Basilica (Figs. 4.9a, b and 4.10). Next to Maximianus is a second member of the male clergy, who holds a jeweled book, and finally, a deacon who carries a censer of incense.

Far less noticed is that to Theodora's left, three women have Eucharistic cloths, two with the white fringed strip of cloth hanging from the girdles at their waist, and a third carrying it in her hand.¹²³ Alexei Lidov cautions against a secular interpretation of this cloth just

Fig. 7.7 Apse mosaics flank the altar. Justinian and his entourage (*left*). Theodora and her entourage (*right*). San Vitale Basilica, Ravenna, ca. 547. © RCS/Alinari Archives Management, Florence

because women have it here: “Let me remind those who are convinced of the lay provenance of the handkerchief that Theodora with her retinue, as well as Justinian, are presented in San Vitale in a liturgical procession in the sanctuary, both holding liturgical vessels.”¹²⁴ It appears, thus, that three male clergy were depicted to Justinian’s left and three female clergy to Theodora’s left.

Worthy of mention here is that although Procopius in his *Secret History* repeatedly identified Theodora as a prostitute, this may have been

Fig. 7.8 Justinian holds paten for the bread. San Vitale Basilica, Ravenna, ca. 547. Wilpert, *Römischen Mosaiken*, pl. 109

Fig. 7.9 Theodora holds chalice. Wilpert, *Römischen Mosaiken*, pl. 110

another example of sexual slander against a woman religious authority. Susan Ashbrook Harvey has identified a competing Syriac tradition about Theodora, a tradition which said Theodora was the righteous daughter of a Syriac priest.¹²⁵ A priestly lineage would be consistent with Theodora's pairing with Justinian at the ritual meal, as seen in these mosaics.

Byzantine historian Mischa Meier has detailed Justinian's extraordinary devotion to Mary, and also how Justinian interchanged imperial images with the divine image to create inescapable two-way visual analogies.¹²⁶ Justinian was not always portrayed with a halo, but here, both he and Theodora have large gold halos, the aura of divinity.¹²⁷ Thus, Justinian flanked by twelve men could have been seen as an analogy to Jesus with the Twelve. Theodora accompanied by seven women might have reminded viewers of Mary and the seven Hebrew virgins who accompanied her to the Temple, according to the popular *Protevangelium*.¹²⁸ Another clue that Theodora was to be viewed as interchangeable with Mary may be provided by an unusual scene of Epiphany on the hem of Theodora's *chlamys*—here three magi hold up their large gold platters toward Theodora with her halo.

The clergy and laity who approached the altar in San Vitale would have seen Theodora and Justinian flanking the altar with their clergy. Theodora offered the chalice and Justinian the paten in a liturgical ritual that paralleled that of the Eucharist taking place below. Together, the empress and emperor modeled a scene analogous to Mary and Jesus at the last supper sacrifice in the *Life of the Virgin*.

THIRD-CENTURY EVIDENCE OF GENDER PARITY AT THE OFFERING TABLE

Irenaeus's second-century complaint about a man and woman performing a Eucharistic ritual together in Gaul is affirmed by the above art that subsequently depicted similar gender parallelism at the altars of fifth- and sixth-century churches. Even earlier evidence of this gender parallel liturgy is suggested by third-century archeological artifacts, both from Palestine and from the Christian catacombs of Rome.

Third-century floor mosaics that flanked the offering table in the so-called Megiddo Church in Palestine provide very early evidence that men and women stood on opposite sides of the offering table. This small church building, in a Roman military compound, is dated ca. 230 and was abandoned ca. 305. Two stones in the floor are all that remain of

the offering table, but on one side of these stones a floor mosaic commemorates two men, and on the other side, two mosaics commemorate five women, including Akeptous, who donated the table. This building was next to the bakery, which Joan E. Taylor suggests may indicate that meals of shared bread were a key function of the space.¹²⁹ The placement of these gendered mosaics on opposite sides of the offering table may identify where a man and a woman customarily stood during the offering. Given the depictions of gender parallelism at the altar in fifth- and sixth-century churches, these floor mosaics appear to provide concrete evidence of the same ritual practice.

Pre-Constantinian frescos of meal scenes in the Christian catacombs of Rome suggest a similar pairing, and also, female leadership in some cases. Numerous pre-Constantinian catacomb meal scenes with people around a tripod mensa laden with fish and bread, like this one, resemble later iconography of the Last Supper, such as seen in the sixth-century Last Supper mosaic in Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna.¹³⁰ Catacomb meal scenes, however, often include women at the table.¹³¹ These catacomb meal scenes may have represented funeral meals, and if so, may have been Eucharistic, because the Latin *Didascalia apostolorum* instructed that the Eucharist be performed in cemeteries.¹³² Most unexpected is that artists typically depicted women raising the cup as the leaders of this meal. According to Janet Tulloch, “female figures dominate the cup action.”¹³³ This female leadership is the opposite of what artists depicted in funeral scenes in Roman religion, which almost invariably portrayed men, not women, lifting the cup.¹³⁴ Tulloch noticed that several of these meal scenes portrayed pairs, a man and a woman, each holding a cup—but the woman standing and raising the cup as the leader.¹³⁵

A slightly different scene of a gender parallel leadership at an offering table is found in a third-century fresco in the so-called Cubiculum of the Sacraments in the Callistus Catacomb in the city of Rome.¹³⁶ No cup is present, but the veiled woman stands with raised arms. She and a young man flank a tripod table laden with fish and bread.¹³⁷ The young man gestures with his right hand toward the fish and bread on the table; the woman stands slightly forward of the man¹³⁸ (see Fig. 7.10 for this fresco).

As suggested by the fact that its cubiculum was called the Cubiculum of the Sacraments, the fresco with the arms-raised woman and young man has often been described as Eucharistic, although today there is no agreement.¹³⁹ On the one hand, Paul Corbey Finney says, “No one (myself included) has the foggiest idea.”¹⁴⁰ On the other hand, Karen Jo

Fig. 7.10 Gender parity at the offering table. Third-century fresco, Callistus Catacomb, Rome. Wilpert, *Malereien*, pl. 41.1

Torjesen calls the offering table a “Eucharistic altar.”¹⁴¹ To my knowledge, no one has suggested that the male and female pair in this fresco could represent Jesus and his mother presiding at the Last Supper, but a fresco depicting a meal scene with seven diners is adjacent.¹⁴² In addition, an arms-raised woman and a young man is how early Christian artists paired Mary and her son on Eucharistic utensils.

The very oldest surviving Christian inscription that can be dated with any certainty tends to support the potential identification of the arms-raised woman as Mary. The fish and bread on the tripod table are common in catacomb meal scenes, and the fish itself was associated with a

sacred meal in Judaism, as well as in some Jesus communities.¹⁴³ An epitaph written around the year 180 by Bishop Abercius of Phrygia, who called himself “a disciple of a holy shepherd,” explains the symbolic importance of this fish as a communion, served along with bread and Christ wine.¹⁴⁴ This inscription, the very oldest, also preserves a clue about the identity of the arms-raised woman at the tripod table. Abercius had traveled widely, and he wrote that from the city of Rome to Ancient Syria, he was served “fish from a fountain, utterly huge and pure, which a holy virgin grasped and she freely distributed this to friends to eat at all times, having good wine/Christ-wine, giving it mixed, with bread.”¹⁴⁵ The “holy virgin” that Abercius describes distributing the fish, bread, and wine seems likely to have represented the arguably best known of holy virgins, Jesus’s mother. With Abercius’s inscription, the tripod table laden with fish and bread now suggests a Eucharistic altar table, as Torjesen identifies it. In addition, it is fair to consider whether the artist intended the arms-raised woman to represent the holy virgin named Mary. In any case, the woman is on the right side of the offering table and the young man is on the left, the same as the woman and man at the altar that we see aboveground two centuries later inside Old Saint Peters Basilica.

Philo’s report of the Therapeutae’s gender parallel liturgy in Judea and the floor mosaics that flanked the offering table in the Megiddo army church in Palestine suggest that the tradition of male and female officiants at the offering table may have originated around Jerusalem. Whether the gender-parallel meal tradition among the Jesus followers originated in a Jewish meal ritual such as the one that Philo described, or not, both advocates and opponents described a gender-parallel clergy in some Jesus communities. We have many pieces of evidence, both text and art, which document the spread of this liturgy around the Mediterranean, from Palestine to Gaul, from East to West, from the backwaters of the empire to the most important orthodox basilicas in its imperial capitals of Rome, Constantinople, and Ravenna.

The *Life of the Virgin*’s scribe said that the narrative was compiled from extracanonical writings that were “true and without error.”¹⁴⁶ Given all the evidence, a now lost gospel, perhaps even the Hebrew gospel, may have been the source of its Last Supper scene. Although no copies of this lost gospel have survived, its tradition of gender parity in the liturgy must have been powerful, because it is witnessed in both literary and archeological remains, including in the two oldest iconographic artifacts to depict real people at the altar of a real church. I suggest

that for early Jesus followers, catacomb meal scenes with both men and women at the table may have symbolized the Last Supper in this narrative tradition.

The gender theology behind Mary and Jesus co-officiating at the last supper is likely related to ancient concepts of pairs such as *koinonos* (Jewish and Christian), *syzygoi*, *conhospitae*, spiritual brothers and sisters, and double monasteries. Almost certainly this gender theology was based on scripture such as Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28—both male and female in the divine image. What is certain is that for centuries, gender parallelism persisted in the Christian liturgy, the most symbolic place where the divine gender order is modeled.

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