

THE SEMIOTICS OF RITES: THE INTELLECTUAL DEBATE ON SACRAMENTS AT THE NASCENT UNIVERSITY OF PARIS, ITS PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES AND CONTEXTS (C. 1160-1215)

Abstract for the general public

In one of his letters, written in 1210, the pope Innocent III left the following remark:

News of certain things recently have reached our ears, about which we are not a little amazed, that abbesses, namely those constituted in the diocese of Burgos and Palencia, bless their own nuns, and hear the confessions of sins of these same, and reading the Gospel presume to preach publicly. Since then this is equally incongruous and absurd (nor supported by us to any degree), we order through the apostolic writing at your discernment so that, lest this be done by others, you take care by the apostolic authority firmly to prevent [these actions] because even though the most blessed virgin Mary was more worthy and more excellent than all of the apostles, yet not to her, but to them the Lord handed over the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

(revised translation after G. Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West*, 2008, pp. 102-103)

There is undoubtedly a lot that this brief remark leaves out: we cannot be certain what were exactly the abbesses' actions, and even if they met the pope's account, how did the abbesses themselves perceive their role? We also know little about the course of the entire controversy (and, arguably, we are not even certain that it should be considered as one). However, what we do know, is that this testimony of a particular conflict – perceived as such by at least one actor – attests to a more common tension. On the one hand, there is a doctrine relatively recently formulated, although perceived as perennial: in this case, the teaching concerning the sacramental ordination, as for which the masters of the twelfth century, both theologians and canonists, reached the conclusion that it may not be - and never was - bestowed upon women. On the other, an older, local custom, here represented by the abbesses supposed (and, for what we know, likely actual) acting as deaconesses or presbyterae for their communities. What we face here, is a by-product of an ecclesiastical reform that took place in the second half of the twelfth century and attempted to reorganize and unify the multitude of various Christian devotional practices.

This project's aim is to provide an account of a crucial part of this reform: the development of the sacramental doctrine in the nascent University of Paris, studied here in the period c. 1160-1215. While it is clear that it is at that time and in that place, that the intellectual groundwork was laid for later doctrinal determinations of the IV Lateran Council (1215), many more complex questions about the dynamics of this process remain unanswered. This project will contribute to the study of early scholastic sacramental doctrine by focusing on its institutional and devotional context: the first one determined most importantly by the development of Parisian University, and the second marked by novel forms of visual devotional practices centred around the eucharist. Furthermore, this study will entail a critical edition of selected material from Robert Courson's *Summa de penitentia*, which is the most important still unedited testimony relevant in the context of sacramental theology before the IV Lateran Council. Many other speculative writings that will be analysed, although available in modern editions, remain significantly understudied.