

Doctoresses

October 13, 2007

A few days ago I met in Rome a gracious Roman lady who asked me why in a sermon several years ago I had been opposed to the papal declaration of St. Catherine of Sienna as a Doctor of the Church. The problem, I replied, lies in the confusion of roles.

Recent Popes have declared three women Saints to be Doctors of the Church: Catherine of Sienna, Theresa of Avila and Therese of Lisieux. Now no Catholic in his right mind would call in question either the orthodoxy or the great usefulness of all of their writings. We have only to thank God for their inspired and intuitive wisdom. Nevertheless for the Pope to declare them Doctors, i.e. teachers, is to encourage Catholic women to set up in public as teachers. St. Thomas Aquinas (IIa IIae, 177, art 2) has three reasons against this.

Firstly he quotes St. Paul (II Tim II, 12): "I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man: but to be in silence." St. Thomas distinguishes here public from private teaching: in the home a mother must teach her children, in a quasi-domestic setting a woman may well teach, especially girls and little boys.

Secondly, any woman set up in public view is liable to arouse unclean desire in men.

Thirdly, "women in general are not so perfect in wisdom as to be entrusted with public teaching."

What is in question here is the whole design of God for man and woman as complementary head and heart of the family. Teaching of a public kind is a function primarily of the reason, or head, just as teaching in the home is as much a function of the heart. True, modern times are destroying home and family, leaving woman frustrated, with little alternative

but to go out in public, where she does not belong and where she often – bless her! – does not want to be. But by giving to women, even Saints, the title of “Doctor,” the modern Popes are giving way to such modern times, instead of resisting them.

St. Thomas Aquinas’ three reasons may look old-fashioned, but the question is whether our new-fashioned world can survive, with women in authority, making themselves constantly as attractive as possible, and still, generally, “not perfect in wisdom.” O Lord, grant us some men!

Kyrie eleison.