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WOMEN AND ORDINATION

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In this, her first article for Faith & Reason, Dr. Joyce Little examines several of the major arguments advanced by the proponents of women's ordination and clearly reveals the deeper, more fundamental problems which their theological positions assume. The essay was originally presented as a talk at the Women for Faith & Family convention held in St. Louis, Missouri in October of 1985.



WHEN BETTY FRIEDAN, AUTHOR OF *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE*, WAS ASKED SOME years ago what she thought the most important effect of feminism would be, she responded, "I can't tell you now. You wouldn't believe it anyhow ... it is theological."¹ The existence of such organizations as Women for Faith and Family is just one among many indications of the accuracy of her assessment.

When feminists turned their attention to the Catholic Church, the most obvious evidence of sexual inequality seemed clearly to be the Church's refusal to admit women to the ordained priesthood and, by extension, to the institutional hierarchy of the Church. Not only a significant number of nuns, but also a good many priests and male theologians, agreed with them. For a great many Catholics, the arguments for women's ordination seemed, virtually overnight, to become obvious and inescapable.

In this essay, I will first, examine what seem to me to be the three major arguments in support of women's ordination and the reasons why these arguments fail to reflect not only Catholic teachings on the priesthood but also the Catholic understanding of human sexuality; second, the radically opposed visions of reality which underlie Catholicism, on the one hand, and feminism, on the other; and finally, a brief preliminary indication of the nature and importance of the role of women in the Church.

The first major argument feminists raise in defense of women's ordination is based primarily on feminist experience itself. Feminists argue that the lack of female priests on the altar and female bishops in the hierarchy gives women a sense of inferiority, of second class citizenship within the Church and further, that many Catholic women experience a call to ordination which is frustrated by the Church's refusal to recognize it. They argue, in effect, that the Church, by refusing to ordain women, finds herself in opposition to the Holy Spirit, who is calling women to the priesthood.

Several assumptions underlie this argument, two of which deserve our special attention. The first of these is the notion that the Holy Spirit calls whom He (or, as many feminists would say, "She") will, and the Church has no right to impede the movements of the Spirit. This view that the Spirit operates not within the Church, but in opposition to her, is entirely at loggerheads with the Catholic faith which holds that the Holy Spirit is the gift of Christ to the Catholic Church, which Christ established and within which he remains really, sacramentally present in the Eucharist. Just as God became visibly present and united to us in the visible, material humanity of Christ, so he remains visibly present and united to us in the visible, material structures and sacraments of the Church. To separate the activities

of the Holy Spirit from any visible, material anchor in history is to deny the enduring character of the Incarnation in history. Furthermore, to place the Church in opposition to the workings of the Holy Spirit raises doubts as to whether Christ can be actually present within such a Church, doubts which many feminist theologians have not hesitated to entertain. The issue of women's ordination, at this point, involves its supporters in suppositions about how God must be seen to act which undermine the central teachings of the Catholic faith with regard to Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Church.

The second assumption which underlies the feminist argument from experience is the view that the contemporary experience of feminist women is more fundamental to understanding reality than is the worship and tradition of the Church. If feminists recognize anything to be infallible, it is their own experience, not the experience of the Church. If they recognize anything to be revelatory, it is feminism itself, not the revelation given in Christ. As Rosemary Radford Ruether, a prominent feminist theologian who continues to call herself a Catholic, has said,

The uniqueness of feminist theology lies not in its use of the criterion of experience but rather in its use of women's experience, which has been almost entirely shut out of theological reflection in the past. The use of women's experience in feminist theology, therefore, explodes as a critical force, exposing classical theology, including its codified traditions, as based on male experience rather than on universal human experience.²

The "classical theology" and "codified traditions" which Ruether supposes to be exposed by feminist theology include such things as papal and conciliar teachings, the universal and traditional practices of the Church and, indeed, the Bible itself.³

At this point, it is not only useful but essential to recall a few things the Church has to say about vocations to the ordained priesthood. First, no one has a right to be a priest. The initiative does not lie with us, but with Christ, who calls whom he will to ordination. Second, the Church never simply accepts at face value the claims

anyone might make to having experienced such a call. Human experience is not infallible, and many a man in the two thousand year history of the Church has misinterpreted God's will for him with regard to ordination.

We are therefore not obliged to accept as infallible the claims anyone, man or woman, makes to be called to ordination. Third, the Church understands her own tradition (which is to say her own experience) to be a more fundamental criterion than the experience of any group within or without the Church when it comes to discerning the will of God and the movements of the Holy Spirit. Those who claim that the Church refuses to ordain women because Christ himself refused to do so are certainly not entirely wrong, but they

are also not entirely right. For the Church appeals not only to the actions of Christ, but also to her own actions, her own experience, her own tradition, as guided by the Eucharistic Christ and the indwelling Spirit.

The importance which Catholicism gives to tradition has enormous bearing on the second major argument feminists give for women's ordination, since the second argument, unlike the first, is based on Scripture. The argument at first glance seems unexceptional and irrefutable. Citing Genesis, feminists point out that all of us, male and female, are made in the image of God. We are equal before God. Christianity, they then go on to point out, not only accepts this but reiterates it in a striking fashion in Galatians 3:28, where St. Paul tells us that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." From this Scripturally-based insistence upon the equality of all human beings, feminists conclude to a non-differentiation between male and female. Hence, they maintain that, since the fact that Christ chose only Jewish apostles did not stop the Church from ordaining Gentile priests, then the fact that Christ chose only male apostles should not stop the Church from ordaining female priests.

The difficulty with this argument does not lie, of course, in the view that men and women are equal. With this the Church agrees. The difficulty lies in associating sexual equality with sexual identity. With this the Church does not agree. Male and female not only can but should



be differentiated from one another. The question at issue here is a matter not only of faith but of common sense as well. Equality and identity do not, in fact, go hand in hand. A moment's reflection will confirm this. Words like "inferior" and "superior" can only be applied to things which are in some fashion identical. One football player, for example, can be called superior to another football player, because they are both football players. One mystery writer can be recognized as better than another mystery writer, because both are mystery writers. But we do not ordinarily say that this football player is better than that mystery writer. To do so would be, as the popular expression puts it, like comparing apples and oranges. We can only compare and recognize inequalities in those things which are fundamentally identical. Sexual identity will not promote male/female equality, it will only promote male/female competition.

On theological grounds, such -a notion of identity is incompatible with both Scripture and tradition, and we need look only at Scripture to see this. On the surface, the text from Galatians may seem to suggest that the difference between male and female has, like the distinctions between Jew and Gentile and slave and free, been removed by Christ. However, when we examine the rest of Scripture, we discover an important difference governing the relationship between male and female, on the one hand, and Jew and

Gentile or slave and free, on the other. In Genesis, we are told that God created the human race male and female. He did not, however, create us Jew and Gentile, slave and free. These are differences which, in the Old Testament, arise after and as a consequence of original sin. As one theologian notes,

... while being male and female is an ontological reality in the order of creation, nationality and slavery are not. They are rather human conditions which are the result of sin. They have no ontological, theological, sacramental or eschatological substance. They have no place in the sacramental structure and life of the Church. God did not create humans to be Jews or Greeks, neither did he make them to be slaves or freemen. He did make them male and female, however, and although the spiritual and moral divisions between the sexes are overcome in Christ, the ontological differences are not.⁴

Furthermore, when we examine the Galatians text within the larger context of what St. Paul is explicitly addressing, we discover that the point he is making has reference to baptism, not to ordination. For, in the immediately preceding verse (v. 27), St. Paul says, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Although the text does not specifically mention priesthood at all, we are well within our rights to see it as relevant to the royal priesthood of all believing Christians, the priesthood to which we gain access by baptism and which we share alike, male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free. But we have no warrant at all for applying this text to the ordained priesthood.



Scripture also has something very important to tell us about the verdict of tradition on this matter. The New Testament is, we must remember, not only a record of the revelation given by Christ in his historic ministry; it is also a record of the revelation as given in the work of the apostles and in the life of the Apostolic Church following the ascension of Christ into heaven. For the revelation does not close with Christ's death, resurrection and ascension, but rather extends to the close of the Apostolic age. What the Church did in that first generation of Christian faith and worship has entered into the Word of God and become normative for all subsequent generations. As a theologian of the Greek Orthodox Church has pointed out,

The Gospel of Christ cannot be written anew because "the fullness of time" came then and not at any other time. There is a sense in which all Christians must become Christ's contemporaries. Therefore, the very "historical conditioning" which characterizes the Gospel of Christ is, in a sense, normative for us. The twentieth century is not an absolute norm; the apostolic age is.⁵

The point made by that theologian is important for our purposes here today, because while it is true, as feminists say, that Christ appointed only Jewish and only male apostles, when we examine the activities of the early Church as recorded in the New Testament, we discover that the Church herself decided, in that first generation, that Christians are not bound to circumcision and other requirements of the Jewish law. This decision, record-

ed in the 15th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, was made by the Apostles gathered together in Jerusalem and acting under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Their meeting, dubbed by Scripture scholars as the “Apostolic Council”, opened the doors to ordaining Gentiles. The Apostolic Church, however, made no corresponding decision with regard to women. Hence, neither Scripture itself nor the earliest traditions of the Church, as recorded in Scripture, provide any warrant for women’s ordination. Add to this the following nineteen centuries of Church tradition denying women access to ordination, and we are confronted with an extraordinarily long and consistent testimony against such a practice.

Feminists maintain at this point that what we really have here is a male-dominated hierarchy trying desperately to maintain its patriarchal authority. But the basic issue at hand runs much deeper than that. For what is called into question when we doubt the validity of Church tradition is not just an arbitrary male authority run amuck for some 2000 years. What is called into question is the nature of the Church and indeed the trustworthiness of revelation itself. For how are we to trust the Church as “the pillar and ground of the truth”, as I Timothy calls her, if she is capable of committing and adhering to such an error for 20 centuries? How are we to trust that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth, as John’s Gospel tells us, if we have been so badly led for so long that we now require the guidance of the feminist movement to lead us to the truth? How are we to take seriously Christ’s words in Matthew that He shall be with us always, if evidence for his presence is so lacking in the life and worship of the Church? Indeed, in the final analysis, how are we to take seriously the Bible in which these words are recorded, when the words seem to have so little bearing on reality? It should come as no surprise that leading feminist theologians who continue to call themselves Catholic, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, no longer take any of these things seriously. What we face here is not a crisis of authority. It is a crisis of faith.

In the final analysis, the feminist notion that women ought to be ordained because they, as much as men, image God, fails precisely because it does not address the key issue of Church teaching regarding the ordained priesthood. The key issue relates to Christ, not to God. The priest acts in the person of Christ (in persona Christi), not in the person of God. Hence, the question at issue is not whether women and men equally image

God, but whether women and men equally image Christ. And to that question, the Church has consistently answered no. Because Christ stands to the Church as bridegroom to bride, and because the priest acts in the person of Christ, whose role is specifically male vis-a-vis the Church, women are not able to stand in Christ’s place or to act in His person. Indeed, the marriage of Christ with his Church lies at the foundation not only of the Church’s teachings on the ordained priesthood, but also of her insistence upon the differentiated and complementary character of male and female sexuality, a fact which brings us to the third major feminist argument regarding women’s ordination.

This third argument consists of an open criticism of and even attack upon Scripture, tradition and Church teachings. The focus of the attack is the now often-quoted text from chapter 5 of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, where we are given the following instruction:

Be subject to one another, out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Eph 5:21-33)

Both Ruether and Fiorenza see the Bible in general to be distorted by male chauvinism, and this passage in particular to offer clear evidence of patriarchal domination over women. Ruether comments on it as follows:

In the New Testament, the [Old Testament] hierarchical pattern of divine male over human female as an analogy for patriarchal marriage is not only continued but exaggerated. This is particularly evident in the post-Pauline letter to the Ephesians (chapter 5). Here the headship of Christ over the Church is the model for the proper relationship of paternalistic husband and submissive wife in Christian marriage. By making the husband analogous to Christ in relation to his wife, the author even suggests that a wife should consider her husband representative of Christ or God! Her husband is her Lord, as Christ is Lord of the Church. She is his body, as the Church is the body of Christ.⁶

Fiorenza is no kinder.

The relationship between Christ and the church, expressed in the metaphors of head and body as well as of bridegroom and bride, becomes the paradigm for Christian marriage and vice versa. This theological paradigm reinforces the cultural-patriarchal pattern of subordination, insofar as the relationship between Christ and church clearly is not a relationship between equals, since the church-bride is totally dependent and subject to her head or bridegroom. Therefore, the general injunction for all members of the Christian community, “Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ,” is clearly spelled out for the Christian wife as requiring submission and inequality.⁷

Both of these theologians see this passage as paradigmatic for understanding how tradition has operated within Catholicism. According to them, a patriarchal reading of marriage as the domination of male over female was deliberately introduced into Scripture by men and used by them ever since to justify their own chauvinistic assumptions about male superiority, skewing in the process a proper understanding of both the Christ-Church and the male-female relationships, not to mention marriage and the priesthood as well. History, as the feminists never tire of telling us, is the record of the victors, and where the history of the Church is concerned, men have, according to them, enjoyed a long and virtually unbroken string of triumphs.⁸ It is difficult to imagine a more encompassing or more destructive critique of Catholicism than we have here.

Before considering how we might better under-

stand the passage from Ephesians, especially in terms of the role women are called to play in the Church, I would like to pause here a moment to consider the quite different views of reality which distinguish feminism from Catholicism. Women on both sides of the ordination debate openly acknowledge the incompatibility of feminism and traditional Christian faith. Rosemary Radford Ruether noted, in the July 5, 1985, issue of the *National Catholic Reporter*, with reference to the two year dialogue between the Women’s Ordination Conference and the Catholics Bishops’ Committee on Women, that “What soon became obvious to us [the Womens’ Ordination Conference] was the vast gap between our consciousness and theirs [the bishops] not only on matters such as theology and morality, but even on matters of fact. We simply had an entirely different picture of the reality of the Church and its history.”⁹

Ruether goes on to say that the women in the Women’s Ordination Conference took the view that Jesus was a Messiah figure within Judaism, that the movement carried on by his disciples after his death (no mention is made of his resurrection and ascension, and indeed Ruether has elsewhere denied that we have any firm reason for believing in personal life after death¹⁰) was not initially an institution or Church at all, and therefore any attempt to say that Jesus founded the institutional Church with its hierarchical structures is “like saying that Sitting Bull founded the Bureau of Indian Affairs.”¹¹ She concludes that feminists and bishops are “not only talking differently about the same things, but in some very basic ways we are really talking about different things when we use words such as ‘Christ’ and the ‘church’.”¹²

Deborah Belonick, a Greek Orthodox theologian opposed to feminist theology, sees the same radical dichotomy between feminism and that Christian faith which is rooted in the Bible and the councils of the Church. According to her,

This feminist theology is in fact so opposed to the Bible and tradition of the Christian Church that one may say that two different worldviews, two visions of God and humanity, are present. And since there is such a wide divergence between the two theological systems, only one can claim to be truly in the Spirit of Jesus Christ; the two viewpoints are too distinct for both to be called “Christian.” One is forced to speak either in the category of “feminist-liberationist priesthood” or of “male-Christian priesthood,” when given the

fact that the female priesthood is based on a theology in opposition to traditional doctrines of the Church and the creative and salvific acts of God.¹³

Feminism proceeds on the assumption that anything which contradicts modern female experience as interpreted by feminists must be wrong. This means that the revelation of Christ as mediated to us by the Church through her tradition, through conciliar and papal teachings, through the Bible, must submit itself to feminist scrutiny; that the feminists may separate the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats. To accept such a view is, of course, to accept the dismantling of the Catholic Church.

Being Catholic does not mean we have to deny the presence of male chauvinism in the Church, either in the past or in the present. Catholicism teaches that all of us are fallen, men and women alike, and male chauvinism is a consequence of male fallenness. The Catholic Church, however, also teaches that, in Christ, the fullness of the divine revelation is given. That revelation is manifested to us, first, through the visible, material humanity of Christ, and, second, through the visible, material structures and sacraments of the Church. The Eucharistic Christ and the Indwelling Spirit guarantee that human sinfulness, male and female alike, shall not undermine the way, the truth and the life, who is Christ, and the Church, which is his Spouse. This is our faith as Catholics. If we do not believe this, we cannot properly speak of ourselves as Catholic.

Although feminists began by calling into question the Church's male priesthood, they have ended by calling into question the Church herself, and, by extension, the whole of the Christian revelation as mediated to us through the Church. Women's ordination has become the tip of an iceberg which would sink the Church more rapidly than that which sunk the Titanic. To quote Deborah Belonick once again, "... admitting women to the priesthood should not be the main issue of debate... The question is much deeper than that. The point is that the theological arguments supporting the ordination of women ultimately are opposed to the Christian faith and its teachings about salvation."¹⁴

If it be correct to say that the theological arguments supporting women's ordination wreak havoc with our faith, and I believe that they do, then what do theo-

logical arguments opposing women's ordination have to offer us by way of a positive understanding of the role of women in the Church which is consistent with our faith? If the role of women cannot be directly identified with the priestly activity of Christ as carried on by those who are explicitly ordained to do so, then how are we to understand our role? Any attempt to answer this question is fraught with difficulties, if only because so little has been done in this area. We must keep in mind that, until recently, theology was done almost exclusively by men, and ordained men at that, many of whom were blatantly chauvinistic and most of whom had little or no interest in this matter. Even today, very few theologians are much interested in pursuing an explicitly theological and even Christocentric account of the covenantal relationship of men and women.¹⁵ Yet it is precisely this covenantal relationship which must be understood if we are to counter the feminist view of women with an explicitly Catholic one.

In the Ephesians text quoted earlier, we have one of the most profound statements in the New Testament regarding the male/female relationship. St. Paul tells us there that human marriage images the Christ/Church relationship. This is an enormously important point, because most of us, I suspect, tend to think just the opposite. We tend to suppose that human marriage is the primary reality, and that St. Paul borrows imagery from it to describe in a metaphorical fashion the close relationship between Christ and His Church. Such, however, is not the case. St. Paul intends us to understand that the fundamental marriage, upon which all human marriages are based, is the marriage between Christ and the Church. That is the great "mystery", as he calls it. The fundamental, underlying structure of our existence as human beings is marital. Human marriages are themselves an image of this deeper, most profound reality of our very being. What St. Paul has to say about human marriages, therefore, cannot be dismissed as a piece of male chauvinism. It must be taken with utmost seriousness, even if we find ourselves made very uncomfortable by the language he employs. And I don't think one need be a feminist to find the language somewhat offputting.

The difficulties for women come in the first few lines of the passage. Although it seems to get off to a good start, stating that husbands and wives are to be subject to one another, it goes on to say that wives ought to be subject to their husbands, indeed ought to be subject "in everything" to their husbands, because the husband is

the head of the wife just as Christ is head of the Church. The fact that husbands are later on enjoined to love their wives, as Christ loves the Church, does little to mitigate the feeling that women are placed in a position which is, as the feminists are the first to point out, submissive and dependent.

Before we rush to assume that what Paul has in mind here is sexual inequality, with women getting the short end of the stick, we ought to consider two things very carefully. First, we cannot assume, as feminists do, that Paul's language here can be taken at face value, that is, can be understood as we popularly understand such language. As Donald J. Keefe, a Jesuit theologian at Marquette, has noted,

Paul's language can be understood only when one keeps firmly in mind that its meaning is governed not by ordinary usage or by ordinary common sense; these are not in service of the revelation which he serves. Paul's use of such antagonistic words as fear, submission and the like, to describe the appropriate reaction of the Christian wife to her husband is entirely misunderstood when it is forgotten that we do not know what this language means in any adequate sense.¹⁶

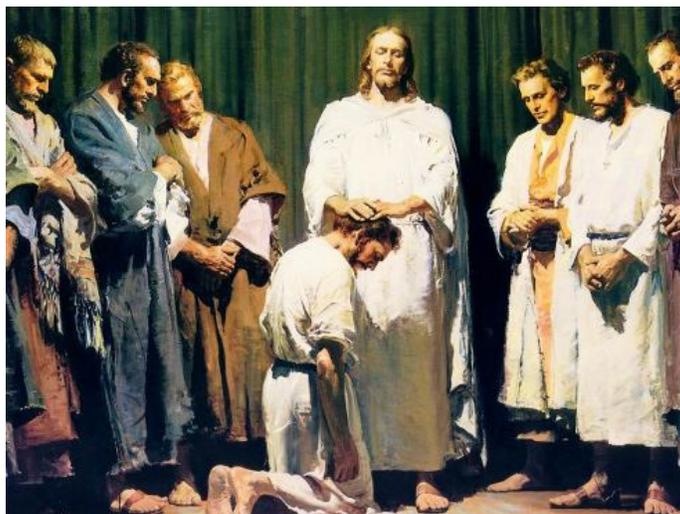
The second point, closely related to the first, is that we do have some indication, from the teachings of the Church herself, that notions such as dependence and submission do not automatically signal inequality. For these words apply to Christ's relationship with the Father. We see this very clearly in the Gospel of John alone, where we are told that the Son is dependent on the Father ("the Son can do nothing of His own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing" - 5:19), receptive vis-a-vis the Father ("All that the Father has is mine"-16:15), submissive to the Father, that is, under a mission given him by the Father ("I came not of my own accord, but He sent me" - 8:42) and obedient to the Father ("I do as the Father has commanded me" - 14:31). If dependence and submission, not to mention receptivity and obedience, signal inferiority, then Christ must be inferior to the Father, as indeed many theologians in the early

Church maintained. Their view, known as Arianism, was explicitly and flatly rejected by the Church in the fourth century councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, in which the Son was recognized to be consubstantial with and equal in all ways to the Father.

The language which St. Paul uses to describe the male/female relationship is therefore consistent with the language which Christ employs in the Gospel of John to describe His own relationship with the Father. The language does not signify inferiority; it signifies relationality, which is to say order, and that order which such language signifies reveals to us that, at the highest and most profound level, that is, in the Trinity itself, order is the very complement of equality. The two go hand in hand.

The Ephesians text, therefore, does not support arguments for male superiority. On the contrary, it reveals to us, first, that the covenantal, which is to say, the marital relationship of Christ and the Church is the fundamental structure of all human relationships, and, second, that the covenantal structure is the basis for our imaging of the order and relationality which is found in the Trinity. The role of women in the Church cannot, therefore, be divorced (if you will pardon the pun) either from marriage itself or from that activity which is proper to the Church as the bride of Christ.

Beyond this point, we find ourselves at the frontier of territory which has, unfortunately, been little explored by theologians to date. Hence, anything further which might be said with regard to the bridal character of the Church and to the implications this has for women in the Church must necessarily be more by way of suggestion than by way of already-established theological conclusions.



Three matters ought immediately to command our consideration. The first of these is the fact that, although masculinity is given an exclusive expression in the sacrament of holy orders, femininity is given no such corresponding exclusive expression. This sacramental practice of the Church finds an important confirmation in the historic

ministry of Christ, in the fact that, although the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is identified with the Church, enjoyed a relationship to her Son closer than any of the Apostles, she was not called upon by her Son to share in their explicit apostolic ministry. Since this state of affairs does not signal her inferiority to the Apostles, might it not signify instead that femininity, and by extension, the uniqueness of female roles in the Church, require no special, exclusive, sacramental expression?

This brings us to the second matter we ought to consider, namely, the importance of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the life and teachings of the Church. Karl Stern, a psychologist and convert to Catholicism, has noted that, whereas the dominant note in the Old Testament is that of prophecy, which is to say, an emphasis on God's future activity in history, the dominant note of the New Testament is Incarnation, which is to say, God's here-and-now or realized presence within history and humanity. As Stern puts it,

In the Hebrew Liturgy, the patriarchs are invoked, as the Blessed Virgin is in the Christian. The remote foreknowledge of that which one will neither see nor touch, is the paternal. Nevertheless, as we have seen, Israel, and mankind as a whole, men and women, represent the Bride. And it is with the Incarnation as historical fact that the Blessed Virgin becomes the prototype of faith. Here, contrary to the faith of the prophets, faith achieves the immediacy of certitude, in that carnal link with being which is the core of all womanhood.¹⁷

Stern here makes two points which are crucial. First, the Incarnational character of Christianity is linked to the female because she, more than the male, is herself linked with the material and the biological. And the material and the biological lie at the very heart of the sacramental notion that materiality can and does mediate the divine.

The second, and equally important, point is that all of us, male and female alike, are represented by the feminine principle, first, by Mary's fiat which is spoken on behalf of us all, and, second, by the Church, which as Bride of Christ incorporates both men and women into that marital union which the Church enjoys with Christ. The implications are obviously sacramental. Just as Mary, by her consent, makes it possible for God to be ontologically united with and materially present among us, so the

Church, by her consent, makes it possible for Christ to be ontologically united with and visibly, materially, and institutionally present within the history of the world. For this reason, Hans Urs von Balthasar can say that "the feminine, Marian principle is, in the Church, what encompasses all other principles, even the Petrine."¹⁸

The third matter which ought to command our attention is the nature of the differentiation between male and female. Walter Ong, a Jesuit in St. Louis, has pointed out that masculinity is hard to interiorize, because the masculine is so much identified with the objective and the transcendent.¹⁹ If this be the case, and I believe that it is, the difficulty which faces femininity, which is identified with the subjective and immanent, is that of finding ways to objectify or externalize it. Because the female finds her femininity within herself and indeed because she herself is most closely linked with all that is immanent in creation, femininity by its nature tends to resist all attempts to assign to it a specific objective role. This is particularly true with regard to the sacramentality of the Church, where the feminine, as the matrix of all of the sacraments, is difficult, if not impossible, to externalize in any single role which would seek to embody once and for all the relationship of the feminine to the sacraments.

Some efforts have been made, mostly by men (perhaps not surprisingly, if we have been correct in identifying the male with the objective), to objectify the differences between male and female. Kierkegaard, for example, said "Woman is substance, man is reflexion."²⁰ Louis Bouyer, the French Catholic theologian, in his book on women in the church, speaks variously of men as identified with apostolate and women with presence,²¹ of men associated with formal prescription and of women with influence,²² and of men as representing the gift of God in the transcendence of the giver while women represent the receptivity of the gift in the deepest levels of human being.²³ Presence, receptivity, and influence all suggest that which cannot be sacramentally objectified.

However the role of women is to be understood in the Church, it must always be by reference to the marital imagery which understands human relationships to be modeled on those of the Christ-Church relationship. As C.S. Lewis pointed out several years ago, in the introduction to Louis Bouyer's book on women in the church (to which reference was earlier made),

One of the ends for which sex was created was to symbolize to us the hidden things of God. One of the functions of human marriage is to express the nature of the union between Christ and the Church. We have no authority to take the living and sensitive figures which God has painted on the canvas of our nature and shift them about as if they were mere geometrical figures.

This is what common sense will call “mystical.” Exactly. The Church claims to be the bearer of a revelation. If that claim is false then we want not to make priestesses but to abolish priests.²⁴

The marital imagery employed by St. Paul is a “mystery,” as St. Paul himself tells us. Karl Stern refers to it as “The unspeakable mystery of the and - of God and His Creation, of God and His people, of Christ and the Church.”²⁵ Man and woman share in that mysterious “and”, of course, but the mystery runs far deeper than that. For, as Stern rightly points out, “The sexual ‘and’ is a reflection of the other - all being is nuptial.”²⁶

These brief reflections fall far short of any sort of definitive presentation of the role of women in the Church. Much more work must be done in this area, and must be done quickly, if feminism is to be answered. For, in the final analysis, feminism challenges the Church on every level of her being. As Ruether herself has noted, “it is not possible to imagine the admission of women to the Catholic priesthood without, at the same time, modifying certain fundamental notions about hierarchy, theology, Church and authority.”²⁷ Ruether’s use of the word “modifying” is an enormous understatement. The changes, as noted earlier, would dismantle the Church.

Sometimes the feminine is associated with total,

unconditional love. Walter Ong expresses beautifully how such total love is conveyed by the Pieta, and I would like to close this paper with his description of that statue.

In the Pieta the Virgin Mother has freed herself of all possessiveness, transmuted all eros (love involved in its own need) into agape (love as self-giving, involved with the other). She has done so by lovingly acquiescing to her now adult Son’s doing what he was called to do, his Father’s will. She leaves her Son completely free, though doing so returns him dead to her arms. And when she takes him dead into her arms, she does not clutch him, but leaves her arms open. The statue tugs at the hearts of women and men alike, but its subject matter is supremely feminine. And it is supreme human freedom: Mary has deliberately chosen to let her Son be about his Father’s business. If she had the choice once more, knowing what it would cost, she would do it again. No regrets. Total courage. Her youthful choice is still part of her. Hence her youthful face, often commented on, despite her mature age. Her arms are open and relaxed. She is completely free, for she is fully aware of what she has chosen.²⁸

Catholic women today are confronted with a choice - the choice between feminism, on the one hand, and Catholicism, on the other. We, the women of the Church, which is the Bride of Christ, are called upon today, in a way in which we have never been called upon before, to speak in the person of the Church (*in persona Ecclesiae*). If we choose, as I have argued here that we ought, to let Christ be about his Father’s business today through the traditional and institutional life and worship of the Catholic Church, we too should do so freely, fully aware of what we are choosing and why.



NOTES

1 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, quoted in “The Spirit of the Female Priesthood”, by Deborah Belonick, in Thomas Hopko (ed.), *Women and the Priesthood* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983), p. 135.

2 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p. 13.

3 Ruether makes her objections to the institution and tradition of Catholicism more than clear when discussing how feminist methodology goes about overcoming the corruption which it finds in Catholicism, a corruption running all the way back to the origins of our faith. We must fall back on what she calls “the myth of return to origins”

in order to make “a more radical interpretation of the revelatory paradigm to encompass contemporary experiences, while discarding institutions and traditions that contradict meaningful, just, and truthful life.” In this fashion, feminists are able to “set the original tradition against its later corruption.” She cites the Reformation as a precedent for this type of theology. (Ibid., pp. 16-17.)

4Thomas Hopko, “On the Male Character of the Christian Priesthood”, in Hopko (ed.), *Women and the Priesthood*, pp. 101-102.

5John Meyendorff, cited by Bishop Kallistos Ware, “Man, Woman and the Priesthood of Christ”, in Hopko (ed.), *Women and the Priesthood*, p. 14.

6Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, pp. 140-141.

7Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983), p. 269.

8According to Fiorenza, for example, “the history of early Christianity is written from the perspective of the historical winners. For the most part, official Christian history and theology reflect those segments of the church which have undergone this patriarchalization process and theologically legitimated it with the formulation of the canon” (Ibid., p. 83).

9Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Meetings, But Not of Minds”, in *National Catholic Reporter*, July 5, 1985.

10Ruether is quite explicit about this in her book *Liberation Theology* (New York/Paramus/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1972), where she speaks of death as “a friend that completes the proper cycle of the human soul” (p. 125) and says of heaven that it is “not a supernatural ‘place’ to which one goes by abolishing the earth, but it is the mandate for what ought to be done on earth” (p. 56).

11Ruether, “Meetings, But Not of Minds”.

12Ibid.

13Belonick, “The Spirit of the Female Priesthood”, p. 137.

14Ibid., pp. 137-138.

15One notable exception is Fr. Donald J. Keefe, SJ, who has written several articles exploring a Christocentric and covenantal understanding of the revelation. Articles by him which pursue the relationship between the covenantal character of creation and the sacramental character of the Church and of history include “Mary as Created Wisdom, The Splendor of the New Creation,” *The Thomist* 47 (July 1983): 395-420, “The Sacrament of the Good Creation,” *Faith & Reason* (Summer 1983): 128-141, and “Toward a Renewal of Sacramental Theology,” *The Thomist* 44 (July 1980): 357-371. Mention should also be made of Gerald Emmett Cardinal Carter’s “Do This in Memory of Me”, a pastoral letter on the sacrament of priestly orders, issued on December 8, 1983, which very explicitly places priestly orders within a Trinitarian-based covenantal ecclesiology.

16Donald J. Keefe, “Sacramental Sexuality and the Ordination of Women,” *Communio* V (Fall 1978): 248-249.

17Karl Stern, *The Flight from Woman* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, The Noonday Press, 1965), pp. 302-303.

18Hans Urs von Balthasar, in the epilogue to Louis Bouyer, *Woman in the Church*, trans. by Marilyn Teichert (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1979), p. 113. 19 Walter J. Ong, *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 98. 20 Cited by Stern, *Flight from Woman*, p. 215.

21Bouyer, *Woman in the Church*, p. 102.

22Ibid., p. 98.

23Ibid., p. 73.

24C.S. Lewis, in essay included in Bouyer, *Woman in the Church*, p. 130. 25 Stern, *Flight from Woman*, p. 273.

26Ibid., p. 274.

27Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Roman Catholic Story,” in Rosemary Radford Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (eds), *Women of Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 382.

28Ong, *Fighting for Life*, p. 101.