

Ministry in Context: The Feminine Principle

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I will begin today with a question – philosophers always do. I ask you all to respond, at once, loud and clear. I have reason to believe that you all will know the answer because many of you are evangelists and catechists.

Most of you look old enough to remember the Baltimore Catechism and my question is an easy one, right from that document:

All together now. Why did God make you? God made me to know, love and serve Him in this world and to be happy with Him in the next.

Great.

Now for one more question: Why did God make you a woman?

This question, for which we do not have an easy answer, is one of the most important questions we women can ask today. There is something going on in human life - people are noticing that humanity includes these beings embodied as female. Female beings are calling attention to ourselves in family life, in the work place, in school, the military, the arts, and in the Church.

What is going on anyway? Aren't we all just human beings? Instead of harping on differences we ought to recognize that we are all the same in God's eyes. Isn't it good enough to be part of God's family and leave it at that?

Actually, it is not good enough. It is not enough because for Catholic Christians in general, and for women religious in particular, there is much more at stake. And for women religious who have promised to "name brokenness, oppression and injustice," the question must be a critical one.

You are the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart who have promised to "recognize the Heart of God in each other and honor our individual giftedness." For you, special women with such a special calling, the stakes are highest of all.

Let me try to illustrate by citing what our new Catechism says about God's creation of women:

Man and woman have been created, which is to say, willed by God: on the one hand, in perfect equality as human persons; on the other, in their respective beings as man and woman. "Being man" or "being woman" is a reality which is good and willed by God: man and woman possess an inalienable dignity which comes to them immediately from God their Creator. Man and woman are both with one and the same dignity "in the image of God." In their "being man" and "being woman," they reflect the Creator's wisdom and goodness. Par. 369.

We Catholics believe that to be created, is to be willed by God. There is no easy way out. If we want to understand God's will for us, in our special way of being human, we must wrestle for an answer to the question, "why did God make me a woman?" How the Heart of God can be recognized and honored in each of us. How our individual giftedness is reflected in the body of a woman.

Each of us must ask how it is that we reflect the Creator's goodness in our womanhood. How are we to 'be woman" in the ways that reflect God's goodness?

Our struggle to find answers to these questions is not helped by the theological tradition we have inherited. Listen to what some of the most respected theologians of our Christian heritage have had to say about women:

You are the she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's Image, which is man. On account of your sin, even the Son of God had to die. Tertullian. Wouldn't Tertullian be surprised to learn in the new Catechism that even the woman, for whom he has such disdain, is created in God's image?

Let's try another: Every woman should be overwhelmed with shame at the thought that she is a woman. St. Clement of Alexandria.

Among all savage beasts, none is found to be so harmful as woman. St. John Chrysostom.

Finally, Woman is the gate of the devil, the path of wickedness, the sting of the serpent, in a word, a perilous object. St. Jerome.

Remember, now, most of these citations are from men whom our Church has held up as moral exemplars, as saints. "But," you may say, "let bygones be bygones. This is ancient history for us. Clearly, our Church does not believe this anymore." True enough. But for centuries, the unbroken tradition of teaching on why women could not be ordained was grounded in the claims of philosophers and theologians such as the ones you have just heard.

Indeed, St. Thomas said that women could not be ordained because we are made of "inferior matter" and it would be unfit to confer a sacrament on unfit matter. In the last 20 years, however, the story is somewhat changed. The unbroken tradition held up is not the one that said women are less than men.

As many of you know, the unbroken tradition now held up is that women were never ordained before. Is it any wonder?

Lest anyone think that the beliefs about the inferiority of women are only represented in ancient history, however, let me read to you from a living priest, quoting from his own seminary textbook from the 1950's:

The reason why a woman cannot receive holy orders is because the clerical

state demands a certain superiority since it involves ruling the faithful; whereas a woman by her very nature is inferior to man and subject to him, even though at a personal level, she can excel a man in her natural and graced giftedness." Fr. Kevin Kelly, *The Tablet*, December 2, 1995, p. 1548.

I was born in the decade during which this was written. Most of you were around by then. Surely we know and work with men whose early formation and world view were shaped by sentiments and teachings such as these.

My purpose, though, is not to debate church teachings on the ordination of women. My purpose is to show that centuries of misogyny have shaped the Christian imagination and we cannot possibly be free of it yet. It is not just that men can still think themselves to be superior to women. Women can think ourselves less than men. The belief that women were, in our created state, inferior to men in their created state permeates our history, our theology, our ecclesiology and our self image in the world. The Church now teaches, right in par. 369 that in "being women" we too reflect the Creator's wisdom and goodness. But where are we?

For so long, our efforts in the women's movement centered on overcoming the perception that we were less than men, that the object for liberated women became to demonstrate that we were as good as men. During the women's movement, when I was a young girl, I wanted to do at least three things that I could not do. I wanted to play in the little league baseball program; I wanted a paper route; I wanted to serve at the altar. I could not do any of these. Why? The answer stunned me: I was a girl. Being a girl always seemed to be the reason for the obstacle. How to defeat this reality? Perhaps by being more like a boy. Perhaps then, I would be noticed and admired. Perhaps then I could overcome what I was by the bum luck of birth.

One of the effects of believing that women were less than men was that there was an invisibility to being female in a man's world. It is not that we did not have our places and roles. But women were invisible because men had the public forum, we had the private. Men held the power to define what was important, what would be noticed, held up and valued. It stands to reason that with that kind of power, men would define what their way of being human as normative and everyone else as different at best, deviant at worst. The power to define has given men, who have the power of the pen and the pulpit, the boardroom and the bedroom, the ability to name their way of being as human as the totality of human experience. Without such power, women have had little choice but to let the male definition of humanity stand.

And so, when I recently viewed my mother's 1949 high school yearbook with her, I asked, "where are the sisters?" There were full page photos of bishops and priests who came to the school once or twice a year for some ceremony or another. But the sisters of St. Joseph, who day in and day out,

taught their classes, cleaned the school, moderated clubs and organizations, met with parents, chaperoned dances, worked miracles with the bookkeeping, etc --- these women were nowhere pictured. Even my mother, who would sooner die than call herself a feminist, was puzzled. "Hey, yeah. Where are those women"? She remembers their names and the way they cared for the school and all the girls in it. But my mother wants to see them again. She will never see those faces again. It would have been prideful for the sisters to be photographed for the yearbook. Those sisters knew it would be prideful because the well-intentioned men who came to give them retreats on their sinfulness told them it would be prideful. How did the priests know about pride? They knew because they were men. Men had and continue to be predisposed to the sin of pride. Women who came into adulthood during a time when women were considered to be inferior to men, were not generally tempted by the sin of pride. The last thing in the world the sisters of St. Joseph needed from their spiritual directors was advice on how to develop humility.

This is the kind of story that illustrates what I aim to emphasize today: men and women are different. We have different gifts. And we have different limitations. In the fullness of God's creation, the different bodies we have reveal something about God. But in a world where only one way of being human is recognized and valued, a whole part of the goodness of God's creation is invisible in our world.

What do our different bodies reveal? Let us begin with the analogy from nature that the Church so often uses: women conceive, men beget. In the most fundamental of human creative acts, the one in which men and women join together to form new life, the roles are clearly different and beyond the realm of human choice or cultural environment. The male experience of this act is largely outside himself. That is, he penetrates the woman who receives him into herself. There is no doubt about the value of penetration and how it has been translated metaphorically into other human values. One can have penetrating thoughts and insights – and this is good. Penetrating analyses. It is good to go into new territory and to leave a part of oneself there. But what of the act of receiving that makes such penetration possible? Is being receptive good? The woman who opens herself to a man in this creative act is doing something critically important in human life and creativity. Being receptive, however, never seems to have quite the appeal of penetration.

Take the analogy a little further. Once new life is conceived, the man is off and about other things. Meanwhile, the immune system of the woman adapts itself to the foreign body now growing within the woman's body. Ordinarily, the introduction of a foreign body into a human organism is grounds for attack by the white blood cells that keep us disease free. In pregnancy, however, this process suspends itself to allow the new life growing within to

thrive. Women say it is a great feeling to nurture new life within. This natural feminine principle can be applied in other areas of life. It is good to host a being other than ourselves within. Something that will have a life all its own - apart from us ultimately. Think of the many ways that women host and support beings different from ourselves and give them a chance at a new life all their own. Think about your struggle to incorporate new beings into the body that is the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart. Think it and know that these ways are good - that they reflect God's will for human beings - that they image divinity itself.

And what of the reception that makes intercourse and conception possible? Receptivity is not a bad thing, it is a good thing. It reflects openness and a listening posture that can take in and envelope the world in ways that constant action cannot. It is not a weakness to be able to listen; it is a gift. It is not a weakness to be open; it is a gift. It is not a weakness to take the world into ourselves and protect it so that it can become what it is called to be; it is a gift.

Finally, once the new life is nurtured and fed within the body of a woman, it is ready to begin a new life all its own. Even then, the body of the woman is there for it. Women can literally feed with our bodies. What does a body like this reveal about God's will? Men are limited in this regard, not because they cannot feed the baby but because they cannot do so with the very bodies God gave them. Nursing mothers have told me that their bodies react when their babies are hungry. In most cultures for most of human history, it is the women who feed. Given our embodiment, this ought to be no wonder. Preparing and serving a meal is not a weakness, it is a gift. Nurturing and guiding our students is not a weakness, it is a gift. Caring for the vulnerable bodies of the sick and aged is not a second class job; it is a gift. Not everyone can do it. It is because of our bodies that women have been particularly suited for these roles.

I am not trying to say that biology is destiny. The human values revealed by women's bodies are human values – men can and should learn them too – just as women can have penetrating insights and talent in sports and a desire to explore the universe. I am saying that the gifts that women bring naturally to the human family are gifts that we must value not for the sake of women but for the sake of the whole human race.

In the thirty years since radical feminists burned their underwear and walked the picket lines to call attention to the cause, we like to think that we have made great strides away from the invisibility imposed on us by the oppression of women. Women are now represented as 51% of the work force in our country. And the trend for working women is represented not just in the traditional fields of teaching, nursing and social work. Women are present in record numbers in the legal and medical professions, in higher education,

in corporate board rooms, in broadcasting, in the armed forces, even in pastoral administration in the Catholic Church. Yet we are still invisible.

The new invisibility, though, is of our own doing. We are invisible now because, by and large, we have forfeited our unique way of "being woman", a way of being willed by God, to be represented in those professions. To "make it" in a man's world, we have done so in ways that keep men comfortable: we have all too often done it the way they do it. We have allowed what it means to be good lawyers, accountants, businesswomen, teachers, doctors, athletes, soldiers, and pastors to continue to be defined by men. In the process of modeling male ways of being and acting in the world, we have betrayed God's sacred will for us. In the rush to demonstrate that women are as good as men we are letting the feminine principle get lost in the shuffle.

Having traded in one kind of invisibility for another, women have not really thought much about what it would mean to express the feminine part of God's will for humanity. If men really oppressed women for the first 2,000 years of Christianity, by defining us out of what counted as human experience, we women may be in danger of oppressing ourselves and each other as we enter the new millennium. As I said at the outset, for women religious who are concerned about naming injustice and oppression, the stakes here are high.

For women religious who are looking for the Heart of God in one another in an effort to recognize and honor individual giftedness, the challenge to identify and hold up the feminine principle is one you must face immediately.

How do we do this, some will surely ask. Many of you are already nobly at work and have been for most of your lives. In your work, you have nurtured, fed, nursed, taught and praised new life more times than you will ever remember. More needs to be done. We need to recognize and honor the ways in which women have traditionally served the human family, as well as the new ways that have opened up to us since the women's movement. We need to question the values that have defined human history up to this point and not only because it is men who tend to wage war but because our planet is starving for a caring and loving embrace. We need to name the dangers of a science unfettered by emotion not because precision instruments like thermometers are bad but because sometimes a woman's cheek on a forehead is a better measure of whether someone has a fever. We need to read what women are writing and listen to what women are saying. To attend to what is happening to our hospitals and armed forces and schools when only one way of being human carries the day.

Be open. Listen. Take in. Feed. Nurture. Nurse. Name oppression, brokenness and injustice. Recognize the Heart of God in all human beings.

Do what the Mission Helpers of the Sacred Heart have always done – witness to God's grace -- only now do so mindful that "being woman" is as important to reflecting God's will for us as "being man" has always been.

Thank you.

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