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Ronda Chervin

*Tell Me Why
I Should Be a
Catholic When...*

**Women Are Second-
Class Citizens In The
Church?**



by

Ronda Chervin, Ph.D.



any women both outside and inside the Church wonder about the position of the female gender in Church history and also in the present day. Given the growing equality of women in society it can seem as if the Roman Catholic Church is really

backward and even unjust in the roles from which women are excluded and also in non-inclusive use of language.

Some women (as well as some men) ask: Since God is so tender and merciful, why isn't God referred to as our Mother as well as our Father? Why are there so many references to man, brothers, and brethren in Scripture, liturgy, and song in the Catholic Church and so few to woman, sisters, or persons (including both women and men)? Since nowadays there are female presidents of countries, women doctors, female soldiers, women rabbis, and female Protestant ministers, why should the priesthood be excluded from women in the Catholic Church? After all, there seem to be no direct statements of Jesus in the Bible against having women in the priesthood! Isn't it especially distressing when you have many priests concelebrating a Mass and no women with them? Should educated women with degrees have to get permission from a priest for everything they want to do? Isn't that treating grown women like little girls? Patronizing!

Could it be that male-dominated societies in biblical times excluded women from leadership in order to hog the power themselves? If these discriminatory attitudes still persist for psychological and sociological reasons, isn't it due time either to reverse this in the Church today or to shun any religious group, especially the Catholic Church, that treats women as second-class citizens?

Let us look at the issue of inclusive language first. What inclusive language means is language that reflects the fact that persons come in both sexes. For example: speaking about a mixed group of male and female human beings as persons is inclusive. The opposite — exclusive language — occurs when both sexes are designated with a masculine word such as "man" or "he."

Such exclusive language can often be found in ordinary speech, in literature, in Scripture, and in worship. Even if in the past people meant the word "man" or "he" to refer to both sexes, and women understood that they were also included in some cases (not on the doors of bathrooms!), many feminists in our day insist that the use of "man" in instances where both women and men are meant is anti-feminine.



Why? Because it makes it seem as if the male sex is the model and the female sex secondary. If the only purpose of using "man" to include both sexes were to save time and paper then we could use "woman" to include both men and women, but we never do. Using "exclusive" male-oriented language is therefore thought to reflect what is called a "patriarchal culture," that is, one in which men dominate over women.

It is important to explain further the difference between what is called horizontal and vertical exclusive language. Horizontal language refers to human persons such as talking about "man, men, he, brothers," or "you guys," when women are also being talked about. Inclusive-language advocates want to see such words replaced by person, humankind, women and men, children of God, brothers and sisters.

Vertical language refers to the concept of God as masculine, as in Father, or he, or Lord. Inclusive-language advocates want to see such designations replaced by God the Creator or the Holy Spirit, or

even she. In referring to God's ways, such feminists wish to see more mention of traditionally feminine traits as pertaining to God, as in "She is tender and merciful."

Whether it be horizontal or vertical language in question, the hope is that changing words to be more inclusive will be educative. Women will feel more included, will believe that their dignity is being honored, and both men and women will gradually understand that feminine aspects of God (for example, empathy) are equally important as masculine elements (for instance, power). Hopefully, changes in language will also reflect and lead to better relationships between men and women in family life, the workplace, and in the Church. A related question involves use of words by



men in society and in the Church that reflect a belittling of women such as calling a grown woman "the girl," as in "Tell the girl to bring my coffee in now" in an office situation.

Challenged especially by feminists within the Church, there have been recent endeavors to address exclusive-language issues. In 1990 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement called "Criteria for the Evaluation of Inclusive Language Translations."

In this document the bishops make a clear distinction between horizontal and vertical language. Acknowledging the changes in perception that make referring to women and men together with words like "man" or "he" or "brothers" they recommend the use instead of inclusive words such as person, people, and human family. They note that in the original languages of the Bible and liturgical texts

collective words meant human beings in general. "The Word of God proclaimed to all nations is by



nature inclusive, that is, addressed to all peoples, women and men.

Consequently, every effort should be made to render the language of biblical translations as inclusively as a faithful translation of the text permits, especially when this concerns the People of God, Israel, and the Christian community" (No. 14).

Instances where changes would not be justified include prophetic passages where the use of "he" refers ultimately to a male person such as Jesus or "she" for a female person such as Mary, interpreted as referred to by words such as "the woman."

The meaning of language does change in the course of history. For example, a word like "Negro," originally thought of by many as neutral, is now experienced by Afro-Americans as conveying a sense of inferiority because of its associations with slavery. Charity invites us not to use the word "Negro" any more.

Charitable patience would also come into the picture when women restrain themselves from jumping on men who are used to speaking of women as girls. Gentle humor might make the point better than attributing motives of scorn to men who have just never thought about it deeply.

With respect to vertical language about God, the bishops take a different stance:

Great care should be taken in translations of the names of God and in the use of pronouns referring to God. While it would be inappropriate to attribute gender to God as such, the revealed Word of God consistently uses a masculine reference for God. It may sometimes be useful, however, to repeat the name of God, as used earlier in the text, rather than use the masculine

pronoun in every case. But care must be taken that the repetition not become tiresome.

The classic translation of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) as Lord and the translation of Kyrios as Lord should be used in lectionaries.

Feminine imagery in the original language of the biblical texts should not be obscured or replaced by the use of masculine imagery in English translations, e.g., Wisdom literature.

Christ is the center and focus of all Scripture. The New Testament has interpreted certain texts of the Old Testament in an explicitly Christological fashion (that is, as referring to the future Messiah). Special care should be observed in the translation of these texts so that the Christological meaning is not lost. . . .



In fidelity to the inspired Word of God, the traditional biblical usage for naming the Persons of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to be retained.

Similarly, in keeping with New Testament usage and the Church's tradition, the feminine pronoun is not to be used to refer

to the Person of the Holy Spirit.

In relation to vertical language, John Paul II points out often that, since Jesus calls God his Father, his choice of wording is normative for us.

"But why did Jesus refer to God as Father?" you might still ask. "Isn't this just because he lived in a patriarchal society?" To think that in such important matters Jesus was simply programmed by his times is to demean his divine nature and God's providence. God could have become incarnate as a female in a matriarchal society. In this case a female Messiah might have called God "Mother." As believers in a religion not made up by us to express spiritual yearnings but revealed by God, it is important to trust that if God reveals himself as

Father, we must ponder that choice rather than reverse it.

Suggestions have been made to avoid the problem of male/female altogether by referring to God as "it" or as Creator rather than as Father or Mother. Such neutral words, however, run the risk of altering the Christian religion to the point of being more philosophical and abstract than being personal and concrete. The word "Father" is full of human meaning for all peoples, whereas Creator is a vaguer and colder word.

For more about vertical language about God, see John Paul II's apostolic letter "On the Dignity and Vocation of Woman," and Donald Bloesch's *The Battle for the Trinity*.

To turn now to the even more controversial



issue of the ordination of women, the Church has always interpreted the choice of Jesus to have only male apostles in spite of the preeminent holiness of his Mother, Mary, as indicating that he wished to ordain only

men to the office of the priesthood. (On the infallible tradition see "Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone" 1994.)

Since Jesus was countercultural in his attitudes toward women, calling them to discipleship on an equal basis with men and breaking down many traditional Jewish barriers between men and women, it is misleading to think that the Lord was simply following customs of discrimination in his choice of males as apostles.



But isn't it discriminatory toward women to have only male priests? Not really. Scripture teaches that equality of personhood can be affirmed even though God-given roles are different. Even in the Trinity the Son is different from

the Father, but that doesn't mean that he is an inferior "second-class citizen"!

A woman was chosen for the highest honor of all those of the human race: Mary, the Mother of God. Men do not resent this choice as discriminatory, as if that made Joseph a second-class citizen.

God has a right to create differences between the sexes, which are not in opposition but complementary in character. In a good Catholic parish the pastor and his associates will take counsel with women of prayer and express their gratitude often for the many gifts women bring to the life of the community.

Yet women still wonder: "Don't we need both women and men to image Christ at the altar?" The answer is that it was God's own will that his incarnate form be masculine. Jesus was the Son of God, not the daughter. Jesus came proclaiming himself as the bridegroom, a male image, with the Church as his bride (see, for instance, Mark 2:19-20, John 3:29, and Revelation 19:7).

Unlike some other Christian churches that give little weight to symbolism, it is part of the God-willed tradition of the Catholic Church to use physical symbols to express invisible spiritual realities. St. Thomas Aquinas taught that "sacramental signs represent what they signify by natural resemblance." Just as Christ chose the material elements of bread and wine rather than crackers and soda to become transubstantiated by his grace into his own body and blood, the apt symbol of the Person of Christ who says in the

words of Consecration, "This is my body, this is my blood," is a priest who images Christ as the Son rather than as the daughter of God. Would you want a male actor to play Mary in a Nativity play?

This does not mean that women have no strong leadership roles in the Church. The example of Mary and the women saints points to the extremely crucial role women play in God's plan. After all, who do we remember, St. Catherine of Siena or her parish priest?

What is more, in recent times more and more leadership roles have been opened to women such as financial head of a diocese or parish administrator, not to mention the age-old influence of sisters in school and hospital administration.

For more information on the question of ordaining women see Manfred Hauke's exhaustive book *Women in the Priesthood?* translated by David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

Are there women who are strong on feminist issues but who agree with the Church's teachings?



Yes. Many. An interesting example from the first half of this century was Edith Stein. A German philosophy student, Edith espoused the feminist cause. Although considering traditional motherly roles to be beautiful, she also explained

why women need to be encouraged in their other talents. When she became a Catholic, she wanted to be a Carmelite nun and this role did not make her feel second-class at all. Her lectures and writings on women have become very influential, especially since her beatification.

An American writer of great ability and perceptiveness, Juli Loesch Wiley was originally a Catholic feminist involved with groups who were interested in liturgical innovations aimed at acquainting Catholics with the goodness of referring to God as Mother and the need for women in the

priesthood. Now a Feminist for Life, she writes numerous articles about why it is better for the priesthood to be masculine. She believes that Jesus chose men only to be priests so that his message that tender spiritual love was more important than power, lust, or wealth would be conveyed by transformed Christian male leaders, who need that message the most!

A Catholic theologian, Mary Neill, O.P., co-author with me of *A Woman's Tale*, thinks that because it is of woman's body that we come and survive from womb and breast-milk, we need males to give us our supernatural body and blood in the Mass — for balance!

In my book *Feminine, Free and Faithful* I explain why a woman is stronger and freer, as were the female saints, when rather than insisting on priestly roles, we follow the Holy Spirit to come into spiritual authority.

