

He is Father, and we worship Him

In June we looked at the Church's infallible teaching that only men can be ordained priests, as established by Christ; and we reflected on the reasons for his choice in the priest's sacramental imaging of Christ as Bridegroom of the Church. Going deeper, we reflect on why God became incarnate as male in the first place, and why Scripture names God as 'Father' rather than 'Mother' – yet how none of this affects men and women having 'perfect equality as human persons'. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 369) '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.' (*ibid.*)

The *Catechism* teaches: 'God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God.' (239) 'In no way is God in man's image.' (370) God is pure spirit with no body, so is neither male nor female in the literal physical sense.

However, 'the respective "perfections" of man and woman reflect something of the infinite perfection of God: those of a mother and those of a father and husband.' (*ibid.*) 'By calling God "Father", the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children. God's parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood, (cf. *Is* 66:13; *Ps* 131:2) which emphasises God's immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature.' (239)

Pope Benedict XVI (writing as a private theologian, not magisterially – yet still enlightening us) explained further: 'It is nonetheless true that God is never named or addressed as mother, either in the Old or in the New Testament. "Mother" in the Bible is an image but not a title for God. Why not? We can only tentatively seek to understand... The mother-deities that completely surrounded the people of Israel and the New Testament Church create a picture of the relation between God and the world that is completely opposed to the biblical image of God. These deities always, and probably inevitably, imply some form of pantheism [the false doctrine that 'everything is God'] in which the difference between Creator and creature disappears...'

'By contrast, the image of the Father was and is apt for expressing the otherness of the Creator and creature and the sovereignty of his creative act. Only by excluding the mother-deities could the Old Testament bring its image of God, the pure transcendence of God, to maturity. But even if we cannot provide absolutely compelling arguments, the prayer language of the entire Bible remains normative for us... We make our petitions in the way that Jesus, with Holy Scripture in the background, taught us to pray, and not as we happen to think or want. Only thus do we pray properly.' (*Jesus of Nazareth* (2007) pp.139-40)

This cautions us against claims we should pray to God as 'Our Mother' as well as 'Our Father'. We worship God as he has revealed himself to us – not a god or goddess of our own fashioning. 'Father' symbolism naturally associates with a deity imparting life and existence 'from beyond'; 'mother-goddess' imagery correlates with more pantheistic notions of a deity 'receiving and developing life within'. God reveals himself in Scripture (and is known by reason itself) as a transcendent God giving existence to beings quite distinct from himself. (cf. Vatican I, *Dei Filius*, DS 3023) The masculine titles inspired by God in Scripture express this more clearly.

So it was no accident that when, in his supreme self-revelation, God became human, it was as male – and with the Son of God thus being a male 'bridegroom', not a female 'bride'. A cosmic

symbolism across Scripture is that creation is a love story between God, the Bridegroom, and his people Israel, the Bride – culminating in the love of Christ for his Bride, the Church, New Israel. (This is why the Church is best referred to as ‘she’, not just an impersonal ‘it’.)

God designed the sexes themselves with their specific symbolism already in view, so we confidently trust the symbolism leads us deeper into truth and mystery. The most perfect created being is female: Mary, exemplary image of the Church, Daughter of Zion, perfectly receptive in faith to grace and to God’s Word – and the one given to us as our true heavenly Mother.

In relation to our topic – I’ve been asked to comment on the innovation sometimes encountered of using feminine pronouns for the Holy Spirit. The Church’s position is indicated by the Holy See in its ‘Instruction’ on liturgical translations *Liturgiam Authenticam*, (2001) formally approved by St John Paul II. It stated: ‘In referring to almighty God or the individual persons of the Most Holy Trinity, the truth of tradition as well as the established gender usage of each respective language are to be maintained.’ (31 (a))

In English the established gender usage is to use the masculine pronouns for the Divine Persons. Regarding the Holy Spirit, the Pentecost Sequence addresses him as ‘Father of the poor’ (*pater pauperum*); and in the Last Supper discourse in John’s Gospel where Jesus especially speaks of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, (cf. *Jn* 14:17, 15:26, 16:7-8, 13-15) biblical translations have overwhelmingly used the masculine pronoun.

(In the Greek of the New Testament the word for ‘spirit’ is grammatically neuter but the word for ‘paraclete’ is grammatically masculine; in the Hebrew of the Old Testament the word for ‘spirit’ is grammatically feminine. In languages that (unlike English) are fully gendered, pronouns typically match the grammatical gender of the respective noun. In any case, knowledge of gendered languages tells us that *grammatical* gender hardly shows that speakers actually view the things spoken about – often inanimate objects – as being of that gender in reality. Arguing from grammatical gender to the real world is clutching at straws.)

Liturgiam Authenticam doesn’t settle everything theologically but it gives Catholics confidence in using the traditional terminology, and not letting anyone pressure us to do otherwise. The document itself, by referring to ‘the truth of tradition’, shows that in the mind of the Holy See, this is not just a changeable disciplinary decision but has a solid basis in truth.

Theologically: in the language used for the Persons of the Trinity, since each of the three Persons, though distinct from the other two Persons, is nonetheless really identical with the one transcendent Creator God (who, as we saw, is rightly named using male titles) each Person is likewise referred to by male titles. ‘Everything (in them) is one where there is no opposition of relationship.’ (Council of Florence (1442), DS 1330, quoted in the *Catechism*, 255)

People naively attempting to rename God as ‘She’ are playing around with cosmic symbolism they don’t understand. Also misguided is the deliberate avoidance of any gendered terms for God at all – as though there is something wrong with Scripture’s masculine titles.

The Scriptural titles do not imply any superiority of men to women. The male represents the infinite Creator, yet falls infinitely short of adequately doing so, whereas the female represents the finite creation receiving from the Creator, and (as herself a created being) does so with perfect suitability. Precisely to the extent the male ‘gains’ by the perfection of the Being that is represented, he ‘loses’ by the imperfection of the representation, and conversely with the female. The imaging qualities of male and female are thus different yet perfectly equal; and every man and every woman is called to imitate, in different ways, both Jesus and Mary.