

RELIGION AND GENDER: A ROMAN CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

Sister Agnes Cunningham

The Roman Catholic perspective on "religion and gender" can be expressed in a variety of ways. I would like to set forth briefly the developments of this topic as it is being discussed by Roman Catholic theologians at the present time. The dimensions of this discussion are theological, anthropological, and pastoral. I shall address each of these areas in turn.

Theological

There are three elements to be noted here. The first is the concept of *justice* because of the foundational, essential *equality* of all human beings, by reason of creation. We read the texts of Genesis to mean that God created women and men equal. In the first creation account (Genesis 1:26f) God created ADAM in the divine image and likeness, male and female. ADAM was MAN (*HOMO*), understood in the inclusive, generic sense. The word is further specified in the second creation account (Genesis 2:21-25): the woman is to be another self, a being standing face-to-face with man; a helpmate and companion. This is the work of a God who creates lovingly, lavishly, freely.

The element of justice is reaffirmed and transformed in the New Creation effected by the Incarnate Word of God. In the early Christian community, the text of Galatians (3:28) was understood to express the fact of human equality in a new way. For those baptized in Christ, there was to be no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Here, the early Christians experienced a paradox. Within the faith-community, all were *one in Christ*. Functions and responsibilities were apportioned or assigned according to office and charism. Outside the Christian assembly, sociological divisions prevailed. Men and women, the free and the slaves, Jews and Greeks continued to adhere to and go their separate ways. Nor was the ideal of the equality envisioned in Galatians 3:28 achieved without struggle.

A second incentive toward this ideal, however, was found in the theological concept of *communion*, which we find emphasized repeatedly in the writings of the early Fathers of the Church. Early Christians were described in the

Acts of the Apostles as having but "one heart and one soul"--*Cor unum et anima una*. Unity of soul was to be achieved through faith in the truths revealed by God in Jesus Christ, Risen Lord, and Savior. Unity of heart was to be realized through the exercise of *caritas*--love, care, and compassion--for the poor and the needy. Thus, Christians were to form a *community* faith, love, worship, and service in which each one had a particular function, a specific responsibility.

The third theological element is that of *mission*. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, the Romans, and the Ephesians, he gave them clear guidelines regarding their expression of the *charisms*--the spiritual gifts--poured out by the Spirit of God on the members of the Church. He spoke of the Church as the Body of Christ. Every member of that body exercised a ministry or service, because each one had been mandated through baptism to share in the *mission* begun by Jesus during his earthly life and entrusted by him for continuance to his Church. Sharing in the mission of the Church according to distinct ministries or services was a third way of affirming the essential unity of all Christians.

The themes of justice, communion, and mission are three theological elements central to the discussion of gender and religion in the Roman Catholic Church today.

Anthropological

A second area of serious discussion touching on gender and religion in Roman Catholic circles today is that of anthropology. Some theologians claim that the ideals enunciated in the early Christian era were never fully realized. Reasons given for this failure are multiple, but some writers claim that a faulty, dualistic anthropology is the primary cause. In other words, in the Christian tradition, men have been--and are--"more equal" than women. This dualistic anthropology, it is claimed, has favored the advancement and dominance of men in ecclesiastical office and in the ordained ministry. It has relegated women to inferior positions and less important services in the Church.

History both affirms and challenges such a claim. It is impossible and fruitless to deny the distinctions that applied to women and men in the age of Christian Antiquity. Many of these distinctions reinforced the inferior position held by women in the Graeco-Roman world. The complete story, however, tells us with no less certainty of women leaders ("movers and shakers" we would call them today) whose action and influence directed the shape of the Church in more than one instance. In the last analysis, we must acknowledge that Christians were--as they are today--women and men of a particular age and a specific society. Relationships between women and men, in ecclesiastical governance as in other areas of life, were

historically conditioned and sociologically enculturated. In living out a Christian lifestyle, in walking the way of discipleship, Christian women and men were more concerned with the redemption of their milieu than with the transformation of its systems and structures. The issues that have become so critical for us were not even questions for them. What are matters of justice for us were not matters of concern for them.

Christian anthropology, as a subject for theological study and reflection, is of relatively recent origin. Investigation into what it means to be a human person, created in the image and likeness of a God we affirm as Trinity, remains a challenge in theological circles. Courses in Christian Anthropology have appeared in seminary curricula in recent years. They include elements of trinitarian and incarnational theologies. They must take into consideration the findings of the human sciences, up to and into our own century. They cannot ignore questions that come to us from the study of Mariology or the research of serious feminist theologians.

As we become aware of the complexities of seeking to articulate an adequate Christian anthropology, we can appreciate the exhortation of Pope Paul VI who urged us to base any efforts for renewed authentic Catholic devotion to the Mother of Jesus on anthropological grounds. The more we understand Mary as a human person, a Jewish Mother, a woman of her time and culture, a woman of faith and discipleship, the more we shall be able to understand what we can say about women in the Christian tradition and about women and men as partners in the mission of the Church.

Pastoral

Dr. Plaskow has suggested that it is not enough to "add women and stir" when we address the impact on religion of questions related to gender. She insists that we must rethink our tradition, using gender as a category of analysis. We must retrieve our tradition as one that belongs to women as well as to men. In these suggestions, Dr. Plaskow reiterates feminist concerns that transcend boundaries of religion, nationality, and culture. Roman Catholic feminists, too, tell us that our Christian memory must be reshaped; that we must reevaluate our "normative" sources.

The impact of these insights has been felt most directly in Roman Catholic circles at the pastoral level. There are three questions, in particular, that call for attention and understanding on the part of everyone concerned. The first question is that of *mutuality in ministry*. The Roman Catholic Church is one of the ecclesial bodies that does not admit women to the ordained ministry. That fact is not meant to exclude women from participation in the life and mission of the Church. Baptismal priesthood--or priesthood of the laity--is one of the basic realities of the

Christian life. It is because of baptism that all members of the Church are mandated to mission and ecclesial service.

Studies in Scripture and history during the past twenty years have shown that the involvement of women in the life and mission of the Church in the early centuries of the Christian era was comprehensive and extensive. These studies have also demonstrated that such involvement, in many instances, is no more than a memory. One of the challenges in Roman Catholicism in the last two decades has been to retrieve, reaffirm, and reestablish the participation of women in the life and mission of the Church.

Mutuality in ministry calls for the admission of women to those functions which do not require ordination. However, that simple statement carries a heavy agenda. It implies the conversion of hearts and minds where old prejudices bar the way to a woman's presence. It envisions possibilities of educational and formational programs for women to assure competent and effective collaboration as partners in ministry. It means a re-thinking and a re-creating of structures to enable and empower the whole Church to be, indeed, Church.

A second pastoral question is that of *language*. Many women feel excluded from the Christian community by what seems to be the exclusive, sexist language of liturgical texts, official documents, and theological discourse in general. Those of us who write professionally are familiar with the inclusive language style-sheets provided by publishing companies as a matter of policy. It is not as easy to "solve" the matter of Scriptural texts and liturgical formulae. At one level, there is the fact of a revealed message or a doctrinal statement. At another, there is the matter of the integrity of a sacred or a "classical" language translated into a vernacular that has yet to "grow into" and assume the character of proclamation or public worship. There is the problem of translation, itself.

Fortunately, we are quickly coming to the point of dissatisfaction with ad hoc adaptations that give the impression of band-aid solutions. Projects for the translation of texts are underway. Accommodations have already been introduced. Under the language, however, are the attitudes and sensitivities that transcend nouns and pronouns. An inclusive mentality and simple, practical guidelines can go far in relieving the difficulties that are experienced when language conveys discrimination or oppression.

A final pastoral question is that of *images and symbols of God*. This question is closely related to that of language. Clearly, however, more than language is at stake here.

In the Christian tradition, we affirm a God who is Trinity--One in substance or nature, Three in person. Further, we affirm that the Eternal Word of God became incarnate and lived among us as Jesus Christ--truly divine and truly human. We also affirm that Jesus revealed to us a God whom we can address as *Abba*. That word is usually translated as "Father." All of this has had an impact on our ways of thinking of God.

I use the word "thinking" deliberately. We Christians in the West have forgotten the full tradition--the tradition *katholicos*--of the East and of the West. In the documents that come to us from the early centuries of the Christian era, we see evidences of another tradition than that with which we are familiar. The Greek Fathers spoke of the mystery of God and of their encounter with that mystery in poetry and hymnody. Their God-language was mysticism and prayer. The development of Christian art and iconography is part of this Eastern tradition. In other words, we need the help of artists, poets, and musicians to help us speak of God in new images and to find new symbols. We need to use both sides of our brain!

The Roman Catholic tradition regarding gender and religion reflects the limitations of its rootedness in Judaism and in Greek Hellenism. Our challenge is to find the liberating elements in each of these traditions, so that we may have the insight we need to address the complex questions of gender and religion that we face today. We must learn to integrate into our constructive efforts for the future the values of an era when women's participation in the life and mission of the Church laid a foundation on which we can build our vision and our hope.

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.