Comment

Women

The Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World, issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on 31 May 2004, is offered as 'a starting point for further examination in the Church, as well as an impetus for dialogue with all men and women of good will'.

The context is clear. One recent approach to 'women's issues' emphasizes the abuse of women by men in order to provoke women into becoming independent of men. The alternative view is that there is no real difference between men and women, which inspires ideologies which 'make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality'. Thus, women and men are either completely alien to one another or absolutely identical.

The perspective is obviously Western: few of the bishops to whom the Letter is addressed can have these problems in the cultures in which they minister.

We need, anyway, to get back to the 'immutable basis of all Christian anthropology' (a phrase from Pope John Paul II). The place to start, so the Letter says, is the first three chapters of the Book of Genesis.

In the first creation narrative God makes humankind — *adam* is a collective noun — 'in his own image': 'male and female he created them' (Gen 1:27). From the beginning, that is to say, humanity as 'image of God' is sexually differentiated, 'articulated in the male-female relationship'.

The second creation story (Gen 2:4–25) assumes that the human is originally created male, is surrounded with trees and animals, but, since these fail to afford him companionship, finally has the female constructed from his side, so that his life 'does not sink into a sterile and, in the end, baneful encounter with himself'. According to Pope John Paul II, expounding this text: 'Woman is another "I" in a common humanity. From the very beginning they appear as a "unity of the two", and this signifies that the original solitude is overcome'.

That the male-female relationship makes humankind 'image and likeness of God' is plainly what the biblical text says. However, from

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first-century Jewish commentators like Philo of Alexandria through the Church Fathers, especially St Augustine, into the Middle Ages, and right into our own day in Orthodox and Protestant as well as neo-Scholastic Catholic theologies, it is in virtue of being endowed with intellect and will that we have been described as created in the image of God. For St Thomas Aquinas, for example, it is by our spiritual capacities for knowledge and love that we are able to reflect the divine nature (*Summa Theologiae* 1.93;1–2 prologue). This interpretation of the image of God in terms of sexual differentiation is such a remarkable break with centuries of tradition that we surely need time to think about it.

The 'original solitude' of the human male, in the exegesis of the second creation story, seems to project into the biblical text the pathos of the solipsistic self of modern existentialist philosophy.

Obviously, the picture of the first human being as a lone male has no basis in paleoanthropology, human biology or common sense. The construction of woman from man is one move in a sophisticated narrative of crime and punishment, which reworks several Middle Eastern myths. The word translated as 'rib' (Gen 2: 21–22) — *tsela* in Hebrew — occurs mostly in connection with the building of Solomon's temple (1 Kings), variously translated in the King James Bible as 'beam', 'board', 'chamber', and 'plank'; and the construction of the Tabernacle (Exodus), translated as 'corner', 'side chamber', and such. It might seem as if the first man was pictured at some stage as a kind of sacred house, a dwelling for the divinity. The history of the second creation narrative, anyway, certainly takes us into the 'dark backward and abysm of time'.

For the CDF's Letter, the nub of the narrative is 'nuptiality'. Their nakedness (Gen 2:25) reveals the human body, 'marked with the sign of masculinity or femininity' — which 'includes right from the beginning the nuptial attribute'. This 'spousal perspective' allows us to understand how 'woman, in her deepest and original being, exists "for the other"' — as men do too, only it does not come so naturally to them.

There are two key points. First, this spousal perspective provides the symbolism that is indispensable for understanding the history of salvation as revealed in Scripture: 'God makes himself known as the Bridegroom who loves Israel his Bride'. 'For as a young man marries a virgin so shall your creator marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you' (Isaiah 62:5), and so on.

These images — bridegroom and bride – 'characterize the dynamic of salvation'. Indeed, they are 'much more than simple metaphors'. They 'touch on the very nature of the relationship which God establishes with his people'.

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Well, yes: Christ the bridegroom and the Church his bride is a powerful way of describing the relationship, explicit in the New Testament and a recurrent theme in Christian tradition. But what does it mean to say that these terms are '*much more* than simple metaphors'? Is the Letter suggesting that this symbolism is somehow uniquely privileged — expressing the 'very nature' of God's relationship with creatures in some more than metaphorical way?

Are these 'much more than simple metaphors' what St Thomas regards as *analogies*? Biblically, anyway, the marital relation is clearly not the *only* analogy: God is pictured as Judge as well as Bridegroom, much more frequently indeed, such that our relationship to God is as much like a court of law as a marriage bed.

Old-fashioned Thomists, of course, might be tempted to put in a word for the appeal that St Thomas regularly makes to the metaphysics of causality to describe our relationship to God: God as 'primary cause', creatures as 'secondary causes' — speaking analogically of course! Of course metaphysics has often done harm in Catholic theology: yet, as Cornelius Ernst liked to point out, St Thomas's approach to the problem of theological interpretation of Scripture laid down what is surely an inescapable requirement for theologians of any epoch: namely, 'that their interpretation must exhibit the ontological primacy of God, God as the ultimately really real' (*Multiple Echo*, page 73). Metaphors, however rich and imaginative, some of us would want to say, need to be seen in continuity with the ontological interpretation of the divine names that we inherit from Catholic tradition.

Women, anyway, have the edge. This is the second key point in the Letter. A woman's physical capacity to give life structures her personality all the way down: 'It allows her to acquire maturity very quickly, and gives a sense of the seriousness of life and of its responsibilities. A sense and a respect for what is concrete develop in her, opposed to abstractions which are so often fatal for the existence of individuals and society. It is women, in the end, who…keep life going'. (Presumably men are the ones who go in for the fatal abstractions — who else?)

Women should certainly 'be present in the world of work and in the organization of society, and have access to positions of responsibility which allow them to inspire the policies of nations and to promote innovative solutions to economic and social problems'.

However, as John Paul II says: 'it will redound to the credit of society to make it possible for a mother – without inhibiting her freedom, without psychological or practical discrimination and without penalizing her as compared with other women – to devote herself to taking care of her children and educating them in accordance with their needs, which vary with age'.

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But back to the key point. In the last analysis, the Letter concedes, every human being, man or woman, is called 'to be for the other'. Yet this is a *feminine* characteristic — indeed *the* mark of femininity. True, 'that which is called "femininity" is more than simply an attribute of the female sex'. This is why men can do it too — 'live for the other and because of the other'.

However, when we turn to the example of the Virgin Mary, we find 'dispositions of listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting' — virtues which belong to 'the vocation of every baptized Christian'. Yet, the Letter insists, women live these attributes 'with particular intensity and naturalness.'

Which is why women are so indispensable in the Church's life — 'recalling these dispositions to *all* the baptized'. Which is why, also, 'one understands how the reservation of priestly ordination solely to men does not hamper in any way women's access to the heart of Christian life'.

Women, in short, are 'called to be *unique* examples and witnesses for *all* Christians of how the Bride is to respond in love to the love of the Bridegroom'. Men, that is to say, need to acquire the 'femininity' which will allow them to respond properly to the Bridegroom. Men really need to discover and develop the dispositions of the bride awaiting her Lord.

Moreover: 'The witness of women's lives must be received with respect and appreciation, as revealing those values without which humanity would be closed in self-sufficiency, dreams of power and the drama of violence'. We can see, that is to say, what men are like without the feminine values of listening, etc., without women to show them how to be human.

If we read on in the second creation narrative, in this innovatory style of exegesis, the woman indeed turns out to be human, quintessentially so, curious, adventurous, daringly testing the limits. In comparison, the man is totally passive; indeed she feeds him like baby (Gen 3: 6). It is the woman's all too human initiative and audacity that opens their eyes, lets them see themselves naked, and leads to their exile in the real world of labour and pain.

That is not a very simple metaphor either.

F.K.

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