

Gender Language in Liturgy—Why I Care
by Cathy Dempsey

I am fortunate to have always had a very close, loving relationship with both my parents. My dad died almost six years ago at the age of 88. My mom will turn 92 in a few days. Mom and Dad raised my brothers and me with deep love and faith, and have always been a great source of encouragement. As grateful as I am to have had a great relationship with Dad, there were always some things (especially in my teenage years) that were just easier to talk to Mom about. Sometimes there was just an easier, deeper connection as a teenage girl and as a young woman talking to my mother.

I had a somewhat similar experience in my prayer relationship with God. In high school and early college, I would pray, but at a certain point it was as if I hit a wall. I felt stuck at a fairly superficial level in my relationship with God. I could not break through to any deeper relationship.

In my early college years, in talking and praying with other Catholic students and staff and clergy at the Newman Center at the University of Missouri (in the early 1980s), I began to hear discussion about inclusive gender language. I began to understand that God is as much “Mother” to us as “Father,” despite our lengthy history of referring to God in exclusively male terms. It made good sense to me. God existed before gender; God created gender; both male and female genders were created by God; both genders were created in God’s image. God both encompasses and transcends male and female.

With that understanding, I began oftentimes to address God as Mother in my prayer. As a woman, this opened up a whole new depth of relationship for me with God. Just as there were some things I could only talk to my earthly mother about, being able to talk to God as Mother was a deeper and more honest conversation than I could have with God the Father. Knowing the roadblocks I hit in trying to relate to an exclusively male God even when I had a wonderful relationship with my earthly father, I cannot imagine the roadblocks faced by people who have had a bad father/child relationship.

The language we use about God matters. We humans deal with a tremendous paradox in our faith life. God is bigger and greater than any words we can use, and far beyond anything we ever can imagine. At the same time, if we experience God at any depth, we are compelled to communicate about God with one another. Human language and words are a gift, and as limited as they are in describing God, words are a powerful tool to communicate about the God we have come to know in our lives.

The language we use about people also matters. Language can convey respect and caring, or disdain and disrespect. The words we use not only express what we already believe; they form us as well.

We face an issue in the English language that not all languages face. We have no gender-neutral terms in the third person singular—we have to use “she” or “he”, “him” or “her.” Historically, we have commonly dealt with this by using “he” and “him” as if they were generic. The difficulty this practice caused for me, in my personal experience, was that it led to a subtle but distinct feeling that it was more typically human to be male than to be female. Only by refusing to use only “him” and “his” as “generic” words have I been able to work my way out of this dilemma.

It is important that we take care with our vocabulary in liturgy, so as to be more welcoming toward and inclusive of the diversity of God’s people. We need to think about, pray about, talk about, and address

our use of gender-related language. It is undoubtedly a complex issue as to the nuts and bolts of how we address it, but we need to have a deep, respectful, and loving conversation about it.