

Foundations of Catholic Morality
“Morality and Gender-Related Language in Liturgy”
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How does the gender-related language we use, especially in liturgy, contribute to the growth of persons in community? I wanted to write about this question because our parish liturgy committee has lately been discussing the issue of inclusive language, particularly in relation to gender. My intention is not to develop or advocate for a comprehensive system of rules as to whether and how certain words and phrases should be changed in given contexts (although it will obviously be necessary to discuss some specific words and phrases). My primary aim is to address whether the gender-related language we use is important at all. Is it actually a moral issue? I plan to discuss first our gender-related language concerning human beings, then language concerning God, for these two areas present somewhat different questions and are sometimes perceived differently by people.

The Second Vatican Council declared that “there is a common dignity of members deriving from their rebirth in Christ, a common grace as sons and daughters, a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope and undivided charity. In Christ and in the church there is, then, no inequality arising from race or nationality, social condition or sex.”¹ The way we speak, then, should express that fundamental belief. Language is important in expressing our beliefs in general. The Canadian Bishops’ Pastoral Team stated that language is a key issue for the entire church, and pointed to the Council of Nicea which, in 325, developed new language to express a deeper

¹ *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), 49-50.

understanding of who Jesus was.² They went on to say, "Today the use of inclusive language indicates care is being taken to ensure that words reflect our belief in the equality of men and women, our understanding of the Gospel and our affirmation of the church as a communion."³

Taking care with the use of gender-related language is not only a question of conveying that we believe in the equality of women and men. The language we use not only reflects and expresses what we already believe, it forms us as well. The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has stated that "translation . . . must be guided by the conviction that liturgical prayer not only is formed by the genius of a culture, but itself contributes to the development of that culture."⁴ Few today would disagree, for example, that there are potentially devastating effects from persistently calling someone "stupid" or calling a child (or an adult) by a racial epithet. Similarly, few in democratic societies today would approve of telling children, "Boys are smarter than girls." This is not only because this statement does not correctly state what we believe as a society, but because of the potential of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. The language people commonly use can shape what people think and believe about themselves and others.

It is often stated that the use of words like "man" or "men" is not intended as exclusive of or demeaning to women. It is argued that such usage is, in certain circumstances, intended as generic. At the outset, it seems somewhat unusual for such

² Canadian Bishops' Pastoral Team, "Inclusive Language: Overcoming Discrimination," reprinted in *Origins* 19 (September 21, 1989): 259.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "Liturgiam authenticam: On the Use of Vernacular Languages in the Publication of the Books of the Roman Liturgy," #47. (2001). Go to www.vatican.va, click on "The Holy See: English," click on "Search," search for "Liturgiam authenticam," then click on "Liturgiam authenticam."

words to be used as generic in some settings, but specific in others-- it seems to almost contradict the very notion of "generic." There is no question, however, that in the English language, the words "man" and "men" and "mankind" have been used for centuries in certain settings as generic for "women and men," etc. What one might question, however, is why those words came to be used in a generic sense to begin with. The generic usage of "man" and "men" was not always clearly present in the English language in its early stages, and came to be proposed and justified as a rule by grammarians in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.⁵ The rationale was stated that "the male gender is 'more comprehensive' than the female and because its superiority should be reflected in language."⁶ In the sixteenth century, English grammarian Thomas Wilson argued that men should always be referenced first and given higher status in expressions like "man and wife," given the "natural" male supremacy.⁷ Today the sexism inherent in views like these is fairly obvious. Given the historical basis for the use of "man," etc., as generic for both genders, to continue this usage seems to perpetuate the notion that to be male is to be more typically human. It can be seen to undermine the equality of women and men, and in the church, to undermine the sense of church as a communion.

In American English, there has been a "noticeable loss of the sense of grammatical gender" and the usage of male terms in a generic sense is increasingly perceived as excluding women, and this change in perception was part of the basis for the United States Catholic Bishops' 1990 guidelines for inclusive language in Scripture

⁵ Thomas H. Groome, *Language for a "Catholic" Church* (Kansas City, Missouri: Sheed & Ward, 1991), 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

translation.⁸ Studies have documented this perception of generic usage of male terms as being exclusive of women. In the early 1970s, for example, separate studies at Drake University, the University of Iowa, and the University of Michigan found distinct tendencies of children and young adults to perceive the use of the term “man” as referring primarily, if not exclusively, to men and not women.⁹ The Drake University study asked college students in one group to find illustrations to be used in a book with chapter headings like “Political Man,” while those in another group were asked to find illustrations for chapters with headings like “Political Behavior,” with the result that the vast majority of illustrations in the first group showed males only, while the illustrations found by the second group were much more closely balanced between females and males.¹⁰ Feminist theologian Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza states that “[i]nsofar as boys and girls learn to express themselves and to define the world in grammatically ‘generic’ language that subsumes women under ‘men’ and ‘he,’ they learn to understand themselves in terms of patriarchal superordination and subordination, of being in the center or being on the margins.”¹¹

This growing perception of exclusiveness in the attempt to use male terms generically is seen by many as requiring a response. It is seen to require some kind of change in our typical word usage. The United States Catholic Bishops recommended not using words like “man” or “men” in scriptural translations where the intention is to be

⁸ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Inclusive Language in Liturgy: Scriptural Texts,” reprinted in *Origins* 45 (November 29, 1990): 406.

⁹ Studies discussed by Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women: New Language in New Times* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991): 23-28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23-5.

¹¹ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 263.

generic, within certain limits.¹² They suggest translating words like '*adam*, *anthropos*, and *homo* as *person*, *people*, *humans*, etc., because in the original languages these words denoted human beings, not specifically males.¹³ The Canadian Bishops' Pastoral Team urged that everyone attend with greater sensitivity and "be more responsive to women who do not see themselves included in our language."¹⁴

By contrast, *Liturgiam authenticam* does not attach any importance to trying to translate liturgical language in ways that are perceived as more gender-inclusive, and in fact the document directly contradicts some of the guidelines set out by the United States Bishops in 1990. In *Liturgiam authenticam*, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments stated the following:

In many languages there exist nouns and pronouns denoting both genders, masculine and feminine, together in a single term. The insistence that such a usage should be changed is not necessarily to be regarded as the effect or the manifestation of an authentic development of the language as such. Even if it may be necessary by means of catechesis to ensure that such words continue to be understood in the "inclusive" sense just described, it may not be possible to employ different words in the translations themselves without detriment to the precise intended meaning of the text, the correlation of its various words or expressions, or its aesthetic qualities. When the original text, for example, employs a single term in expressing the interplay between the individual and the universality and unity of the human family or community, such as the Hebrew word '*adam*, the Greek *anthropos*, or the Latin *homo*), this property of the language of the original text should be maintained in the translation.¹⁵

The document goes on to set forth a number of specific examples, emphasizing the need to retain established gender references, including established gender references to the

¹² National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 407.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Canadian Bishops' Pastoral Team, 260.

¹⁵ Congregation for Divine Worship, #30.

individual persons of the Holy Trinity and the use of the feminine pronoun in references to the Church.¹⁶

Liturgiam authenticam is quite straightforward as to what is to be done with regard to translating gender-related language in liturgical books. There appears to be an underlying assumption that gender-inclusive language is a mere matter of political correctness, but the document does not explicitly say this nor does it attempt to give any justification for such an assumption. What seems to be lacking is any effort to grapple with the question of whether established usages of gender promote the growth of persons in community, or detract from it. To that extent, I do not find the document particularly helpful in my inquiry here. Additionally, the absence of any discussion of the impact of gender-related language seems strange in light of the document's statement about the formative nature of liturgical language that I cited previously.¹⁷

Our language about God presents additional issues because, if nothing else, we understand much less of God than we do of humans. We experience God in a variety of ways, and while we know that we experience only a tiny fragment of the totality of God, we are compelled to attempt to express and describe our experience of God. In this attempt, we use metaphor. Gail Ramshaw, a Lutheran scholar of liturgical language, writes, "Language about God must needs be metaphoric, for human language has no words that precisely describe divinity."¹⁸

One metaphor we Christians have long used for God is "Father." It is a wonderful metaphor. Difficulty arises, however, when we come to see God as solely "Father."

¹⁶ Ibid., 31.

¹⁷ Congregation for Divine Worship, #47.

¹⁸ Gail Ramshaw, *Reviving Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language* (Akron, Ohio: OSL Publications, 2000), xii.

People easily see the limitations of less personal metaphors for God. There is little difficulty recognizing that although we use the metaphor "God is a Rock," God is not *just* a rock.¹⁹ I often find in my conversations with others, though, a very strong and singular attachment to male metaphors for God and a great resistance to the use of female metaphors.

Gail Ramshaw discusses numerous potentially negative connotations of exclusively naming God "Father," not the least of which are the "conscious and unconscious sexual bias of father language" and the experiential connotation we perceive based on our own individual human fathers.²⁰ My admittedly limited research did not locate any specific studies showing statistically the impact of the exclusive use of male metaphors for God. It can be expected, though, that exclusive use of male language to describe God presents problems comparable to the attempted generic use of "man," "mankind," etc. If only male metaphors for God are used, and never female ones, people may consciously or unconsciously perceive God to be exclusively or at least primarily male. Then the understanding that can develop is that women are made less in the image of God than men.

I have heard numerous stories of adults who, as children, were abused by their human fathers and so they find a destructive connotation in the metaphor of God as Father-- one of the potential pitfalls of the father metaphor mentioned by Ramshaw.²¹ Even in my own prayer experience as a young adult, I found myself very stifled and limited in my ability to be open to and with God when I only had a male image of God-- even though I had and have a very good and close relationship with both my earthly

¹⁹ Ramshaw gives a very interesting discussion of the rock metaphor for God, *Ibid.*, 67-8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

²¹ *Ibid.*

father and mother. On the other hand, when I became aware of the possibility of naming God as Mother, my prayer life deepened greatly. I liken it to the fact that although I do have a good relationship with my human mother and father, there are some things that are just easier to talk to my mother about.

Exactly how we should name God and what metaphors ought to be used in particular liturgical settings is a complex question, and beyond the scope of this paper. I conclude, however, that attending to the use of gender-related language in liturgy is critical to our growth as persons in community. I do not expect the immediate elimination of all male “generic” human references, although I believe it is something to strive for. I do not advocate the elimination of all male metaphors for God, although I believe we should include far more female metaphors for God, strive to limit the automatic and repetitive usage of male metaphors, and enrich our usage of gender-neutral metaphors for God. It is my hope to be respectful of the views of others in ongoing dialogue about our use of gender-related language in liturgy. But I believe we must engage in the dialogue. We cannot avoid the issue simply because it is messy. The church as a communion “is a sacrament or sign of the unity to which the whole of humanity is called.”²² Our liturgical language must therefore both express the equality and unity we believe in, and by expressing it, help bring that equality and unity into being.

²² Canadian Bishops’ Pastoral Team, 259.

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