"GOD IS OUR FATHER; EVEN MORE GOD IS OUR MOTHER": THE YEAR OF GOD THE FATHER AND "RESPECT FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS"

Daniel Patrick Huang, S.J.

You may have noticed that the title of this morning's talk contains two quotations. The first line — "God is our Father; even more God is our mother" — is a direct quotation from a speech made in 1978; the second line — connecting the year of God the Father and "respect for women's rights" — originates from a document published in 1994. Can you identify the sources of these two quotations? Perhaps it may surprise some of you that these quotations are not taken, as one might expect, from the writings of contemporary feminist theologians: from the works, say, of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, or Elizabeth Johnson. Rather, they are the words of the last two popes of the twentieth century.

The first line is taken from an Angelus address of His Holiness, Pope John Paul I. Over twenty years ago, on September 10, 1978, Pope John Paul I joined the rest of the world in turning his attention to the historic Middle-East peace talks between President Sadat of Egypt, Premier Begin of Israel, and President Jimmy Carter of the United States. The three men meeting in Camp David were all men of faith, and each had spoken publicly of their religious beliefs as a moti-

*Talk given during the Academic Convocation at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary, Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines on August 6, 1999.
vation for working for peace. President Sadat quoted a lovely Islamic saying: "There is pitch darkness, a black stone, and on the stone, a little ant; but God sees it and does not forget it." Premier Begin quoting from the holy book of his Jewish heritage, referred to God's promise in Isaiah that even should a mother forget her child, God will never forget his people. President Carter, a Christian, recalled Jesus' teaching that "even the hairs of our head are numbered" by God.

The pope recalled the religious references of these important world leaders approvingly, and then went on to express similar convictions. He said:

... we who are here have the same sentiments; we are the objects of undying love on the part of God. We know he always has his eyes open on us, even when it seems to be dark. God is our father; even more God is our mother. ... If children are ill, they have additional claim to be loved by their mother. And we too, if by chance we are sick with badness and are on the wrong track, have yet another claim to be loved by the Lord.¹

The point of the pope's comparison is clear: God is like a mother who loves, with a special care, her sick child.

The second line in the title comes from no. 51 of Pope John Paul II's 1994 Apostolic Letter Tertio Millennio Adveniente, "As the Third Millennium Dawns." No. 51 is found in the section of the letter that discusses 1999 as the Year of God the Father. The Holy Father begins by insisting that the year of God the Father is one in which all Christians must "lay greater emphasis on the Church's preferential option for the poor and the outcast." He then goes on to propose the radical idea that the Great Jubilee be a time for considering the possibility of reducing, or perhaps even canceling, the international debt of poor nations. Fi-

nally, he adds:

The Jubilee can also offer an opportunity for reflecting on other challenges of our time, such as difficulties of dialogue between different cultures and the problems connected with respect for women's rights and the promotion of the family and marriage. (TMA, No. 51 [emphasis added])

The thoughts I would like to share with you this morning are neatly summarized by the words of these two popes. First, Pope John Paul II forces us to face the fact that there is a problem — indeed, that there are problems — connected with respect for women's rights. The most basic problem, of course, is, simply, that women's rights are violated, disregarded, trampled upon, in the world, in Asia, in the Philippines. Secondly, Pope John Paul I suggests one aspect of a solution to the problem: namely, that we go beyond our usual exclusively male images of God; in other words, that, like him, we learn to speak of and image God not simply as Father, but also as Mother.

There will be four parts to my presentation. First, we shall reflect on the stark reality of women's oppression and analyze the cultural, political and religious roots of this oppression. Secondly, we shall turn to the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Heb 12: 2), Jesus Christ, and seek to understand more deeply his experience of the God he called abba, "Father." Third, I shall offer a concrete pastoral suggestion concerning our language about and imaging of God. Fourth and finally, I shall attempt briefly to offer some thoughts on what all this has to do with seminarians, those who are training to serve the Church as ordained ministers, as priests of the third millennium.

The Problem: Women's oppression and sexism

Our brief time together does not allow a systematic presentation of women's issues and problems. Let me simply recall some names and stories — mostly familiar names and stories — that, perhaps more powerfully than any abstract analysis, might impress on us the deeply
troubling reality of the problems of women in our society.

- Baby Echegeray, raped repeatedly as a child by her father, Leo Echegeray.
- Jacqueline and Marjoiy Chiong, lovely, promising young Chinese Filipinos from Cebu, gang-raped, and then brutally murdered. Marjoiy was apparently still alive when she was thrown into a ravine like so much garbage, after being abused. Jacqueline’s body has not yet been found.
- Rosario Baluyot, a 12-year-old child prostitute from Olongapo, who died on the operating table from infections left by half a vibrator left in her womb by a Swiss pedophile doctor. The doctor was brought to court, but released due to “lack of evidence.”
- Myrna Diones, “one of five girls who were arrested by policemen for shoplifting. They were arrested, raped, tortured and thrown into a ravine. She woke up in the funeral parlor and was able to accuse the perpetrators of the crime.”
- Eileen Sarmenta, college student of U.P., Los Baños, raped by Mayor Antonio Sanchez of Calauan, Laguna; passed on by him to be raped in turn by his bodyguards; later, murdered.
- Sarah Balabagan, overseas contract worker, sentenced to death, for killing her employer when he was raping her. Public outcry led to the commutation of her sentence to a year of imprisonment and one hundred lashes.
- A young woman, who shall remain unnamed, from the Northern Philippines, sexually abused by her uncle. Running away from home, she is left in the care of a priest, who also abuses her. Running away from the priest, she arrives in a nearby city where she is gang-raped by a group of “standbys,” and afterwards raped by the policeman she reports the case to.


3 Ibid.
These and so many stories of rape assail us almost everyday in the media. We hear of them so often that they no longer inspire horror and outrage in us. Perhaps, at least for this morning, we can allow ourselves to sense the violence, the cruelty, the brutality of these acts of men against women. Perhaps this morning, we can allow ourselves to imagine the terror and the pain of these victims. Even more, perhaps we can allow ourselves to see in them simply the most extreme instance of a more systemic problem of discrimination and violence against women. Allow me to repeat. Rape is not the only problem: it is simply the most extreme instance, the most painful and graphic symbol of a larger problem.

What is this “larger problem”? One great service of feminist theologians is that they have given the larger problem a name and identified its two primary manifestations. The name of the problem is sexism. Just as racism is the prejudicial attitude that sees persons as superior or inferior on the basis of their race, so sexism is a “belief that persons are superior or inferior to one another on the basis of their sex.”

“Sexism like racism classifies human beings, prescribes certain roles and denies certain rights to them on the basis of physical characteristics.” Simply, sexism views women as inferior to men simply because they are women. It involves a rejection of the full dignity of women as equals of men.

Sexism is manifested in two ways. The first way, called patriarchy, concerns structures of power: who holds power and who is deprived of it; who makes decisions and who follows; who is the head and who is subordinate. Patriarchy, literally “the rule of the fathers” is a structure that places power almost exclusively in the hands of men; and this power tends to be total, dominating, authoritarian. Under the regime of patriarchy, women are to obey; or to be background supports for men (thus the saying, “Behind every great man is a woman”); or they are allowed to have power only in the domestic or family setting (thus,

---

4 Margaret Farley, quoted by Elizabeth Johnson, in *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 23.

the saying, "A woman's place is in the home"), while men are to hold power in the public sphere of politics, economics, and culture.

It needs little reflection to see that, even though things are changing, patriarchy remains the primary global power structure in economics, politics, culture, and even the Church. Most of these structures are in the control of men, and women are usually denied access to these posts of power. Just consider: up to the 19th century, in Europe, university education was essentially only open to men. In the early part of this century, in our own country, as in most parts of the world, only men were allowed to vote during national elections. In the snap elections of 1986, one of the propaganda techniques used by the Marcos camp against Cory Aquino was to repeat that she could not be an effective president "dabil babae lang siya." John Paul II himself, without using the term "patriarchy," shows a keen awareness of the problem when he writes the following words in his important Letter to Women of 1995:

Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude.... [They have been] excluded from equal educational opportunities, ignored and not given credit for their intellectual contributions.... This has prevented women from truly being themselves, and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity.6

The second manifestation of sexism is cultural, rather than political, and involves a way of thinking about human beings. Androcentrism, literally "male-centeredness," is a pattern of thinking that sees men as normative of humanity, and women as somehow derivative or dependent on men for their dignity and worth. Androcentric thinking views men as strong, rational, and active, while women are stereotypically portrayed as weak, emotional, and passive.7

---

Examples of androcentric patterns of speech and action abound. Think for example of the common use of the word "man," as in "Man is a rational being" or "Man is created in the image of God." The word for the male is also the generic term for humanity, women being told that they are "included" in the male word. If one were to say, as a general statement about humanity, "Woman is created in the image of God," most men would probably bristle and feel excluded! Consider too, our marriage patterns: why is it automatic that when a man and a woman marry, it is the woman who loses her own family name and takes on that of the man's — a family name, incidentally, which the woman took from her father, and not from her mother? That we do not question these practices at all, that we see them as simply "natural," is surely an indication of how deeply shaped by androcentrism our thinking is.

The Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson sums up the effect of sexism, with its patriarchal power structures and androcentric patterns of thinking, simply as "systematic oppression." Women, she writes, are

excluded, marginalized, and rendered invisible in language and public life. They are subordinated in theory and practice to men.... As U.N. statistics show, while forming one-half of the world's population, women do three-fourths of the world's work, receive one-tenth of the world's salary, and own one-hundredth of the world's land. Two-thirds of illiterate adults are women. Over three-fourths of starving people are women and their dependent children. To make a dark picture even bleaker, women are bodily and sexually exploited, used, battered and raped. The fact is, men do this to women in a way women do not do to men.\(^8\)

Let me add that our present pope, John Paul II, has a similar sense of this systematic oppression of women. For me, one of the most moving testimonies to his sense of this injustice against women is a

\(^8\)Johnson, *Consider Jesus*, 102.
short sentence in his Apostolic Exhortation on the Family, *Familiaris Consortio*. In the letter, the pope describes a “persistent mentality” prevalent in today’s world, which “considers the human being not as a person but as a thing, . . . at the service of selfish interest and mere pleasure.” The pontiff then concludes starkly: “the first victims of this mentality are women.” (FC, no. 24)

**A contributing problem: exclusively, literally, and patriarchally male imaging of God**

There is, I believe, a growing sense in the Church today that addressing this evil of sexism is one of the great calls of the Spirit to the people of God in our time. The bishops during the recently concluded Synod for Asia put it thus:

One of the significant signs of the times is the awakening of women’s consciousness of their dignity and equality with men. The Church in Asia, to be a credible sign of the respect and freedom of women, must give witness to Christ as the promoter of the true dignity of women.10

In order to do this credibly, however, the Church must face the fact of sexism in her own life and teaching. This morning, we shall address just one manifestation of the influence of sexism in the Church: the tendency to limit our language and imaging of God to male speech and symbol.

That Jesus called God “Father” and taught us to call God “Father” is at the heart of the Good News. Unfortunately, partially due to the influence of sexism, androcentrism and patriarchy, Christians have taken Jesus’ privileged symbol for God and understood it in a literal, exclusive, patriarchal sense. Let me attempt first to explain the terms “literal” and “exclusive.” Let me do this by asking a simple question: God is our father; but does this mean that God is male? Is God a man?

---


Competent theologians such as yourselves will of course answer that question in the negative. God is not male; God is not female either, for that matter, for God is Spirit. What is more, God is mystery, inexhaustible, transcendent mystery. All our language about God is analogical, symbolic, metaphorical, drawing on our limited human experience to express the endless mystery of God. No one symbol can adequately capture the sheer limitlessness of God’s holy mystery. Thus the rich variety of words and symbols used by the Biblical writers to speak about God: abstract concepts, like “God is love”; symbols from nature or inanimate reality, such as light, fire, water, wind, rock, eagle, shield, fortress; more personal images, like shepherd, bridegroom, king.

Thus far, we are agreed. God is spirit, God is mystery, God is not literally male. Now, pay attention to your reactions to the following statements: “God is good. She is loving. She gives us all we need. I entered the seminary because I want to follow her will. I want to surrender my life to her.” If you are a typical Catholic, you will probably feel at least a mild discomfort: “Mona’s lain,” as one seminarian I tried these statements on put it. Others might react more strongly and feel that there is something suspect or vaguely heretical in speaking of God as a “her.”

Let us reflect a bit on this discrepancy. Why is it that in one’s conscious, conceptual mind, one can affirm unproblematically that God is not male or female, and that therefore, one can use many images to speak of God’s mystery; and yet, at the same time, on the “affective level,” feel disquieted and disturbed by the use of feminine pronouns for God? Is it not because, on the level of our actually operative images and words about God, that level where we meet God and out of which we speak about God and act on God’s behalf, we image God as literally and exclusively male? “Literally”: meaning, we take God’s fatherhood literally, and image God as a man, usually a Caucasian man, perhaps with a white beard, most probably of an advanced age. “Exclusively”: we think of God only in male terms and images.

That we should think this way is, of course, not entirely our fault, because our entire tradition has spoken of and imaged God in this
literal and exclusive fashion as male. Think of the many paintings and statues of the Holy Trinity you have encountered, perhaps even prayed to, in churches, chapels, family altars, Bibles, stampitas. Have you seen any that depicts a single member of the Trinity as a female? Until very recently, I personally have not. Of course, you might say, this is natural: Jesus taught us to call God Father, and fathers are men. Nevertheless, did Jesus mean us to think of God as father in literally and exclusively male terms? Is a male father figure the only way Jesus imaged and spoke of God? We shall return to these questions shortly.

In the meantime, let us explain the third term mentioned earlier: "patriarchal." Often, the problem of God being imaged literally and exclusively as male is aggravated by a view of God as a patriarchal, dominating male as well. The accent is placed on God the "Father almighty," and his might, his power is understood in patriarchal terms, as absolute, harsh, judgmental, fearful. Scholars have pointed out, for example, that one reason why the cult of Mary flourished so luxuriantly from the middle ages onwards was precisely because of the tendency to view a male Jesus and his male Father as distant, cold, aloof, judgmental, kingly, while Mary, by way of contrast, was depicted as a warm, maternal, merciful, approachable woman.11 I venture to say that much Filipino devotion to Mary is still ideologically supported by this contrast between the image of a kind, patient mother-figure (Mary), on the one hand, and the image of a distant, judging, all-powerful — in a word, patriarchal — male Father, on the other.

The important point however is this: this literal, exclusive, patriarchal imaging of God as male has arguably contributed to the problem of sexism. One of the most quoted sentences in all feminist theology puts it pithily yet powerfully, "If God is male, the male is God."12 A faulty image or understanding of God is not just an intellectual mis-


take, but one with profound social and psychological consequences. The way we image and refer to God powerfully affects the way we relate to one another. If, in both devotion and theology, only masculine images and metaphors are used for God, then this, as we have seen, "creates the impression that God is male" and "contributes to the religious legitimization of patriarchy" since "the male and masculinity are [placed] at the center." In other words, such a male imaging of God supports the patriarchal mindset that limits the possession of power to men, and the androcentric pattern of thought that sees the male as normative and the female as somehow derivative and dependent.

What then is to be done? Jesus taught us to call God "Father," and to this we must remain faithful. And yet is there a way of calling God "Father" which overcomes the problem of an exclusively and literally patriarchal concept of God that legitimates sexism, patriarchy, and androcentrism? Feminist theologians faithful to the Christian tradition have taught us that such a way exists, and we discover it by returning to Jesus himself. We shall now turn then to the Son who taught us to call God "Father."

Jesus' experience of God as Abba

One of the most striking things about Jesus is the unique way he addressed God. Whereas God is designated as "father" only eleven times in all of the Old Testament, God is referred to as "Father" 170 times by Jesus in the Gospels. Furthermore, scholars are in general agreement that the unique word Jesus used to address and speak of God was the Aramaic abba, a caritative, "babble-word used originally by very small children of their fathers . . . and also used by adults to address their fathers, and as an address of courtesy and affection for older men than one's father." The word implies "respect, intimacy, and familiar affection." 

---

13 Lacugna, "God in Communion with us," 100.
The noted Scripture scholar, James D.G. Dunn has pointed out that the Old Testament use of the metaphor "father" for God conveyed two important aspects of Israel's experience of God: namely, God's "care and authority."\(^{15}\) Jesus' use of the informal and affectionate term abba communicated his intensification of these two aspects of Israel's experience. In other words, as liberation theologian Jon Sobrino puts it, Jesus called God abba because first, he experienced "a God who is a Father," a God who, like a loving parent, overflows with graciousness, kindness, concern, and compassion for humankind, and whom human beings, therefore, can turn to in complete trust and delight. Secondly, however, Jesus' "abba experience" also included an experience of a "Father who is God," a Father who remains mystery and authority, whose saving will, even when it seemed, as in the garden of Gethsemane, difficult to comprehend, Jesus accepted in obedience and surrender.\(^{16}\)

Thus far, we are clear: Jesus called God abba because he experienced God intensely as parent, with both a parent's care and a parent's authority. We shall come later to the question of why Jesus spoke of God as a male parent. In the light of our previous discussions however, we can now raise two important questions. First, did Jesus, in calling God abba, indicate that he experienced God as literally and exclusively male? And, secondly, did Jesus, in calling God abba, mean to convey a patriarchal understanding of God?

To answer the first of these two questions, we shall enlist the aid of feminist Scripture scholar, Sandra Schneiders. Dr. Schneiders has convincingly demonstrated that, although Jesus addressed God as abba,

---


he did not experience God as literally and exclusively male. Her "evidence" seems terribly obvious once it is pointed out, so obvious that one wonders how the tradition as a whole seems to have overlooked it in the first place. It is this: just as, in the Old Testament, God, although imaged as a male father, husband and king, is also depicted in female images, such as that of a woman giving birth, a nursing mother, a mother eagle, a midwife, even a mother bear, so too Jesus spoke of and symbolized God as a woman.

Schneiders discusses four examples; because of our time constraints, let me point out two of them. Perhaps the most powerful example is found in the great series of parables of God's unexpected mercy in Luke 15. All three parables convey the heart of the Good News of the Kingdom: that God is drawing near, not to punish or abandon sinners, but to mercifully seek out and find those who are lost. Thus, Jesus portrays God as a shepherd leaving the ninety-nine sheep in search of the lost one; as the merciful father running to embrace his wayward prodigal son; and, in the central parable in the series of three, as a woman, a housekeeper, a homemaker, dropping all her chores and turning her house upside down to search for a misplaced coin, and then joyfully calling her neighbors to party with her when she finally finds it! Matthew 13 provides us with another parable with yet another female image of God. After comparing the Kingdom of God to a man sowing a tiny mustard seed in his field, a seed that grows into the largest of shrubs, Jesus tells a parallel parable, this time about a bakerwoman kneading a tiny bit of yeast into three measures of flour until the whole loaf rises (Mt. 13: 33).

Who is the kind shepherd, the compassionate father, the hardworking sower of the seed? We have no problem in identifying God with these images. But who is the diligent, searching housekeeper? Who is the industrious bakerwoman kneading the yeast of the Word

---


Landas vol 13, no. 1 (1999)
into the dough of the world? Aren't these female images just as much images of God for Jesus as the earlier masculine ones? It is a telling indication of our androcentrism that we have parishes dedicated to the good shepherd, and lecterns and pulpits carved with the image of the sower sowing the seed of the Word; but no parishes, no churches, no icons, no statues of God the good housewife or of God the hardy bakerwoman. But to return to the issue at hand, clearly the existence of these female images of God suggests that although Jesus called God "Father," he was not imprisoned within an exclusively or literally male understanding of God, but felt free to express his understanding of God's holy mystery using female metaphors.

We now turn to our second question: did Jesus understand God's fatherhood along patriarchal lines of domintative power? This question we can perhaps answer more easily. The parable that has, in a sense, become the symbolic center of this year's celebration of God the Father, the parable of the Prodigal, Merciful Father, shows us that the heart of Jesus' experience of God as Father is not that of controlling, dominating power, but of limitless parental compassion. In Jesus' story, what sets the Father running down the road, throwing away his dignity to welcome and embrace his wastrel of a son is compassion: "When he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms, and kissed him tenderly" (Luke 15: 20-21).

Phyllis Trible has done a fascinating study of the origins of the Hebrew word for compassion, rahamim:

In its singular form the noun rehem means "womb" or "uterus." In the plural, rahamim, this concrete meaning expands to the abstractions of compassion, mercy and love.19

Interestingly, John Paul II makes the same link between the compas-

---

sion of God and the wombs of women in his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*.20

What does this study of the etymology of the Hebrew for “compassion” suggest? It awakens us to a hidden comparison behind all Biblical references to God’s compassion. The word *rabamim*, beginning very concretely in a woman’s uterus, a mother’s womb, suggests that God’s compassion is like the love a woman bears for the child of her womb. As the pope explains, “*rabamim*, in its very root, denotes the love of a mother.”21 This fact suggests that the way to understand the depths of what the father feels for his wayward son in the parable is through an understanding of “the deep and original bond — indeed the unity — that links a mother to her child.”22

One mother describes this love very concretely and very movingly thus:

I sit on the edge of my son’s bed. His face is smooth with sleep. The glow of the night-light stands vigil against the “monsters” that he worries lurk beneath his changing table. In the warm dark of the room, the two rhythms of our breathing punctuate the silence. As I stand up to leave, I feel my heart, utterly self-contained a moment before, pulled out of my breast, stretched to span the widening distance between us. A presence, palpable in its intensity, connects us. Before he was born, I did not know how I could ever let him in. Now that I have, I don’t know how I will ever let him go.

“Before he was born, I did not know how I could ever let him in. Now that I have, I don’t know how I will ever let him go.” Isn’t this a lovely way of describing the womb-love which is compassion: a mother welcomes a child into her womb, and in so doing, welcomes the child

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
forever into her life? "To welcome a child," this mother writes, "is to give priority to the unpredictability of another life, to tend it in sickness, no matter what you had otherwise planned, to allow your plans and dreams to be altered, even set aside, because of another's need." "It is," she concludes, "to welcome the unfolding mystery of an entire lifetime's joys and pains as your own."  

Compassion, rabamim, then, is a kind of "womb-love." And thus, if compassion is the heart of abba, this father-God Jesus experiences and proclaims, then this father is not patriarchal, because this father is very much like a mother.

One final question must be faced before we move on. If Jesus experienced God as parental because of God's care and authority, but did not experience God as exclusively, literally, and patriarchally male, why did he choose as his privileged metaphor for God a male parental metaphor? Why did he not address and teach his disciples to address God as "mother"?

Sandra Schneiders offers the interesting and, to my mind, convincing suggestion that one can understand Jesus' choice by attending to what C. H. Dodd called a "hidden parable" in John 5: 19-47. There, Jesus affirms, "the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees the Father doing: and what the Father does the Son does too." The hidden parable is "that of a son who is gradually initiated into his father's trade, apprenticed to his father until such time as he is able to take over the 'family business."  

In other words, part of Jesus' experience of God as parent was that it was from this God that he, like an apprentice-son, learned what he had to do to carry out his mission. It was probably because of this, Schneiders argues, that Jesus had to speak of God as a male parent. In the culture of his time, "a mother-son

---


24 Schneiders, Women and the Word, 43.
relationship could not have carried this meaning because mothers had no independent trades and they did not train their male children for adult work."²⁵

Earlier, we made the claim that one's image of God affects one's relationships to one's fellow human beings. This assertion is clearly borne out when we look at Jesus' praxis. Because he did not experience the Holy Mystery he called abba as literally, exclusively, and patriarchally male, Jesus subverted the patriarchal and androcentric structures of his culture. Completely unlike the rabbis of his time, Jesus called female disciples to be part of his community, to follow him and share in his ministry as equals of his male disciples. We know some of the names of these women: Mary Magdalene, Johanna, Salome, Susanna, Martha, and Mary, who, in a typical disciple's gesture "sat at Jesus' feet listening to his teaching." We know too that it is these women who remained faithful to Jesus to the terrible and bitter end, who stood compassionately by his cross, when all the male disciples had fled in fear and panic. Finally, we know too that it was to these women, disqualified by the patriarchal culture as official witnesses, that Jesus subversively entrusted the message of testimony that marked, in a sense, the beginning of Christianity: the message that He is risen from the dead²⁶.

A Proposal for Pastoral and Spiritual Praxis

Let us retrace the steps of the journey we have taken thus far in this talk. We have spoken of the problem of sexism, patriarchy, and androcentrism, and identified an exclusively, literally, and patriarchally male conception of God as a contributing part of the problem. We then turned to Jesus, who taught us to call God abba, yet freely depicted God in female images; who described this Father-God as compassionate as a mother has compassion on the child of her womb; and

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Cf. Elizabeth Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," in Freirian Theology, 123-27.
who, as a result, built up a community of free and equal disciples, male and female, having a common dignity, sharing in the same mission. Now, we return to our time, to our world, to our painful problems of disrespect for women's rights and disregard for their God-given full and equal dignity with men, and we ask the question: "Now what? What are we to do?"

My concrete suggestion, a suggestion that I feel is appropriate for celebrating this year of the Father, comes down very simply, to imitating Jesus in two ways. First, like Jesus, let us call God "Father" with devotion and love, but let us, like Jesus, feel free to use female language and images for God, in order to break the stranglehold on our imaginations of our literal and exclusively male imaging of God.

Let me clarify. I am not suggesting that we get rid of male language and imagery for God, but that we seek to complement this language and imagery with words and metaphors taken from women's life and experience, so that we might allow to surface aspects of God's inexhaustible mystery that might be inadequately rendered or evoked by male symbols.

Allow me to clarify further. In one of her earlier articles, Elizabeth Johnson suggests that much of Catholic devotion to Mary involves experiencing in the person of Mary all the female characteristics of God that our restrictively male imaging of God does not allow us to experience when we pray to God the Father, or even to the male Jesus Christ.27 I am convinced of the truth of much of what she says. I ask you to pay attention to your own religious experience. What is it that you experience when you pray to Mary that you do not experience, or experience only with difficulty or conscious effort, when you pray to God the Father? Why is it so easy for us to turn to Mary in our needs? Why is it that Filipinos seem to love Mary more than they love the Father? Very simply, is it not because Mary is first, woman and mother, in whom we sense the warmth, the ready and non-questioning accep-

tance, the kindness and intimacy of a mother; secondly, because Mary is experienced by us as merciful and patient, compassionate with the weak, consoler of the afflicted; thirdly, because, while Mary is experienced as powerful, we are convinced that because she is merciful mother, her power is directed towards our good and our well-being: she is the Mother of perpetual help?

Can we not experience that God the Father is all of these and more: for God is the source of all the maternity, mercy, and advocacy of Mary? If we allowed ourselves, even in the privacy of our own meditation, to image God in prayer as the housewife, as the compassionate mother, as the bakerwoman molding us and kneading us; if we permitted ourselves once in a while, to speak to and of God as a “she” and a “her,” would we not perhaps be able to draw nearer to God himself, and lose the fear and the reserve that often characterize our relationship with God the Father? Would not this richer, fuller imaging of God perhaps liberate us a bit more from our patriarchal and androcentric mindsets, and motivate us to work more generously and committedly for the correction of these grave global injustices?

Incidentally, I want to point out that this mixing of male and female imaging of God is actually powerfully present in the most famous icon in the Philippines of God the Father. This year, all over the country, reproductions of Rembrandt’s justly famous painting The Return of the Prodigal Son adorn church and convent, rectory and home. The tender welcome of the father, his gentle and loving acceptance of the son who has strayed, has seldom been more movingly captured in art. But the late Henri Nouwen, in his wonderful book-length meditation on Rembrandt’s masterpiece, insightfully points out a detail that we might easily miss. The two hands of the father are different. The left hand, rougher looking, more muscular, more firmly clasping his son’s shoulders, is obviously a man’s hand; the right hand, however, is smoother, more refined, with elegant, tapering fingers lightly touching the son’s back. This hand, Nouwen suggests, is a woman’s hand. Nouwen unveils Rembrandt’s subtle genius: in this unobtrusive way, illuminating to those who have the patience to contemplate the paint-
ing with attention and devotion, Rembrandt depicts the merciful father as somehow, mysteriously, both male and female, holding and caressing, father and mother.  

A second suggestion must go hand in hand, as it were, with the first. Like Jesus, our renewed language about and symbols of God, purified of androcentric and patriarchal limitations, should motivate us to help create a culture and a church in which men and women respect one another as equals: although different, still equally images of God, equally called to discipleship and mission by the Lord. To contribute to the building up of such a society and such a church for our time is surely to fulfill the deepest desire of the Father, who sent her Son, to “gather together into unity the scattered children of God.” (Jn 12:51)

A final word to the priests of the third millennium

Which brings us to our final section: a special word to the priests of the third millennium. The responsibility for building this kind of Christian community and society, healed of discrimination and violence against women, where the full dignity of all is respected, falls, in large part, on you, future servant-leaders and shepherds of Christian community. What kind of Christian community will you build up? Will your diocese, your parish, your BEC’s, be communities of hope, because in them, the injustice of women’s oppression will have been overcome; because they will be communities of equal disciples of Jesus?

The answer to these questions depends on whether you, who are to be called “Father” by our people, are, like Jesus, sacraments and living icons of God the Father, compassionate as a mother, diligent as a homemaker, industrious as a bakerwoman? But how can priests be symbols of God the Father-Mother and prophets of her justice if our concrete words and actions manifest disrespect for women and a dis-

---

regard for their equality and dignity: when seminarians enjoy and cheer on John Estrada, Randy Santiago, and Willy Revillame’s sexual harassment of scantily clad Calendar Girl contestants on MTB; when, as some religious sisters complain, priests treat them like maids, ordering them about, not respecting them as equal partners in mission; when parish priests who, presumably, are literally and exclusively male, unfortunately behave as patriarchal males as well, little kings in their own parishes, exercising absolute, non-consultative, non-participatory power in their kingdoms; when priests, despite their profession of celibacy, sexually molest or victimize women, often those entrusted to their pastoral care? Clearly, much conversion from our own distorted attitudes is needed if we are to participate in the great task of building up communities of inclusiveness, respect, and equality-in-difference.

Conclusion

I began this talk with the words of two popes. Let me end with the words of our present Universal Shepherd, John Paul II. In his Letter to Women, John Paul writes:

The journey must go on! But I am convinced that the secret of making speedy progress in achieving full respect for women and their identity involves more than simply the condemnation of discrimination and injustices, necessary though this may be. Such respect must be won by an effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion of women... beginning with a universal recognition of the dignity of women.29

The pope is right: “respect for women’s rights” is best promoted, not just by condemnation, but by the recognition of their dignity. In this year of God the Father, who, as John Paul I reminds us, “is even more our mother,” may our modest efforts to speak of and image the holy mystery of God more inclusively help to open our eyes to that

precious dignity of women, and thus bring us closer to the building of that community so memorably described by St Paul: "There is among you no more Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3: 28)