

# How Gender Makes a Difference

by Marcel LeJeune

"The Catholic Church is just a sexist organization run by powerful men who only want to keep women barefoot and pregnant. That is why they don't allow women to be priests!" We've all heard comments like that. Indeed, there seems to be no avoiding today conversations and disputes that revolve around gender and sexuality: females in the sacramental priesthood; inclusive language in worship; a woman's "right" to an abortion, and so on. Of course, many Catholics know, for example, the initial defense of the Church's view on the male-only priesthood, namely, that Jesus was a man and that he chose twelve men as his apostles. This is fine and true, but is there another, perhaps deeper defense of the Catholic teaching that gender sometimes makes a difference? In this article, we'll suggest some ways that gender and the body play in understanding some broader aspects of Church teaching.

In many ways it seems that the Catholic Church is the last line of defense against a veritable army bearing high the banner of gender-equity. To be sure, the Catholic Church is nearly alone in standing against modern notions of gender equity. But from that can one conclude that the Church must view women and men as unequal? Not at all! Indeed, the Church views male and female as equal, and just not in the narrow legalistic sense that society does. But let us back up for a minute to see the issue more clearly.

Modern society has placed a litmus test upon people and the way in which they relate to one another: this test is basically one of function. The secularistic criteria of functionality has become commonplace in the way our society thinks of people and consequently of their equality. Functionality now determines whether men and women are equal, and if functionality really is the manner in which we decide if men and women are equal, then we must probably conclude that the Church is archaic and sexist. But in the eyes of the Church, equality between men and women is based on something much more important than mere function. We must confront the secularistic notion of functionality as the standard of equality and work to let a true notion of equality again take its rightful place. So, what is that basis of equality?

## The Image of God

Most people know the story of creation in Genesis.

Man, "Adam", was created by God. We also know that Adam was alone in his humanity and that something was missing. God knew this and said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:18). What we see here, I suggest, is that Adam did not enjoy the full range of his human capacity for relationships with creation as it was. As a human, he needed something else to be complete. The "other" that gave him the full meaning of relationship was Eve. Thus, Adam's maleness was ordered toward Eve's femaleness and vice versa, because they are created for and ordered to one another.

An important note we must make about the creation narrative is that Adam was not referred to as "male" until there was a female to contrast with his maleness. Pope John Paul II underscores this in his book *Theology of the Body* (p. 44) where he says, "The circle of solitude of the man-person is broken, because the first 'man' awakens from his sleep as 'male and female'." Prior to Eve, Adam is just "man" in the sense that is used to define all of humanity; that is, mankind as a whole in which gender is not even considered. Adam only takes on the masculinity that is part of his nature after Eve is created and she can then provide the femininity that is needed to give masculinity its meaning. In other words, without female, there is no male. God created this distinction between male and female and it is consequently a divinely instituted distinction.

What does being made in the image of God truly imply? It means that we reflect in some fashion the nature of the Divine. We know that God is Trinity—three persons in one God. We also know that Jesus Christ is God-become-man. In the same way, we mirror the reality of Jesus' incarnation in our humanity by our being made in the image of God. In his first encyclical *The Redeemer of Man*, Pope John Paul II said that not only do we find meaning to our lives in relationship with others, but also we can only find the true meaning of *ourselves* in the Incarnation (p. 18). Thus, John Paul II helps us dive deeper into the understanding of who we are, as humans, as men and women, and as God's people. He also tells us that just as the Trinity is fully ordered and defined by its relationship of person to person, so humanity is ordered and defined in its relationship of man to woman. We reflect the image of God in this relationship of man and woman together. We can then see that just as God is a

community of loving persons, so we are called to live in the same relational community of love. In a relationship of love of man and woman, we can fully find the meaning that God intends us to have by our creation in his image.

### **Different yet equal?**

What happened next in the Garden of Eden is what we have come to know as marriage. "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Here, the dynamic of the relationship between man and woman changes. Now we not only have man and woman in the narrative, but we have husband and wife. This brings on a real, ontological change in both the relationship of Adam and Eve, and in Adam and Eve themselves. The two become one. They complement each other in the differences that they bear by their nature. But the two are not interchangeable. The woman cannot be husband and the man cannot be wife. To complete each other they first must realize that *in their differences, they find what the other needs to be complete*. The Pope writes (p. 50) in the *Theology of the Body* that "the formulation of Genesis 2:24 indicates that human beings, created as man and woman, were created for unity." Exactly the opposite happens in modern thought when, attempting to make man and woman equal, it ends up making them the same, thus denying precisely that which truly makes us equal, our reflection of the divine.

It is now becoming clearer why the Church has a view which seems to be in conflict with society—it is. According to a function-based definition of equality, the roles that a woman once had are now open for men to fulfill, and vice-versa. We each are capable of doing what everyone else does regardless of our nature. This then justifies such ideas as that women should be priests because women can do anything that a man can do as priests (proclaim the Gospel, wear vestments, give homilies, run parishes, and so on). But as we have seen, this way of thinking about humanity is a denial of the purpose in which God created us — male and female. If we are able to be whatever we want, just by willing it, this boils down to a refutation of what God intends each of us to be.

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### **Where do we go from here?**

If we as men and women seek to understand our differences, then we also must ask how our differences complement each other, and how we are tied to one another and to God.

If we side with society and the world-view that humanity is defined by function, then, for example, the unborn child has no rights since it cannot "do" anything, and more generally women and men are no longer distinguishable except by how we might function. But if we side with the Church and the sacramental, sign-value, view of humanity, then our dignity is tied to the fulfillment of our beings as found in each other and in the relationship that God created between men and women at the beginning. If we are in fact all the same, then how is it that we are so different? How do we have an honest conversation about humanity, men and women, equality, and so on if we cannot even recognize that we are different? What does this criterion of equality based function end up doing to us? It means that we can never truly be equal; for true equality can only be found by acknowledging our differences and then finding that which transcends them.

It is frustrating to fight the long, hard battles thinking that we may never overcome the majority opinion in our world. But, we can also rest assured knowing that whether the temporal battles are won or lost, the war has been decided before time began. Gender means that we are ordered to God and one another. Our knowledge of our dignity depends upon us knowing the difference.

### **The answer**

This teaching on the equality of men and women that the Church has given us and that has been refined most recently by Pope John Paul II has allowed us to find a new approach to the age-old problems of defending the Church's teaching on many topics. We can now dive into the meaning of gender, relationships and the dignity of humanity to discover that God really does know what he is doing when the Church teaches us about gender and human worth. In fact it is not only important to know about this to be able to defend the Church's teachings in the public arena, but it is also important so that we can order our own lives to the will of God and how He sees the world. We are more than just persons who can "function" in this way or that. We are men and women each created in the image of God, and that means something much more. In fact it means everything.

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