



A look at the past and present

# The journey of men and women together

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Synodality is on the agenda and the issue of women cannot be set aside, especially when it becomes clear that the visible face of the Catholic Church has predominantly male connotations. For the present and future Church to be effectively synodal, perhaps among the first conversions that should take place is relative to the place of women. If there is no listening and no common journey between men and women, if humanity cannot walk together with its other half -- the female gender - how can we expect the synodal journey to happen in all its other dimensions?

## **Misunderstandings and the history of women in the Church**

The fresh air of women's empowerment in the Christian West -- and in Latin America in particular -- did not initially come from the churches. Rather, it was secularization, and in the midst of very concrete, secular struggles (like voting rights, fair wages and working hours, sexuality, human rights), that women began to "leave" their confined, private domestic spaces for the public sphere and to become active participants in societal structures, politics, economic and cultural endeavors.

An emerging recognition of women in the Christian world dates back only seven decades. After the historic events of the Second Vatican Council, women's voices began being heard more and more, claiming space within the Church in concrete and fulfilling ways. Women were coordinating communities at diverse levels and developing profound reflections on religious experience and doctrine from their own perspective as women.

In official Church discourse throughout the centuries, in fact, there has been a silencing of women and a masculinization of language about God, the sacred, and the religious. This cultural process prevailed for many centuries. The revolution wrought by Jesus and his Gospel, in which men and women were considered equal in right and belonging as disciples, was echoed in the early church, but not much after that. Leadership, positions of decision-making, trust, and the Church's visible face became predominantly male.

## **The dominant, masculine element of humanity**

At the same time, the presence of women and the feminine was further silenced through the way in which the Divine was named. This was due to patriarchal influence, to a cultural matrix very present in the society of Jesus' time and reflected in biblical language. This resulted in attributing universal value to the masculine and forgetting the importance of the feminine half of humanity. This practical and cognitive attitude gave historical weight and space to the 'male', as the highest paradigm of the human person. Similarly, other parameters for defining human beings were also universalized in Western culture, such as the prototypical human also being seen as white (Caucasian) and of European ancestry.

Western and Christian civilization is markedly 'androcentric'. In other words, by combining two biblical accounts of human creation - the Yahweh (Gen. 2:18-24) and the later priestly (Gen. 1:26-27) accounts - into a single narrative where creation is interpreted in a hierarchical relationship between the two sexes: The woman was created afterwards, by and for the man. This resulted in an ontological, biological and sociological dependence of women, and even worse a conception that men are 'theo-morphic' (formed in the image of God). This has profoundly impacted - through its extension to theology - much of Western theological and ecclesial language.

## **Talk of God influences both Church life and society**

Talking about God shapes and guides the life not only of religious communities, but also the life of entire societal communities, and individual members. Our words about God can have positive or negative effects on society; they are never just neutral in their construct. A patriarchal and androcentric God discourse has promoted a generalized exclusion of women from the public sphere. Women were subordinated relative to the imagination and needs of a world conceived primarily by men. In the church, this exclusion occurs in virtually every sphere: in creeds, doctrines, prayers, theological frameworks, liturgies, missionary visions, ecclesial orders, and in leadership.

Yet at the same time, women worked tirelessly throughout the centuries prior to the Second Vatican Council, despite having no access or position in the public ecclesial sphere. They predominated in a multitude of services essential to the life of the Church: in catechesis, in communities, in parish organization. But they were always invisible when it came to decision-making, leadership and public recognition. Yet their presence was always well received and recognized among simpler people and in communities.

After the Council, this state of affairs began to change. Women started to become more present and visible in theology courses, in decision-making bodies, in various ecclesial organizations, and more specifically among organized laity aware of their identity as the people of God. This visibility was also seen in religious associations, various forms of consecrated life, and in families where they often were both head and main provider within broken families and in painful situations of child separation and abandonment.

## **The woman's body: Obstacle and challenge**

Theological reflection on the female body is central to overcoming this situation. In a world like the Church, where visible corporeity is predominantly male, the entering of women is a disturbing element. And this disturbance comes, more than anything else, through her own corporeity. By being other than a man, she expresses a different experience of God, in addition to that expressed through her thoughts and words.

Theological reflection on this issue shows that one of the most important sources of discrimination against women in the Church seems to be something deeper and much more serious than mere physical strength, intellectual training or work ability. The Church is still strongly patriarchal, and patriarchy emphasizes male superiority not only on an intellectual or practical basis, but also in what could be called an ontological basis. In other words, women are oppressed by their own bodily constitution, and this is seen not only in Christianity, but in many other religions as well.

In the context of this embodied discrimination, there is a very strong association - on a theological level - with the fact that women are held responsible for the entry of sin into the world, and for death as a consequence of sin. Although officially denounced by Pope John Paul II in his apostolic letter, *Mulieris dignitatem*, it still remains central to much of the reality of women in the Church. For this reason, the mystical experiences of many women were often viewed with suspicion, and there was strict, rigorous surveillance by the men charged with controlling and exorcising them. Many rich mystical experiences of women truly graced by God with very intimate spiritual communications have remained ignored in a world where the media remain in the hands of a few, and where examples like Teresa of Avila are the exception rather than the rule.

Throughout Church history, women have been kept at a prudent distance from the sacred and all that surrounds it, including liturgy, ritual objects and spaces, and direct mediation with God. Despite the progress made in women's participation in church life, the stigma of being seductive and awe-inspiring as a source of sin, continues to hang over them.

This begs serious reflection within the Church. Indeed, if it is possible to fight against intellectual discrimination through equal access to studies, and against professional injustice through just opportunities for skill development, what should one do with regard to one's own corporeality? Should it be denied? Avoided? Ignored as a potential source of enriching diversity?

### **Fellow travelers on the road**

The divine image is found in both women and men. If the God in whom we believe can be perceived as having both masculine and feminine characteristics and ways of acting, then both masculine and feminine words and metaphors are necessary to describe God. If women, like men, are theomorphic, that is, made in the image of God, it is imperative that this God of whom both are images, should not be described or thought of as simply andromorphic, but rather as anthropomorphic. This is also the only possible way to truly conceive and describe the human person. We know this will be challenging because of the 'poverty' of human language, which is limited in its capacity to express the majesty and ineffability of the divine.

But in the meantime, we strive to combine two symbols, two languages and two metaphors - masculine and feminine - in order to draw closer in our understanding of the divine. And for this, the Trinitarian paradigm seems a fruitful path. Trinitarian faith can make a valuable contribution to a return to that paternal and maternal home for which the 21st century person yearns, even without being aware or able to identify this yearning. For this to occur, men and women will need to understand one another as companions on the same journey, respecting one another precisely for their respective diversity. Only in this way will it be possible to build a more 'human' world for all, and to build a Church more oriented to encounter, community, and love; a Church more in line with God's dream of a diversity that, in walking together, proclaims symphonic truth and a plurality in unity.