

# Retrieving the Tradition

## Women priests? A Marian Church in a fatherless and motherless culture

Hans Urs von Balthasar

Because of her unique structure, the Catholic Church is perhaps humanity's last bulwark of genuine appreciation of the difference between the sexes.

The worldwide offensive of "feminism," which is battling for the equality of women with men, takes effect within the Church as the women's claim to the ministerial priesthood. As a whole, the battlefield presents a confusing picture, and this in turn affects the ecclesial arena, which in addition has its own special problems.

### I.

On the whole, the assault of "feminism" is in a fatal predicament, because it is fighting for equal rights for women in a predominantly male-oriented, technological civilization. Thus it either takes up the front against this civilization as such (or, what amounts to about the same thing, against the mas-

culinity shaping it) or claims its place within this civilization, which can scarcely be done without an unnatural masculinization of woman or a leveling of the difference between the sexes. All these possibilities contain *a priori* a contradiction more or less perceptible in the parlance and program of the movement. This contradiction, however, may by no means be dismissed as "feminine illogic"; rather, it conceals a profound tragedy of our times.

The era of matriarchal culture has long since come to an end, and that of patriarchal culture is likewise over, though not so long since. We are living in a time both fatherless and motherless, and it is anachronistic to characterize and approach our modern forms of society on the basis of an obsolete patriarchy. The natural relationship between the typical male outlook and mankind's present (and probably, future) technologized way of life has nothing to do with a dominance of the father in the clan; rather, it is traceable to the prevalence of a rationalism to which natural things and conditions mean above all material for manufacturables. Of course, as long as culture has existed, man has also been *homo faber*; but, as long as there really was *culture*, man retained his balance in an attitude that contemplated nature while being receptive to its essence, an attitude that we can in general term philosophical. When philosophy ends where the contemplative-receptive glance has turned into a merely calculating one (what one can do with a thing), a feminine element—to state it briefly—that makes a person *secure* in nature and in being is abandoned in favor of a preponderance of the masculine element, which pushes forward into things in order to change them by implanting and imposing something of its own.

The sexual image suggested here should not be pressed, for the philosophical attitude of letting oneself be gifted and fructified by nature and being is not feminine in the mere sense of receptivity. A forward-moving way of thinking certainly reigns in the attitude: one which, like the fructified womb, is of course able to bear patiently the seeds received and give birth to them in images, myths and concepts. In the contemplating intellect, the active element of the feminine principle is wedded to the passive element of the masculine (which needs the self-bestowing power of the womb in order to be able to give) in the best possible way. On the contrary, where positivistic, technology-oriented thinking succeeds in reigning supreme, the female element also vanishes from the attitude of the man. There is no

longer anything that maternally embraces the human being's existence; under the power of the human spirit, nature has descended to the level of mere material; even the spirit itself is in danger of becoming material for self-manipulation, and being as a whole, as unreifiable, is overlooked.

This epochal forgetting, in which the femininity of the woman is also forgotten, cannot be reversed by any kind of rationally expedient planning, least of all by the woman's moving into the already overpopulated other side. Such a change would totally destroy the disturbed balance, level the all-fructifying difference between the sexes in favor of an asexuality (with male indications, however) and consume humanity's last ideological reserves. For, evidently, a humanity devoid of philosophy and victim to the pure positivism of "making"—and in the end of self-making—is without norms and thus without direction. And if a great part of this technological civilization is running itself idly to death anyway, there is some hope only because another part—today, in addition to some prudent women, this comprises above all young people who eye the prevalent activism with mistrust—is creating reserves that will assure survival after the downfall: reserves that are not geared to "needs" and "consumption," like everything about which we are worried (the economy, the Third World, ecological preservation), but to being, to the background that gives meaning to things, to security, to making a home for man who is always on the run, exposed to the world—all of which is essentially the woman's role.

At such a late hour of history, can we still hope for a return of this sense-giving balance—which is only symbolically intimated in the sexual, but in reality extends much farther as concerns the human being in his place within being as a whole? If we can do so, then certainly only through the woman who perceives and understands her role as counterpoise to and spearhead against man's increasingly history-less world, and who then must do just the opposite of what current feminism does. Neither competition with man in the typically masculine field nor a rationally drawn up (with masculine means!) counteraction against the masculine world is meaningful; meaning can be found only in creating a vital force against history-less, technologized existence, in abstaining from the artificial superabundance being offered with a view to noticing anew the real "superabundance of life." We must not imagine that things will fall into place by themselves; it would take deep moral decisions on the part of women to seize the spokes of the wheel that is rolling toward the absurd. . . .

## II.

Over against the old world, whose balance is so endangered, the Church is the beginning of the new cosmos founded in Jesus Christ. In that new cosmos, from its very foundation, the right balance, including a sexual balance, is assured. It is on a matter of recognizing it and living in it. The Church begins with the Yes of the Virgin of Nazareth, which summarizes Israel's faith and brings it to abundant fulfillment: unreserved readiness to conceive, in full freedom, making woman's entire psychophysical fruitfulness available. It is an active fruitfulness, incredibly surpassing all the natural fruitfulness of the woman, which is already superior to that of the man; and it carries, brings forth, nurtures, and educates not just any child, but God's Son. Just as he owes what he is to his eternal Father, so too he owes it to this motherly, ecclesial womb; and he will gradually educate Mary—pierced by the sword—unto the Cross, where he will consecrate her as the mother of his disciple, of the apostles and of the visible ecclesial assembly.

The Twelve whom he commissions and invests with the necessary powers are chosen thirty years later. They receive masculine tasks of leadership and representation within the comprehensive feminine, Marian Church. They begin as failures—this is demonstrated most clearly in the case of Peter—and can never match the quality of the primordial Church, the "perfect Bride," the *Immaculata*. Their role is a service within the permanent existence of the Church: they are to represent him who, by virtue of the surrender of his entire substance on the Cross, gathers the people of God into himself eucharistically and places it under the Father's great absolution. In view of his self-giving (by no means in view of any act of Peter), Christ's "predeemed" Mother has also received the grace to speak her impeccably, infallible Yes. What Peter will receive as "infallibility" for his office of governing will be a partial share in the total lawlessness of the feminine, Marian Church. And what the men, consecrated into their office, receive in the way of power to consecrate and to absolve will again be in its specifically masculine function—the *transmission* of a vital force that originates outside itself and leads beyond itself—a share in a fruitfulness (before the Eucharist, she gave birth to Christ) and purity (she was absolved from all eternity) belonging nonofficially to the perfect feminine Church.

One can say that Christ, inasmuch as he represents the God of the universe in the world, is likewise the origin of

both the feminine and masculine principles in the Church; in view of him, Mary is pre-redeemed, and Peter and the apostles are installed in their office. And insofar as Christ is a man, he again represents the origin, the Father, for the fruitfulness of the woman is always dependent on an original fructification. Neither of these points is to be relativized, nor is the resultant representation of the origin by the Church's office.

A woman who would aspire to this office would be aspiring to specifically masculine functions, while forgetting the precedence of the feminine aspect of the Church over the masculine. With this ecclesial feminism we again arrive at the sphere of what we described in the first section, in which the woman, through a tragic misunderstanding, reaches for what is specifically masculine; except that now it is considerably easier to rectify. The right balance need not be arduously sought, for it is already present in the essence of the Church. In order to perceive this, of course, one must have an eye for the fundamental Marian dimension of the Church, the eye possessed by the Church Fathers, the Middle Ages and even the Baroque period and lost only by us—during the period of the rationalistic Enlightenment. The title "Mother of the Church" represents an attempt to recapture something of the awareness belonging to Christianity for nearly two thousand years. But in this awareness, "Mother" and "Church" were even more closely joined: in the image of the "mantle of grace" for instance, the Church's prototype and the universal Church living within her ambit flow into one another.

If one takes an unbiased stance, one has to marvel at how intensely this prototype, precisely in recent times, by means of active testimonies from heaven, has been offered to the world as a reminder and a point of reflection. From Catherine Labouré to Bernadette at Lourdes, to Beauraing, Barneux and Fatima (to mention only important and recognized instances), the self-testimony of the *Ecclesia immaculata* is uninterrupted. She is not allowed to hide herself behind her Son in false humility; she comes uninhibitedly to the fore and manifests her nature: "I am the Immaculate Conception," she insists at Lourdes, and this in connection with the Rosary, which points clearly enough to the divine origin of the Son and of the entire Trinity. The masculine hierarchy was willing enough to recognize the messages of Lourdes and Fatima, and the numerous Marian encyclicals of the popes have underscored the rightful place of woman in the Church's inmost nature.

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ation of the difference between the sexes. In the dogma of the Trinity, the Persons must be equal in dignity in order to safeguard the distinction that makes the triune God subsistent love; in a similar way, the Church stresses the equal dignity of man and woman, so that the extreme oppositeness of their functions may guarantee the spiritual and physical fruitfulness of human nature. Every encroachment of one sex into the role of the other narrows the range and dynamics of humanly possible love, even when this range transcends the sphere of sexuality, birth and death and achieves the level of the virginal relationship between Christ and his Church, a relationship expressed not in isolated individual acts of specific organs, but in the total surrender of one's own being.

The Church's Marian dimension embraces the Petrine dimension, without claiming it as its own. Mary is "Queen of the Apostles" without claiming apostolic powers for herself. She possesses something else and something more.

But modern man, who tries to make (*machen*) something out of every object, can only with difficulty distinguish authority (*Vollmacht*) such as Jesus bestows and power (*macht*). The two are, however, basically different. Ecclesial authority is a specific qualification for service to the community. It is appropriation as expropriation; leadership, but from the last place. One must, therefore, guard against exalting the service of the bishop and the priest to a quality fundamentally inaccessible to women. Like all Christians, women possess this quality eminently in the "universal priesthood" of all the faithful, which allows and basically effects an offering and being-offered of all together with Christ. (In this connection, Cardinal Mercier sowed confusion by proclaiming that the diocesan clergy is *the* state of perfection.) "Power" is so often unobtrusively behind many contestations and movements, supposedly on behalf of justice, equality and so forth, that, precisely in the case of the theme under consideration here, extreme caution and the most precise discernment of spirits are necessary. Both sexes, each in its own way, aspire to "power" and use the most varied methods to gain it. Power is connected subterraneously with humanity's original sin and concupiscence and, naturally, also makes itself felt as a motive within the Church. It is by no means a prerogative of men.

On the other hand, the ecclesial office, whose contour comes so expressly to the fore in the New Testament and from the earliest tradition onwards, may not be leveled into the other services and charisms in such a way that it appears merely as one single function among others: there is only one "shep-

herd" of the pastured flock, and this image remains valid even though so many single functions in a community are distributed among lay people, both women and men.

Who has the precedence in the end? The man bearing office, inasmuch as he represents Christ in and before the community, or the woman, in whom the nature of the Church is embodied—so much so that every member of the Church, even the priest, must maintain a feminine receptivity to the Lord of the Church? This question is completely idle, for the difference ought only to serve the mutual love of all the members in a circulation over which God alone remains sublimely supreme: "In the Lord, the woman is not independent of the man nor the man of the woman. For just as the woman [Eve] comes from the man, so also the man [including Christ] comes through the woman; but everything comes from God" (1 Cor 11:11-12).\* □

## KAIROS

# The blossoming of the desert

*Pauline Matarasso*

We are living in a redeemed world, and if nature in all its abundance is God's gift we are invited to work with him in a continuing process of which only he sees the end.

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom," promised Isaiah. As though setting out to fulfill in letter and spirit Isaiah's prophecy, the Cistercians acquired, within a generation or so of their founding, a reputation as farmers and growers which even today they have not quite lost. Surviving account books and archaeological evidence have yielded much practical information about monastic agriculture. How the early Cistercians viewed their spiritual life has been less explored. Yet, the texts are there to be interrogated, and from them one can pick out certain recurrent themes that were important to the writers, which have found echoes in other centuries and other milieux and may perhaps have something to say to us today.

When the Cistercians chose to site their monasteries in the most isolated and inhospitable spots, it was not from a perverse desire to make life hard for themselves, but because they wished to live out the desert experience of the Exodus. For it was in the desert that God fed his people, and through the

\*Taken from *New Elucidations*, trans. Sr. Mary Theresilde Skerry (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 187-98. Reprinted with permission.