

## THE CASE FOR GENDER SPECIFIC LANGUAGE

There is an old saying in Ireland, “Never tear down a fence until you know why it was put up.” In seeking to eliminate most or all gender specific language, such as the use of the pronoun “he” for an unknown person, or the use of “she” for the Church, modern translators do not reflect upon why this terminology may have arisen. They simply assume that such language does nothing more than reflect a sexist way of thinking. Thus, for example, the 1992 standards for inclusive language in the NIV translation of the Bible cite with approval the following statement by the Association of American University Presses, “Books that are on the cutting edge of scholarship should also be at the forefront in recognizing how language encodes prejudice.” Likewise, in Random House’s Webster’s Dictionary, there is an article encouraging “inclusive” language, entitled, “Avoiding Sexist Language,” which calls gender specific terms “sexist.”

Such claims are based upon the unsubstantiated assumption that gender specific language has no purpose other than to carry on discrimination against women, presumed to be more common in a bygone era than today. Paragraph 2477 of the Catechism says, by contrast, that it is rash judgment “to assume, without sufficient judgment, the moral fault of a neighbor” and goes on in the next paragraph to quote favorably St. Ignatius of Loyola’s admonition “Every good Christian ought to be more ready to give a favorable interpretation to another’s statement than to condemn it.” Applying this principle to gender specific language, we ought to look for a better explanation for such terminology, rather than assume that it developed because of sexism. And, in fact, a moment’s careful thought indicates that the charge of sexism is not nearly so probable as the theory that gender specific language reflects, not a belief in the superiority of male over female, but rather an attempt to personalize language and reflect the complementarity of masculine and feminine elements in humanity and all of creation.

First, the charge of sexism does not account for the fact that gender specific language works in both directions. We tend to refer to the generic unknown person or humanity in general by the masculine pronoun (as in “someone left his pen on the desk”) or by such masculine terms as “mankind” or “workman.” By contrast, when referring to a specific thing we love, such as a nation, a city, a ship or a university, we tend to use the feminine “she,” as in “I love my town for her simple charm.” On the spiritual level, we tend to refer to angels and demons as male, and virtues and vices as female. It is unclear why the one should be considered superior to the other. It is true that a person is higher than a thing we love; however, the generic person referred to as “he” may be something we love, like, dislike, despise, or feel neutral toward. By contrast, the feminine pronoun tends to refer to loved or admired things of this earth. Thus, the use of pronouns on the earthy level is balanced.

In the spiritual realm, it is unclear whether virtues should be considered higher or lower than angels. In fact, St. Thomas Aquinas, citing St. Gregory the Great and Dionysius, describes one of the middle choirs of angels as “virtues” in the sense that they carry out divine commands with the strength of virtue. See Summa Theologica I q.108 art. 5 corpus and ad 1. In addition, on the one hand, virtues as we perceive them are an aspect of good human or angelic nature, and thus are lower than the fullness of humanity or angelic nature. On the other hand, virtues in themselves are participation in divine nature and, in that respect, are higher than human or

angelic nature.

It is true that we generally refer to God as “He” and God’s people in general or the soul by means of feminine terms. At first sight, this distinction could seem to imply the superiority of masculine over feminine, as God is superior to His people. However, given the fact that the inspired writers of Holy Scripture use these terms, one should ask whether there might be another explanation. Among others, Peter Kreeft offers such an explanation in section 46 of his book Angels (and Demons), which discusses the possibility of masculine and feminine angels. In explaining why the Bible always describes angels as masculine, he points out among other things that they represent God, who is also described as masculine. He then goes to explain one reason for this terminology: “As a man is different from a woman and comes into her from without to impregnate her, so God is different from nature and comes from without to impregnate her with miracles and human souls with salvation.” Thus, God is like a husband to His people and to each soul, as is especially expressed in the spiritual interpretations of the Song of Songs, and as a Father to His people and to each person, as reflected in the Our Father. On the other hand, a mother brings forth children from within. And thus a human institution, whether the Church or a university, is better described as a mother, as in the term “alma mater.” It is true, of course, that as a matter of necessity, the masculine term here is used for the greater nature, that of God Himself. On the other hand, this terminology is easier for a woman to use in prayer and meditation, for it describes the soul as feminine. Thus, it is again unclear why this terminology is more favorable to men than women. In conclusion, for all of these reasons, and probably others that deeper scholarship would reveal, the claim that gender specific language is based upon a sexist attitude that favors men over women is intuitively improbable.

A better theory is that traditional English, and other languages as well, rightfully use gender specific pronouns and other terms for at least two good reasons: (1) to personalize language and avoid clumsy impersonal references; and (2) to reflect the complementary masculinity and femininity of humanity and of creation.<sup>1</sup> As to the first point, even if the gender specific use of pronouns and some nouns was arbitrary, it would serve a good purpose to avoid impersonal clumsiness. Thus, for example, the phrase “Someone left his or her pen on the desk” is clumsy and impersonal. And the alternate phrase “their pen” is generally inaccurate, for the pen is not likely to be owned by more than one person. Even worse, sometimes gender specific language refers to a person as “it.” For example, the revised New American Bible and the current Lectionary translate Mark 9:36-37 as follows, “Taking a child He [Jesus] placed *it* in their midst and putting His arms around *it* said to them, ‘Whoever receives one child such as this in My name, receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives not Me but the One who sent Me (emphasis added.)’” See Lectionary (Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B; Tuesday of the Seventh Week in Ordinary Time.)<sup>2</sup> The child may have been a boy or girl, but most assuredly was not an it. In addition, perhaps the most annoying aspect of gender neutralization

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<sup>1</sup> I am not, of course, arguing that anyone sat down at some particular time and decided that English would use this terminology for these reasons. Rather, the idea is that common sense and primordial wisdom gradually brought about this usage.

<sup>2</sup> Actually, neither the New American Bible nor the Lectionary capitalize pronouns referring to God. Out of respect for God’s name, which is also difficult enough to maintain in the modern world, as well as a desire for clarity regarding who a pronoun refers to, I also adhere to the ancient custom of capitalizing such pronouns.

in theology is the insistence upon referring to the Church, the Bride of Christ, as “it.” The old translation of Eucharistic Prayer I and the Opening Prayers for Masses for the Universal Church used to do, but happily, the new translations once again refer to our Mother Church as “she.” Such references only make an impersonal society less personal than it is. By contrast, referring to people as individuals (assumed to be “he” absent evidence to the contrary), rather than insisting on using the plural or generic terms such as “one” and personalizing other things we should love or admire (such as a land, a country, or a virtue) through use of the feminine pronoun makes life more personal and evokes love all the more. This approach is that of the Scriptures, which tend to refer to the generic person as male, but refers to such things as Israel, Jerusalem, and Wisdom as female. (The word of God is described as male, for reasons that will be addressed below.) And what is good enough for Holy Writ should be good enough for us.

In addition, the division of our pronouns between male and female is not arbitrary, but rather reflects the complementary aspects of creation that other languages reflect in their male and female nouns, a complementarity that C.S. Lewis noted in his book Perelandra. In that book, the last of his space trilogy, the hero Elwin Ransom sees a vision of two angels. One angel is a quintessentially masculine angel of the planet Malacandra. He appears as a vigilant soldier guarding his cool, ancient, structured land. The other angel is a quintessentially feminine angel of the planet Perelandra. She appears with her eyes and arms welcoming people to her fresh, warm, tropical land. Ransom then realizes that masculinity and femininity run much deeper than the male and female of the human race, to the very core of creation. That is why, in languages that divide their nouns between male and female, certain nouns such as sun, sky, fire, and mountain are almost always male, and other nouns such as moon, earth, water, and certain trees were almost always feminine. Lewis did not note this fact, but St. Francis of Assisi’s famous *Canticle of the Creatures* likewise reflects this complementarity of creation by referring to Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Fire, Sister Water, Brother Wind, Mother Earth, and Sister Bodily Death.

In English, we do not generally have masculine and feminine nouns, but we do reflect this complementarity in our pronouns. For, on the whole, the masculine tends to be more objective and universal; the feminine more subjective and personal. That is one reason why early grade school teachers are generally women, for taking care of the young must be personal, not abstract. By contrast, men tend to gravitate more toward the fields that make more use of general laws and formulas, such as mathematics and engineering. The Old Testament and New both reflect this distinction between male and female. Thus, in the creation accounts, Adam orders the animals by giving them objective names; Eve brings Adam out of loneliness by teaching him more personal human love. The prophets are almost always male, for the voice of prophesy is thundering and masculine, tearing down and building up, reminding people of the permanent laws of God and bringing people back to His unbreakable promises. See e.g., Is. 18:1-20; Jer.1:9-10.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Wisdom is presented alternatively as a beautiful young woman and as a welcoming mother. See, e.g., Prov. 9:1-12; Wis. 8:2-8; Sir. 4:11-19. For Wisdom is more creative and subtle, and thus more feminine. See Wis. 7:22-27. In addition, as Pope John Paul II

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<sup>3</sup>The exceptions to this rule are Miriam and Anna. However, these women are not the usual prophets. Miriam more sings of God’s love, see Ex. 15:20-21, and erred when she sought the prophetic office of Moses, see Num. 12. Anna was the quiet widow, speaking of the new era about to dawn. See Luke 2:36-38.

noted in footnote 52 of his encyclical letter Dives in Misericordia (Rich in Mercy) the Old Testament has two terms for mercy: the masculine hesed, the unfailing loyalty to the objective covenant; and the feminine rahamim, which reflects the personal love of a mother for her children.

In the New Testament, we see a similar complementarity. The men, most obviously the Apostles, are more often organized into structures, such as that of the Twelve, and given specific instructions by Jesus. After the Ascension, when they have a question to resolve, they tend to get together in a council to give specific instructions as they did at the Council of Jerusalem. See Acts 15:1-29. The examples reflect the fact that men operate more by order and structure.<sup>4</sup> The women, by contrast, are not so much given specific orders or put into a structured environment. Rather, they generally respond more spontaneously to the promptings of the Spirit, as Mary does at the wedding feast of Cana, as the repentant woman did in washing Jesus' feet, and as the women at the Cross do. Such complementarity is also present in the perfection of human nature and personhood. Nature is more objective and universal, what we all have in common. Personhood is, obviously, more personal and individual. The highest human nature is masculine, belonging to Jesus. The highest human person is feminine, that of Mary, Jesus being a divine person.

Thus, the use of pronouns and some nouns in English reflects this distinction between masculinity and femininity. The universal, general, or abstract person is typically referred to as male and the more specific thing one loves as female. This distinction is often forgotten in the modern era, which tends to level differences and make so many things impersonal. Given the importance of retaining personal language to counteract the impersonal nature of modern society, and given the need to remind people of the richness of the complementarity of masculine and feminine, such a linguistic distinction is as important now as ever. Thus, it would seem folly to abandon gender specific pronouns, especially when the arguments for doing so are based upon unsubstantiated assumptions about the origin of such language.

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<sup>4</sup>Father Wojciech Giertych, O.P., currently the Theologian of the Papal Household, made this and many similar points in drawing a distinction between the roles of men and women during his classes on Moral Theology at the Angelicum University in Rome. Copies of the relevant notes are available upon request.