

The Mystery of Male and Female, Masculine and Feminine: Whys, Wherefores, and Warnings

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In past ages, the Church has met various challenges to her central teachings, particularly in the patristic era, when the mystery of the Incarnation, the sublime interrelationships of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, and the personhood of the Holy Spirit were misunderstood by significant teachers, who misled not a few. Centuries later, the matter of holy icons and their integral connection with the Incarnation came under review. Hundreds more years passed after this before St Gregory Palamas thoroughly countered the Cal-abrian monk Barlaam, who was giving voice to Western skepticism regarding the possibility of seeing the uncreated energies in this life, and thus undergoing theosis. Even later, the Eastern Church, though somewhat removed (in a day of less easy communication) from the battles of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, was not insensible to the disputes that embroiled Western Christians. Of course, the Orthodox peoples had their own struggles, but these appear to have been more socially driven than theological. Nevertheless, the division between culture and theology is hardly impermeable, as Fr Georges Florovsky compellingly demonstrated in his discussion of the “captivity” of the Church and the danger of attendant pseudomorphosis.¹³⁶

Today, it would seem, there are two main subjects of contention among those who take the name of Christ: the nature of the Church (ecclesiology) and the nature of humanity (theological anthropology). The first question is one that is both implicitly and explicitly raised in various different Christian contexts, from the doomed ecumenist dialogues that have become common among revisionist circles (which seek the lowest common denominator in minimizing serious differences) to more substantive discussions joined by conservative Protestants who are seeking their ancient roots, Catholics who sense (with Pope John Paul II) that they have lost one of their theological “lungs,” and Orthodox who seek to be light and life to believers who are removed from the apostolic Church. The second question, that of theological anthropology, is a ubiquitous theme today, sounded not only among those who call themselves Christians but also among many outside the boundaries of the Church—though, of course, the adjective “theological” is less seldom attached to outside discussions.

Indeed, the last hundred years have seen an onslaught against common, but (sadly) unexamined assumptions regarding male and female, which our culture inherited mostly from its Christian past. During the twentieth century in the West, the concepts of human sexuality and gender first have been subjected to scientific and cultural rationalization and now are being described in terms of personal subjective preference. In all this, we have met a clear and destructive challenge to dominical teaching: both non-Christians and (astonishingly) some who name Christ presume that Jesus was simply bound by His culture when He declared, “from the beginning ... God ‘made them male and female’” (Mark 10:6). These changes in perspective are not merely abstract, as we know, but have been

accompanied by breathtaking alterations in our social fabric—a metamorphosis that some even within the Orthodox fold seem prepared to consider, or even to embrace.

It is, therefore, timely that the 2019 symposium for which this chapter was originally written has focused upon “Chastity, Purity, Integrity: Orthodox Anthropology and Secular Culture in the 21st Century.” There are many aspects to these conjoined themes, both practical and conceptual. In this offering, I aim to focus particularly on humanity as male and female, gleaning wisdom from pertinent scriptural passages, Church fathers, and contemporary Orthodox thinkers. We will begin by questioning why humanity has been considered as a holy mystery in the Church, go on to troubleshoot questions that emerge regarding the Incarnation and our anticipated eschatological state, suggest some boundaries intended to mark off danger points in our necessary discussion of such ineffable matters, and finally close with an appeal to the Christian imagination to grasp the mystery of “masculine and feminine” as something even larger than male and female.

Why Humanity Is Mystery

Why should we think in terms of humanity, male and female, as a mystery? After all, our sexuality is something that we share with the animals, linking us with this present age, rather than (in any obvious way) with God, in Whom, the fathers insist, there are no passions, or parts. It was the pagans, not the Christians, who believed in erotic relationships between gods and goddesses, as mysteries of fertility. What is it, then, about our sexuality that could possibly be understood as anything but carnal, so far as the Christian is concerned?

For the answer we go back to origins. In both of the first two chapters of Genesis, we are presented with the creation of humanity as a great mystery. In Genesis 1, God “deliberates,” so to speak, with Himself, before creating the crown of His creation. Of course, we know that God’s willing is nothing like the “gnomic” necessities of human decision-making, as differentiated by St Maximus. Yet the Holy Scriptures use this anthropomorphic picture of God not simply to entertain, but, it would seem, to differentiate *this* creation qualitatively from the other forms of life that have preceded it: humankind warrants God’s special attention. Moreover, the story goes on to proclaim a paradox: “So God created [Adam] in his own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gen 1:27). Here we are given a glimpse of our complexity: our unity, as Adam, which can be translated “human being” or “humanity;” and our duality as male and female. In this we see our complexity as, to use the phrase of C. S. Lewis, “amphibious” beings—reflecting the image and likeness of God, but sharing sexuality with the animals.¹³⁷ And the mystery is deepened in Genesis 2, where we hear, for the first time, about something that is *not* good: “It is not good for the Adam to be alone.” So this chapter back-tracks, to fill in the story of *how* the female was formed. This taking of Eve from Adam, and his recognition of her as “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh,” adds to what we have learned about God’s unitive and dual creation of Adam: it is not just that Adam is comprised of man and woman, but that woman has been taken from man, and therefore is his glory, as St Paul will explain in 1 Corinthians 11.

Christians may think of this as a faint reflection of the eternal begetting of the Son from

the Father, or the procession of the Spirit from the Father. Together, the man and the woman are *Adam*; yet they are distinct, and the one comes from the other. Together they reflect the image of God, and are given dominion over the rest of creation (see Genesis 1:28)—a nurturing monarchy, showing forth the righteousness of God. And together, they partake of that world, too, for they are embodied, sexual beings like the animals. So they stand as a bridge, in a “priestly” position, says Fr Alexander Schmemmann, between the rest of the world and the loving God Whom they represent.¹³⁸

The narratives in Genesis, then, describe a great mystery. From these primordial stories have arisen many speculations, as theologians try to push against the boundaries of what we do not understand. Was the original Adam a hermaphrodite, and only became male after God made the differentiation?¹³⁹ Is our sexuality, therefore, not a basic, or foundational thing, but a second stage, which will eventually be dissolved? Should we see a human being, whether male or female, as only *half* of what it is to be human—something “not good” in itself, but only good when completed by the other half? The first idea of a double-sexed Adam was posited by ancient rabbis. The second, that a single person is incomplete, is implied in certain contemporary Christian circles—often evangelical—where the married state is considered the norm, and the single state as a default position. It would seem that these two perspectives push Genesis to say more than it really does. For we know that the *perfect* Adam, the Lord Jesus, was no hermaphrodite—He was circumcised on the eighth day! Furthermore, He was by no means incomplete without a female partner, though He yearns and cares for the Church as His mysterious Bride.

Alongside Genesis, we also have more distinct clues concerning the human mystery in Ephesians 5:21–32, 2 Corinthians 11:2, and the book of Revelation, all of which picture God’s people as the Bride of Christ, and anticipate the time when we shall be presented, completely pure, to Him. Together, then, we bear a *feminine* iconic nature, responding to the One Who is pictured in divine and masculine terms as our Bridegroom. This is not a sideline in the Scriptures, but so important that it is enshrined in our worship, particularly in the Bridegroom Services of Holy Week. We recognize, then, a symbolism that is accentuated in the Bible and continued in the life of the Church: redeemed humanity is feminine to Christ’s masculine grandeur.

Besides this persistent imagery in the Scripture, however, we also must take seriously the corrective words of Jesus to the Sadducees, who were mocking the doctrine of the resurrection. In all three synoptic gospels, we hear of how that ancient sect of Jews, the ruling priestly class, sets a riddle for Christ, a story in which a woman is married to several men sequentially throughout her life. The question, intended to stump Jesus, like the question about taxes to Caesar, is “Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife does she become? (Luke 20:23)” (see Mark 12:18–25; Matthew 22:23–30; and Luke 20:27–36). Jesus, true to style, does not answer an insincere question. Instead, He says that they know neither the power of God nor the Scriptures, for in the resurrection, there is no giving or taking in marriage, but they are “*like* the angels.” Furthermore, in Luke’s version, he adds “and cannot die.” Many have failed to notice the little word “like,” and so some popular versions of Christianity have pictured those who have fallen asleep in the Lord as actually being angels. Others seem not to have noticed the explicit purpose of Jesus’s remarks—to correct the scornful on their

dismissive picture of the resurrection—and have, it seems, pushed His comments about “giving” and “taking” in marriage to speak more systematically about the marriage bond having an ephemeral nature.

But what happens if we read Jesus’s remarks to the Sadducees not so much in terms of theological anthropology, and the dismissal of marriage in the Kingdom, but as a sharp response to the way that they have sarcastically framed the question? The Sadducees have asked, “Whose wife will she be?” Perhaps the Lord’s emphasis on “giving” and “taking” amounts to this sort of response: “You don’t know the power of God or the resurrection. It isn’t like that ... she doesn’t *belong* to anyone, since there is no giving or taking, but they all, male and female alike, have glory like the angels. There is no more curse: and they won’t die.” On this reading, Jesus is explaining that the effects of the fall—undue power of a man over his wife, and death—don’t pertain in the resurrection. The Sadducees have been ridiculing the resurrection because they are picturing it in the wrong way. Jesus’s rebuke to them has to do with their assumption that the doctrine of the resurrection would be like a resuscitation—something like the Jehovah Witness pictures in our day. Certainly, Jesus is qualifying the importance of sexual intercourse and reproduction: as the fathers would put it, it is in our “garments of skin” that these things pertain. But to push Jesus’s words beyond this rebuke is to miss the point of the narrative. It is a similar mis-step as those make who take the parable of Lazarus (see Luke 16:19–31) as proof that there can be no communication between the righteous who are asleep in the Lord, and those of us who pray for and to them: the parable is not intended to work out the geography of the afterlife, complete with the “gulf” that Protestants see to be unbridgeable. Similarly, this dominical word to the Sadducees does not contradict Orthodox teaching concerning God’s eternal crowning of husband and wife.

Thus, while on the one hand many speak in the Church of human marriage as having eternal implications,¹⁴⁰ and celebrate its exalted status as an icon of Christ’s communion with the Church, on the other hand we know that the resurrected life is not exactly like the current one, and our genders will be expressed differently. All these things point to the mystery of humanity as male and female. But how do we come to terms with this mystery?

First, it is wise to consider how the Virgin and Theotokos Mary, in relation to Christ, helps us to understand. Fr Alexander Schmemmann, in his exhilarating book, *The Virgin Mary*, says that “being the icon of the church, Mary is the image and personification of the world—that is to say, of the new world that God is making.”¹⁴¹ Most particularly he means that she is the personification of God’s redeemed people, the Church: “Mary is not the representative of the woman or women before God, she is the icon of the entire creation, the whole mankind as response to Christ and to God.”¹⁴² As we say in the hymn, “we bring a virgin mother” to the Lord as our offering. All of creation rejoices in her, and as it does so, it fulfills St Paul’s words that the creation is “on tiptoe” waiting “the moment when God’s children will be revealed” (Romans 8:19 (NTE)). Mary is the present sign of that great day to come, when the effects of the curse will be fully reversed, and there will be no more decay or death. Because of holy Mary’s consistent “yes,” she has become, as Fr Schmemmann explains, “the locus of Christ’s transformation, not just of woman, but of all humankind, and even of the entire creation.”¹⁴³

Wherefores: Mapping Out Questions, Partial Solutions, and Dead Ends

Mary's role in all this helps us with the "wherefores" that come up when we think of our salvation, and of our gendered condition. Some have agonized: if Christ is male, and if salvation depends upon Christ assuming our human nature, how can the female have been "assumed" in the incarnation, and how can women be saved? Next, to put it a bit too plainly, does the risen/ascended Christ have male properties? What does this mean for eschatology, for the risen saints and for us? Finally, does it help to distinguish between male/female and the masculine/feminine?

There is not enough space in an essay of this nature to be thorough with such questions, since the focus here is upon theological anthropology rather than Christology proper. To begin with, however, it seems advisable for us to drop the Western distinction of "essential" versus "accidental" when thinking about sexuality. The maleness or femaleness of a particular human being is *neither* essential to his or her humanity, *nor* merely an outward accident (or appearance) of who that one is. The woman Eve is not a second creation, separate from humanity—but she is distinct from Adam. As St John Chrysostom explains, she is distinct in her relationship, especially since the fall, but not in her nature: "For had Paul meant to speak of rule and subjection ... he would not have brought forward the instance of a wife, but rather of a slave and a master. For what if the wife be under subjection to us? It is as a wife, as free, as equal in honor. And the Son also, though He did become obedient to the Father, it was as the Son of God, it was as God."¹⁴⁴

Father and Son are both divine in nature; Adam and Eve are both *Adam*—human, created from the same material by God for His purpose. Moreover, as the second Adam, Christ recapitulates *both* Adam and Eve, despite their distinctness in gender. Jesus is fully male, for He is a particular human being, but His humanity is drawn exclusively from the woman. (We might reflect on how that is even more amazing for us than for Christians of an earlier day, given what we know about genetics: any rudimentary parthenogenesis that we have seen issues in a female, or quasi-male. But from Holy Mary, without a human husband, the second Person of the Trinity became Incarnate. As we chant in the Theotokion for Pentecost, "Every mind is overawed with your childbearing!") As a first step in understanding our nature and how Christ took it upon Himself, the unique role of the Theotokos helps us to see how woman is fully involved in the Incarnation, and so fully recapitulated in Christ. And so we are led to be amazed at a mystery.

Second, in our worship, we consider the risen and ascended Christ to be masculine, the Theotokos feminine, and the saints intact in their gendered natures. The fathers *have* differed regarding the glorified body, whether it retains sexual characteristics or not.¹⁴⁵ In our own day, there are theologians such as Paul Evdokimov who have taken a page from the rabbis, and speculate that our eschatological state is hermaphroditic, in conformity with how they misinterpret the protological state of undifferentiated Adam in Genesis.¹⁴⁶ But in our icons, in our worship, and in our reverence we continue to relate to those who are glorified as masculine and feminine. Though we may not be able to discover from Scriptures or Tradition whether *physical* maleness and femaleness is eternal, it would seem that the distinction between masculine and feminine is something that we must preserve. Woven into the theological grammar of the Scriptures, and our worship, is the idea that gendered language

points to a mystery even bigger than that of a male and female in a single marriage.

In our day, both Paul Evdokimov (despite his views on the final resurrected body) and C. S. Lewis have held on steadfastly to this idea that the physical male and female states are intimations of something greater. Evdokimov has speculated concerning mysterious “enstatic” and “ecstatic” realities to which female and male point, whereas Lewis has painted pictures and created characters that gesture toward an ineffable duality. I frankly find the approach of Lewis more helpful, and less apt to lead us into theological quagmire.¹⁴⁷ Pictures can feed our imaginations where discursive reason is more difficult.

Boundaries to Help the Explorer “Watch Out!”

Our minds, however, matter. Indeed, part of rationality is for us to recognize where reason cannot take us. Orthodox theology has formally recognized this in its distinction between kataphatic and apophatic theology, especially as we deal with mystery. In appreciation for the limitations of human reason, I would like to suggest nine boundaries, marking off the danger points connected with potential discussion regarding gender, anthropology, and theology, and giving practical guidelines within which I believe that our ongoing exploration can safely take place.¹⁴⁸ So, then, these boundaries adopt the patristic method of approaching a mystery apophatically—what we *cannot* say—in order not to stray beyond what we know:

1. We cannot say that all symbols are merely human expressions, and that language and action are detachable from the reality to which they point.
2. We cannot say that gendered language is expendable in talking about God or humanity.
3. We cannot say that the relations of Father, Son, and Spirit are symmetrical, nor can we say that they are not mutual and equal.
4. We cannot say that the relations of husband and wife are totally symmetrical, nor ought we to say that there is no mutuality or equality.
5. We cannot say that woman and man are two different creations, but we also cannot say that man and woman are indistinct from each other.
6. We cannot say that there is an absolutely confined role for each gender— reversals are part of our story.
7. We cannot say that there are no “higher” gifts and no “lesser” gifts—but all are necessary, and the higher need the lower, so that sometimes it is impossible to discern which is more important.
8. In God-talk, we cannot forbid the use of feminine imagery, for the Bible uses it.
9. In God-talk, we cannot ignore the usual or normative use of masculine language, even if it is uncomfortable to us.

These, I think, give us some parameters, both guarding us from danger and honoring the mysteries of theological anthropology and trinitarian theology. The first two hedges recognize our need to speak in metaphor, and the particular value and deep significance for our faith of gendered language and realities, as revealed to us in the Scriptures. Indeed, the pervasive use of masculine and feminine language in the Scriptures and ongoing Christian Tradition marks out this territory as sacramental—that is, we are offered in the male and

female signs that points to an ineffable mystery, and even partake of it.

The second two are predicated on St Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 11:3–16, where he acknowledges both *taxis* and mutual honor, both in the Godhead, and between male and female. These two boundaries could be the subject of an entire book, let alone an article. Some theologians, particularly within the evangelical community, have engaged for the past few decades in a heated debate on how 1 Corinthians 11:3–16, and other passages in the New Testament, ought to be understood—both in terms of male–female roles, and in terms of trinitarian theology. A major problem here seems to be that the real impetus of the debate is concern for women's roles in the Church, rather than the quest for an understanding of the Trinitarian mystery: God's nature thus becomes a mascot for ecclesial polity, rather than a mystery in itself that gives insight into the nature of humanity, created after His image.¹⁴⁹

The next three boundaries are meant to safeguard the complexity of our human relations. It may be that in this triad we will find the means to respond sensibly to the evangelical complementarians, who are certainly not semi-Arian, as charged by their egalitarian counterparts, but who do sometimes demonstrate a rigidity concerning the charisms of woman that might be deepened by a sacramental view of the universe such as the Orthodox account provides.

The final paired boundaries move from talk about male and female per se into our Christian naming of God. We must not reject, even in reaction against our confused age, the Biblical and traditional use of feminine similes and imagery for God; on the other hand, masculine language is normative, enshrined in the prayer that Jesus made us bold to say, and essential, rather than mere window-dressing, for our faith.¹⁵⁰ It is, after all, from the heavenly Father, that every form of “fatherhood” (*patria*) in heaven and earth is named (see Eph 3:15)!

These intertwined mysteries of theological anthropology, with all its un-usual contours, and the ineffable Trinity, we must guard, but also probe, in order to give reasons to our sexually confused age. We want to remain in Christ, to learn more and more of Him *and* of our world, and to commend what is real and true to others. It is my prayer that this symposium is only the beginning of a movement to address the skepticism, incoherence, and fragmentation of our day. May it be that in meeting these challenges we become a stronger and wiser Church concerning the human mystery, just as the challenges of Arius, the Spirit-fighters, Nestorianism, and Monophysitism issued in our deeper appreciation of the One Who is holy.

We have suggested some chastening boundaries for the future exercise of Christian minds. It may now be helpful for us to dwell upon an image to enliven our imaginations—for “*the refreshment of the spirit*,” as Lewis puts it.¹⁵¹ We may not be able to *define* the final resurrected state (for it is even more mysterious than our present human situation), but luminous pictures will certainly help us to anticipate it. We need such glimpses of glory in our wounded and soiled state!

Here is one such picture from Lewis's novel *Perelandra*, the second of his cosmic trilogy. At the climax of the story, the reader meets the King and Queen of Perelandra, victorious over temptation, newly come into their inheritance of the green world, and commanding even the homage of the huge angelic beings (with masculine and feminine aspects) whom the reader has already met. Consider the wonder of these two-in-one, the way in which they are

both “very good” in themselves, but point sacramentally beyond themselves to the One from whom all good things come. Mark also the main character of the book, Ransom, and his awareness of his own deficit—a lonely longing for a true mother and father, in our fallen world. May his yearning give voice to our present need to truly see and appreciate male and female, as God created us, pointing toward mysteries that we can hardly fathom.

All was in a pure daylight that seemed to come from nowhere in particular. He knew ever afterward what is meant by a light “resting on” or “overshadowing” a holy thing, but not emanating from it. For as the light reached its perfection and settled itself, as it were, like a lord upon his throne or like wine in a bowl, and filled the whole flowery cup of the mountain top, every cranny with its purity, the holy thing, Paradise itself in its two Persons, Paradise walking hand in hand, its two bodies shining in the light like emeralds yet not themselves too bright to look at, came in sight in the cleft between two peaks, and stood a moment with its male right hand lifted in regal and pontifical benediction, and then walked down and stood on the far side of the water. And the gods kneeled and bowed their huge bodies before the small forms of that young King and Queen.

There was a great silence on the mountain top, and Ransom [the main character of the book] also had fallen down before the human pair. When at last he raised his eyes from the four blessed feet, he found himself involuntarily speaking though his voice was broken and his eyes dimmed. “Do not move away, do not raise me up,” he said, “I have never before seen a man or a woman. I have lived all my life among shadows and broken images. Oh, my Father and my Mother, my Lord and my Lady, do not move, do not answer me yet. My own father and mother I have never seen. Take me for your son. We have been alone in my world for a great time.”¹⁵²