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Alienated Catholics: Establishing the Groundwork for Dialogue

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Alienated Catholics:
Establishing the
Groundwork for
Dialogue



The "Communities in
Conversation" 2006
Project: Talking about
Christianity and Sexuality



Chartres Cathedral:
Early Stirrings of
Catholic Studies and
Social Thought

URBI et ORBI

FALL 2006

Newsletter for the Lane Center for Catholic Studies and Social Thought

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Alienated Catholics: Establishing the Groundwork for Dialogue

Catherine M. Murphy

ST. AGNES CHURCH • MARCH 26, 2006

One of the earliest arguments against women's ordination the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops articulated in 1972 was that, since the incarnation of God was in a male, this culminates in a male priesthood. This reflects a hierarchical anthropology well-known from Christianity's earliest encounters with the Greco-Roman world, whereby the male was associated with the mind, reason, and the spirit, while the female was associated with the body, passion, and the material world.¹ In fact, some Greek doctors and philosophers thought that every fetus began as a male, but those that didn't develop fully became female.² Thomas Laqueur calls this the "one-sex body" theory—there is one normative body, the male, and the female body is just an underdeveloped version of it.³ Several of the early Church fathers were well aware of these notions, and added to them a scriptural layer that read Eve's secondary creation from Adam's rib as evidence of woman's subordination and incompleteness compared to man. Eve's susceptibility to temptation later in the story only proved that she should be carefully managed by a man. This gendered anthropology was used to legitimate male control of women on the grounds of female incapacity and male superiority throughout much of western history, so that only recently have women, rather than their fathers, husbands or the state, been legally allowed to make decisions affecting their bodies, their children and their property.

To some extent, this notion of female incapacity lurks behind the language of complementarity used by John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem* in 1989.⁴ There are two sexes each with their own complementary roles. But *Mulieris Dignitatem* then goes on to say that the complementary roles are fixed by the theological metaphor of church as bride of Christ, with Mary the God-bearer as the icon of that nuptial relationship. She is the "representative and archetype of the whole human race" (2.4), while the divine principle meets her as male child. She is matter, he is spirit. An idea of how the church and Mary negotiate the chasm between matter and spirit defines the roles to which real women are to aspire. Even granting that this ideology of womanhood is born out of John Paul II's profound devotion to the virgin mother Mary and is presented as a meditation rather than a theological exposition, it perpetuates the notion that womanhood is a fixed ideal that men define in terms of themselves and their definitions of sin and grace. Simply recall the language of the Second Vatican Council in its closing message:

The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which

women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling.

A promising start, to be sure, but in the end women's role is imagined not as a constructive addition, but as a prophylactic against further sin, which by the way women were responsible for in the first place. The most women can be imagined to do in this framework is to not make humanity fall further, as Mary did by obeying; the job of saving humanity is reserved to men. Thus the male is still imagined as the one who transcends sinful human nature, while the female can participate in terms of her body (celibacy [1 Cor 7] or procreation [1 Tim 2:15], or better yet, as in the case of Mary, both!).

This first argument against women's ordination, that women are not men and therefore should image Mary but cannot image Christ, has fortunately been downplayed in more recent Church teaching. But the central argument the Church now makes is problematic in a different way. Church teaching now emphasizes that the Church is not free to ordain women because it is bound by the example of Jesus, who only selected men as his Apostles.⁵ Let us pass over for the moment all the historical problems with this statement, such as whether the evangelists are giving us the exact practices of the historical Jesus. Let us also pass over the fact that, just three months before the CDF issued *Inter Insigniores*, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, a subsidiary of that same Congregation, had issued a report stating that (a) the New Testament does not settle in a clear way once and for all whether women can be ordained priests (a unanimous vote); (2) scriptural grounds alone are not enough to exclude the possibility of ordaining women (12-5 vote), and (3) Christ's plan would not be transgressed by permitting the ordination of women (12-5).⁶ Even ignoring these considerations, the argument that the Church is bound by what Jesus did can only appear gratuitous, since one of the first things the Twelve did after selecting Matthias to replace Judas (Acts 1:15-26) was to break from the example of Jesus by first ordaining Hellenist deacons (Acts 6:1-7) and then authorizing the mission to the Gentiles and the abrogation of a good portion of the Jewish law (Acts 10 on). If the example of the Twelve is normative for the Church hierarchy now, then the courage of the Twelve to trust the Spirit and change what Jesus did should surely be normative as well. And since when have Catholics been fundamentalists about Jesus' practice and scripture? The Catholic Church teaches that the Holy Spirit guides the Christian community not only through Scripture, but also through tradition. In principle, this means that

tradition can change.

These two arguments used to foster acceptance of the teaching of the church hierarchy reveal a view of women that is at best metaphorical and at worst misogynist and is not based on the experience of real women. Women are no more associated with the material world and sexuality than are men, nor should we imagine the material world and sexuality as the danger zone that all people should flee if they want to be holy. How is such a view of sanctity incarnational? How is such a view of matter sacramental?

The preference of spirit over matter, this concern to dominate and control that which we do not know, these are the dangerous inclinations that we must address. When the hierarchy calls their work service but won't let half of baptized Christians do it, it's not about service, it's about power and privilege. It's about who will sit at the right and left hand of Jesus rather than about who will follow him to the cross (Mark 10:35-45 and parallels).

To borrow the recent language of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' *Always Our Children*, as amended by the Vatican, the prerogative of power and the disdain for women are more or less deep-seated tendencies in Catholic teaching, and I believe together they lie at the heart of the Church's views of homosexual practice.⁷ The "others" that the Church hierarchy creates must exist so that the Church doesn't have to exorcise itself. The Church has had many historical others, the Jews and Muslims, for example. But its deeper others are its sexual others, women and homosexuals—deeper because they function as almost mythic figures of sin and deviance. When the Jews and Saracens were demonized in the Middle Ages and even more recently, they were feminized and imagined as sodomites because these sexual others run deeper. Women and homosexuals were not imagined as Jews and Muslims. The "others" the Church hierarchy creates in its teachings, onto whom it projects its demons, must exist so that the Church doesn't have to exorcise itself.

How else are we to read the Church's handling of the sexual abuse crisis? The bishops responsible for condoning the abuse have taken the spotlight off themselves and rendered this a "clergy" crisis rather than a crisis of episcopal leadership; they have transferred their own culpability to the convenient but tragically inappropriate scapegoat of gay clergy, and this despite the fact that so many of the bishops are gay themselves. There is an illness here that needs to be properly diagnosed before a remedy can be discerned, and members of this hierarchy would rather sacrifice the wrong victim than face their own illness. "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, 'We see,' so your sin remains" (John 9:41; cf. 15:22).

This illness infects the Church teaching on homosexuals and accounts for the fact that these teachings don't even make sense on their own terms. How can *Always Our Children* tell us, on the one hand, that the "homosexual orientation cannot be considered sinful," and then add a Vatican-mandated footnote reminding us that the inclination is an "objective disorder"?⁸ Either my homo-

sexual desire and practice is a grace because it is part of the created order for a small and not really very threatening percentage of us, or it is an objective disorder because it is entirely my sinful choice. The footnote reads, "This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most [persons with the homosexual inclination] a trial."⁹ I am one such person, and the only trial I experience is the one manufactured by so many others when I venture out my front door.

The criminal charges are many and clear.¹⁰ Most recently we have heard that gay couples who adopt children "do violence" to those children, "in the sense that [the children's] condition of dependency would be used to place them in an environment that is not conducive to their full human development."¹¹ This teaching is misguided; the only violence that is done to the child of gay parents is done not by the gay parents, as the CDF asserts, but by people, and churches, that name the grace of our love a sin and sanctify their own hatred and fear as divine law. Even had the Catholic bishops not jeopardized their credibility on this issue by turning a blind eye to the abuse of children—"using [the children's] condition of dependency...to place them in an environment that [was] not conducive to their full human development"—this would be a perfect example of a perverse logic that names grace a sin and authorizes evil in the name of grace.

I yearn for the day when my fellow Catholics and Christians can judge my love not by the sex of my partner, but by the quality and the fruits of the love itself, for surely these not only testify to the source of the love, but give glory to God as well.

I have taken comfort in a passage from the first letter of John: *Whoever says [she] is in the light, yet hates [her] brother; is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his [sister] remains in the light, and there is nothing in him to cause a fall. Whoever hates his brother [or his sister] is in darkness; he walks in darkness and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes. (1 John 2:9-11)*

My comments are offered in the spirit of identifying the real darknesses that jeopardize love, the hatreds that we can no longer afford to mask as love or reverence. We have done too much damage to too many people who in good conscience discover themselves to be women or gay or lesbian and yearn to live loving lives in the context of our rich faith, but find church doors closed to them and too many sacrificial victims crucified on its walls.

Those of us who wish to remain in the church have the nearly impossible task of helping to transform the language of damnation into the language of communion. The reason I remain is that I recognize this to be not my task primarily, but the costly price of love long ago paid on a cross. ■

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It's about who will sit at the right and left hand of Jesus rather than about who will follow him to the cross

(Mark 10:35-45 and parallels)

(see *Alienated Catholics* on page 12)

(Alienated Catholics from page 5)

- 1 Teresa M. Shaw provides an entertaining and accessible description of the Greek medical models and early Christian adaptation of them in her book, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998). See also Lesley Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), especially pages 41-109.
- 2 Aristotle, On the Generation of Animals 1.17-20; 2.1-3, in *De Partibus Animalium I and De Generatione Animalium I*, trans. D. M. Balme (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 34-52, 58-65, 140-49, 155-65.
- 3 Thomas Laqueur, "Destiny is Anatomy," in *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990) 25-62.
- 4 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* [On the Dignity and Vocation of Women, 15 August 1988] (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1989).
- 5 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores* [Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood, 15 October 1976], *Origins* 6:3 (3 February 1977); reproduced in *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration* (ed. Leonard Swidler and Arlene Swidler; New York: Paulist, 1977) 37-49. Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* [Priestly Ordination, 22 May 1994], *Origins* 24:4 (9 June 1994) 49-58; available online, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_22051994_ordinatio-sacerdotalis_en.html. U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Doctrine, "Ten Frequently Asked Questions About the Reservation of Priestly Ordination to Men," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Office of Media Relations (1998), online, <http://www.usccb.org/comm/archives/1998/98-210a.shtml>.
- 6 Pontifical Biblical Commission, "Biblical Commission Report: Can Women Be Priests?" *Origins* 6:6 (1 July 1976) 92-6; reproduced as "Appendix II: Biblical Commission Report, 'Can Women Be Priests?'" in *Women Priests* (reference above) 338-46. In that same anthology, see the excellent essay by John R. Donahue, S. J., "A Tale of Two Documents," 25-34, which compares the Pontifical Biblical Commission report and *Inter Insigniores*.
- 7 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth, "Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers" (1998), online, <http://www.usccb.org/laity/always.shtml>.
- 8 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth, "Always Our Children."
- 9 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1994) no. 2358.
- 10 For example, on the language of "objective disorder," see the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona humana* [Declaration on Certain Questions Pertaining to Sexual Ethics, 29 December 1975], *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 68 (1976) 77-96. For a probing critique of the language of "objective disorder" in the context of natural law arguments, see Jack A. Bonsor, "An Objective Disorder: Homosexual Orientation and God's Eternal Law," in *Horizons* 24 (2/1997) 193-214 and "Homosexual Orientation and Anthropology: Reflections on the Category 'Objective Disorder,'" *Theological Studies* 59 (1/1998) 60-83. For Church statements prior to 2000, see Mark D. Jordan, "Teaching by Threatening," in *The Silence of Sodom: Homosexuality in Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 21-50, 263-6.
- 11 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons" (3 June 2003), online, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_200307 ■

(Chartres Cathedral from page 7)

pope against such a reactionary move. (In 1889, Manning would also intervene in the London Dock Strike; the resulting "Cardinal's peace" had an impact far beyond Britain.) The pope's thought continued to change as he grappled with such immediate events.

Thus, when *Rerum Novarum* finally appeared in 1891, it came as a shock and established its legendary place in the history of

Catholic thought. After a century of intransigent opposition to changing social and economic realities, Catholicism weighed in favor of workers' rights to form associations that would offer them leverage in the face of wealthy industrialists. It did this while maintaining its distance from the atheistic underpinnings of communism (and some forms of socialism) by appealing to the enormous weight of Catholic tradition going back to medieval times. Catholic anthropology was not fundamentally individualistic — its philosophy of the human person did not (as did 17th- and 18th-century philosophers) envision a person as being first an individual and only secondarily a member of a community (by means of a "social contract"). Catholic anthropology began instead with the individual as embedded within a community of persons from the beginning of life — and this was not rooted merely in modern socialist thought but rather in ancient tradition.

Leo's world-view, expressed in his two landmark encyclicals on Catholic philosophy and Catholic social ethics, was grounded in the broad neo-medievalist movements of his century. These movements looked to an earlier epoch in order to locate a world that (at least in their hopes and dreams) could provide alternative models of thinking and valuing — alternative models of interpersonal obligations and mutual duties as well as of individual rights; of organic interconnectedness as opposed to the radical individualism and isolation that was felt to be alienating in the modern world.

Few have articulated the enduring appeal of Chartres as poignantly as the Swedish film-maker Ingmar Bergman, and his reflections are a fitting place to end these brief reflections on the choice of Chartres as the image for our Lane Center masthead.

Regardless of my own beliefs and my own doubts, which are unimportant in this connection, it is my opinion that art lost its basic creative drive the moment it was separated from worship. It severed an umbilical cord and now lives its own sterile life, generating and degenerating itself. In former days the artist remained unknown and his work was to the glory of God. He lived and died without being more or less important than other artisans; 'eternal values,' 'immortality' and 'masterpiece' were terms not applicable in his case. The ability to create was a gift. In such a world flourished invulnerable assurance and natural humility.

Today the individual has become the highest form and the greatest bane of artistic creation. The smallest wound or pain of the ego is examined under a microscope as if it were of eternal importance. The artist considers his isolation, his subjectivity, his individualism almost holy. . . .

Thus if I am asked what I would like the general purpose of my films to be, I would reply that I want to be one of the artists in the cathedral on the great plain. I want to make a dragon's head, an angel, a devil — or perhaps a saint — out of stone. It does not matter which; it is the sense of satisfaction that counts.

Regardless of whether I believe or not, whether I am a Christian or not, I would play my part in the collective building of the cathedral.

Ingmar Bergman, introduction to *Four Screenplays of Ingmar Bergman* (1960) ■

The unabridged text of this essay may be found at www.usfca.edu/lanecenter/masthead