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SITE MAP

God Language and Feminist Christology

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Must our image of God go? I shouldn't believe it strongly, but some sort of case could be made out. ~ C. S. Lewis

About Vertical Inclusive Language

What is "vertical inclusive language?"

"Vertical inclusive language" is language that equally reflects both male and female aspects of God; it is like inclusive language used to describe humans. Christian scripture and tradition has almost exclusively used masculine language, *Father, Lord, King, He*, despite the fact that Christian theology maintains that God has no gender. According to the theology, God's divinity contains the perfections of both the male and female. However, because God revealed God's self as male, Christianity has made masculine language normative in the description of God. Advocates of inclusive language argue that the use of masculine terms demonstrates and perpetuates patriarchy and sexism. Their solution would be the equal use of gendered terms. For example the use of *Mother* and *She* along with *Father* and *He*, and replacing of gendered terms with ungendered terms such as *Parent* and *Monarch*. Also, Jesus Christ could be called the *Divine Child* instead of *Son of God*. (Cooper 1)



Eve and Adam image from [Lycos Image Gallery and Pictures Now](#)

Some Variation Within the Movement

Evangelical Feminism: The movement holds that the biblical principle of equality requires women to have equal opportunity to that of men, to have positions in ministry, and within marriage to share authority and the power to make decisions. They do not believe that the Bible condones female subordination and spiritual superiority of males. They find the Bible to have an objective and authoritative meaning, a spiritual message that remains unchanged and obvious despite changing readers and interpreters of the text. Because of the equality of all of creation before God, evangelical feminists believe that there is no theological or moral justification for the subordination of any group or individual based solely on their race, gender or class. (Groothuis 1)

Theologically Liberal Feminism: This movement disagrees with evangelical Feminists; theologically liberal feminists argue that portions of the Bible in fact do teach female subordination. They view biblical interpretations and translations as contradicting the universal message of equality and therefore find the Bible to be authoritative but open to reinterpretation. The authority and meaning of the Bible is thought to lie not only in the text but also in "cultural preunderstandings," which theologically liberal feminists

believe interpretation must take into account. For them, the reader determines authority or lack thereof of the text, as biblical meaning is found in the relationship between the reader and the text. The spiritual consciousness and feminism of women readers makes the Bible authoritative. (Groothuis 2)

Nonevangelical Feminist Theology: These movements argue for the subjectivity, relativity, and pluralism of religious truth. Groothuis charges that they view religion as a series of myths, metaphors and symbols, which together demonstrate religious truth. Groothuis believes that for nonevangelical feminists, religious truth is functional as personal belief, not substantial and universally true despite varying personal beliefs. (Groothuis 2)

Radical Feminist Theology: This theology holds that female spirituality is fundamentally different from male spirituality and therefore requires a different approach to the Bible. The female personification of Sophia (the wisdom of God) as more than a metaphor and the use of new interpretations of a radically feminist Bible do not separate sexuality from spirituality. (Groothuis 3)

History of the Movement

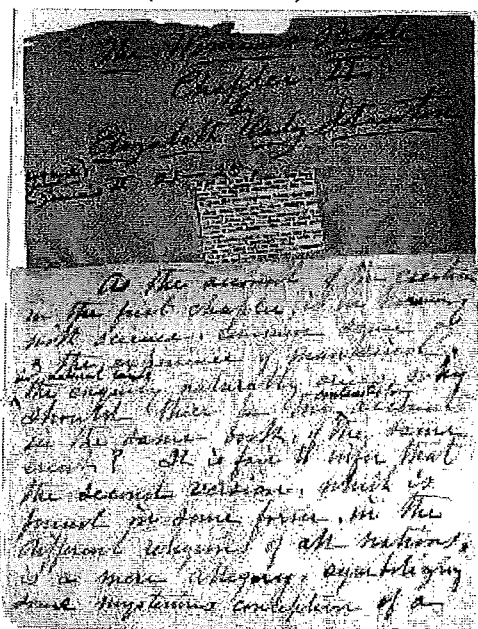
Evangelical Feminism emerged as a movement in the 19th century. The movement largely began in the work of abolitionists such as Sarah Grimke who, while trying to challenge slavery, found themselves needing to defend their right to speak out at all. In the 1830's Grimke and other evangelical leaders argued that the Bible had been incorrectly translated and interpreted. Tied to the argued belief of the time that the Bible fundamentally opposes slavery, was the notion that mistranslation makes the Bible seem to condone and make normative subordination of women. Groothuis states that Evangelical Feminism has not strayed far from the basic philosophy it began with nearly two hundred years ago. (Groothuis 2)

Elizabeth Cady Stanton edited *The Woman's Bible* in the late 19th century, shaping the theological liberal feminist movement. The Women's Bible is made up of sections of biblical text matched with reinterpretation and commentary written by Stanton or other contributors. (San Francisco State University class project site) The contributors to the book argued that the Bible was contaminated with the sexism of the men who wrote it. Unlike Evangelical Feminists, Cady Stanton and her comrades believed that retranslating and interpretation would not fix this problem. They held that the Bible contains inherent androcentricism. (Groothuis 2)



Sarah Moore Grimke

image from National Women's History Month Page



A page from *The Women's Bible*, edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton

image from San Francisco State University class project site



Elizabeth Cady Stanton

image from National Women's History Project

The Debate over Gender Inclusive Language:

What are the bases for the argument to adopt "vertical inclusive language?"

Advocates of "vertical inclusive language" and feminist theology are found across ecumenical lines. There are Roman Catholics, Protestants and even a few conservative evangelicals and confessional communions. Besides arguing that "vertical inclusive language" will serve to overcome sexism, inclusivists employ scripture, tradition, hermeneutics, theology, and linguistics to justify inclusive language. Inclusivists who attest to the divine inspiration and ultimate authority of Scripture argue that within the Bible lies the foundation of "vertical inclusive language." They emphasize the portions of the Bible that are maternal or gender neutral (*rock, fortress, light*). The human character of the Scripture is also emphasized. While these inclusivists hold that the Scripture is divinely inspired, they argue that its language is culturally situated in the society of early Christianity and therefore not the final truth. The strong masculinity of God is an accommodation to the culture of the time, similar to God's accommodation of slavery and polygamy. Important figures who have used feminine language in reference to God are also invoked. These include Augustine, Chrysostom, Bonaventure, Julian of Norwich, and John Calvin. Inclusivists argue that if these important figures advocated inclusive language, it must be not simply a modern invention of feminist ideology. Rather, inclusivism must be consistent with biblical Christianity and history. (Cooper 2)

Some inclusivists separate the Word of God from biblical text. They argue that the text of the Bible was not inspired but was the recordings of encounters with God after the fact. They claim that the language of the Bible is completely human and therefore may be altered, when appropriate, in order to better express the religious truth that it was meant to communicate (Cooper 2). Inclusivists also cite Scriptural emphasis on divine justice and liberation. God revealed God's self to individuals, but also continues to be revealed in the modern church and its reading of Scripture. In this way the Bible can be seen as a revelation in progress. By reading Scripture themselves using inclusive language, women are part of a continuing revelation of God. Some inclusivists directly challenge masculine terms for God. A prime example is the allegation the Jesus might not have referred to God as *Father*, but Gospel writers made up that reference. (Cooper 3)

Using modern hermeneutics, and the notion that discussion about a text brings out the text's true meaning, inclusivists argue that humans' projections of meaning create a meaning for the text. This argument undermines the normativeness of masculine God language and justifies inclusive language. (Cooper 3)

" . . . finite knowledge and languages cannot encompass the infinite . . . metaphorical expressions, nonetheless, contain truth, and generally are authentic finite (obviously partial and limited) expressions of Reality. They may facilitate or distort the conceptualization of truth, but we should ever remember that the essence of personal revelation is an encounter with God in a personal relationship. Language is not the master, but the servant of revelation." ~ Meredith Sprunger (1)

Theological doctrines such as divine transcendence and general or creational revelation are also invoked to support inclusive language. God can have no gender because God transcends all categories. They argue that attributing masculinity to God is a misunderstanding of the masculine terms used to describe God. In fact, some say that Christian tradition has made an idol of masculine language and worshipped a false God. Revelation doctrine holds that God's revelation is not exclusively textual and that creation is also a language and expression of God. Because of the creation of females in equal image and likeness of God, living women can be used as primary sources of God language. Also, God's transcendence makes any human label inadequate. Human definitions are thus anthropomorphic, symbolic, figurative, analogical, or metaphorical but never literal.

Therefore masculine terms for God have no more accuracy than any other human word. The Bible contains both female and male metaphors, both of which, inclusivists argue, are equally valid in their equal inadequacy. (Cooper 3)



Creation of Eve image from [Lycos Image Gallery and Pictures Now](#)

In addition, inclusivists charge that Christian faith has never been limited to Scripture. Language for God includes doctrinal terms such as *Trinity* and *First Person*, and philosophical terms such as *Final Cause* and *Great Designer*. Other non-biblical terms include *The Hound of Heaven* and *The Man Upstairs*. Because these terms are all acceptable, inclusivists wonder why *Mother* should not be acceptable also. (Cooper 3)

A final argument is that God's name is not important. What God is and what God does are real and important. Inclusivists argue that inclusive language can express God's self and actions just as well as patriarchal linguistics. They argue that the essential meaning of the religion and theology will not change with inclusive language, except for the loss of sexism. (Cooper 3) Meredith Sprunger says, "The First Source and Center of all things and beings is not revealed by name but by nature. The name given this Ultimate Reality is of little spiritual importance"(1).

What are the arguments against "vertical inclusive language?"

We cannot eliminate fatherhood from the gospel without destroying its very meaning ~ W. A. Visser't Hooft (Sprunger 2)

Mark Brumley explains an argument that defends the use of traditional, masculine language to describe God. Because God chose to portray himself as male, we as humans do not have the authority to manipulate his language to satisfy modern egalitarianism. While theologians could surely provide reasons why God chose to reveal himself in the way he did, and regardless of their persuasiveness, biblical witness remains the standard for addressing God and therefore must not be challenged. Challenging him and altering his self reference would replace the true God with one that we

created. (Brumley 1) If the biblical witness of God's masculinity is dismissed, how can any of the claims of revelation be trusted? Brumley argues that abandoning the biblically emphasized masculinity of God, or to claim that masculine images of God have been humanly designed, rivals abandoning biblical revelation and thus Christianity itself. He believes that God has taught us how to refer to him. (Brumley 5)



Still life with Bible

image from [Lycos Image Gallery and Pictures Now](#)

Groothuis argues that radical feminist theology errs by sexualizing the nature of God (4). She cites professor Mary Lefkowitz of Wellesley College who criticizes this non-separation of sexuality from spirituality and its

"loud insistence on a gender requirement for spiritual birth. If such a definition will harm anyone, it will surely harm women, by simplifying and demoting them to creatures of mere sexuality" (Groothuis 4)

The Bible never refers to God as having a sexual nature nor does it ever divinize sexuality. Creation possesses sexuality, not the creator. God is depicted in mostly masculine terms but Groothuis says this does not make God male. Existing biblical depictions of God as feminine would be unfit and not make sense if God were in fact male. The combination of God described in masculine and feminine terms shows that no sexual distinctions apply to God's nature. Carl Henry argues that the pronoun 'he' used in the Bible to refer to God is not a reference to his sexual gender, rather it is a generic pronoun that stresses his personality. (Groothuis 5)

While inclusivists may argue that the difference in masculine and feminine language is only quantitative (only about two dozen feminine references to God in contrast to tens of thousands of masculine references), Cooper argues that there are also qualitative differences that make a change to gender inclusive language inappropriate. He explains that all the feminine references are figures of speech whereas the masculine terms are titles, proper names and common nouns used to identify (appellatives), followed by Hebrew and Greek masculine grammar. He also points out that many of the feminine references are attributes coupled with masculine terms in the same sentence. For example,

"Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures." ~ James 1:18

and,

"Hearken to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am He, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save." ~ Isaiah 46:3-4

Therefore, Cooper argues that the Bible never refers to God as a female being, only as having feminine attributes. Cooper argues that the reduction of titles such as *Father*, *Lord*, and *King* to metaphors is a confusion. Cooper feels that equating the human terms such as *Mother* with the masculine divine titles undercuts the authority and determination which are integral to the process of naming. He sees God's

names as not having meaning in their supposed representation of God, but in their historical context, their places in revelation. *Mother* does not share that history. (Cooper 5)

Feminist Christology:

Along with the problem of gendering God, many women have had problems with the traditional representation of Christ as male.

Ruether's *Liberation of Christology* discusses the Christ symbol with regard to women:

"Christianity has never said that God was literally male, but it has assumed that God represents preeminently the qualities of rationality and sovereign power. Since men were assumed to be rational, and women less so or not at all, and men exercised the public power normally denied to women, the male metaphor was seen as appropriate for God, while female metaphors for God came to be regarded as inappropriate and "pagan". The *Logos* who reveals the "Father", therefore, was presumed to be properly represented even though the Jewish Wisdom tradition had used the female metaphor, *Sophia*, for this same idea. The maleness of the historical Jesus undoubtedly reinforced this preference for the male-identified metaphors, such as *Logos* and "Son of God", over the female metaphor of *Sophia*" (Ruether, 9).

Although Ruether views the Christ symbol as bounded in a sexist and male dominated symbolism, the question is still posed as to whether this Christ can be liberated from patriarchy. Ruether believes that in order to

"reaffirm the basic Christian belief that women are included in redemption, 'in Christ', all the symbolic underpinnings of Christology must be reinterpreted" (Ruether, 13).

However, is it possible to change the symbolism of the central figure of the Christian tradition when it is already so imbedded in the doctrine and rituals? For women like Ruether, a theologian and follower of the Catholic tradition, they are placed in a position of marginality because of the Christ symbol. However, if one is devout in a tradition she faces the decision whether to abandon the institution and start all over with new symbols and ideas or try to change the institution from within. Ruether believes that the Christ symbol can be re-interpreted through different means such as a new use of language (i.e. abandoning the Father-Son analogy), re-interpretation of Jesus' identity, and concentrating on Jesus as a "lived message and practice" rather than simply as a biological male (Ruether, 23). Ruether also points out that while the Christian tradition focuses on Jesus' maleness, they tend to forget his other human facets such as his position as a first century Galilean Jew. Through this new re-interpretation of Jesus' role and symbol, women will have more access to power. When Christology changes to incorporate women and put them on an equal plane, this equality transcends practice and rituals. Women will have become more powerful when the power symbol of the tradition, Jesus Christ, is more accessible and identifiable to them. Thus Christology and women would both be liberated from patriarchy.

Links and Bibliography

- This site has multiple links to [articles and sources](#) on Feminist Christology.
- Article by [Elizabeth Johnson](#).

[*Sexuality, Spirituality, and Feminist Religion*](#) by Rebecca Merrill Groothuis

[*Contemporary Theological Issues: Gender-Inclusive Language for God*](#) By John Cooper. *Theological Forum* Vol. XXVI, No. 3&4, December 1998

[*God Language*](#) By Meredith Sprunger. *Spiritual Fellowship Journal*, Fall 1993

[San Francisco State University class project site](#)

Catholic and Feminist: Can One Be Both?

ELIZABETH FOX-GENOVESE

Can one be both Catholic and feminist? Many of us these days are asking the question, sometimes with considerable anguish. The real question, however, is why is this a question at all. Why do so many of us see the relations between Catholicism and feminists as problematic?

Until we can answer this, we will find it difficult to think constructively about the prior question of whether it is possible simultaneously to be both Catholic and feminist. Many of us, I suspect, think the answer to this question should be "yes," if only because we believe ourselves to be both. But knowing that others perceive irreconcilable conflicts between Catholicism and feminism, even the most optimistic of us is likely to pause. For we do know that even if we hope to reconcile the claims of Catholicism and feminism within our own beliefs and lives, most Catholics and most feminists would insist that such reconciliation is difficult if not impossible.



Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

The perceived difficulties originate in the allegedly incompatible demands that both Catholicism and feminism impose upon their adherents. Catholic teaching includes a series of prescriptions about human sexuality, fertility, and marriage. As Pope John Paul II and the Magisterium insist, Catholicism does not countenance sex outside of marriage or divorce and does require that sexual relations be open to reproduction, which, in practice, means refraining from the use of artificial contraception. In addition, Catholics are held to revere life in all its forms and hence to refrain from abortion, suicide, and assisted suicide, all of which are viewed as forms of murder. The Holy Father has further enjoined Catholics to oppose capital punishment in virtually all cases. These requirements apply equally to women and men, but there can be no doubt that their consequences, notably with respect to the prohibition against abortion, may appear to fall more heavily upon women.

In addition to forcefully underscoring the practices from which Catholics must refrain, the Holy Father has repeatedly emphasized the dignity of women as persons, acknowledged the abuse and injustice that has too frequently been inflicted upon women, and welcomed modern advances in women's worldly and professional equality with men. Praising "the culture of equality," he has written that "respect for the full equality of man and woman in every walk of life is one of civilization's greatest achievements." And he sadly acknowledges that "unfortunately even today there are situations in which women live, *de facto* if not legally, in a condition of inferiority." Such injustice makes it all the more "urgently necessary to cultivate everywhere a culture of equality, which will be lasting and constructive to the extent that it reflects God's plan."^[1]

The Pope's frequent remarks upon the dignity and vocation of women testify to his genuine concern to further steady improvement in women's traditional position, which has been historically, and throughout much of the world remains, one of subordination to men. To the disgust of feminists, however, he has also insisted upon women's specific genius, which includes responsibilities as well as rights. Women's right to equal treatment and respect, like their right to equal partnership in the mystery of redemption, derives from their equal value as persons in the eyes of God. And many of their responsibilities, like men's, derive from the same source. But women also have specific responsibilities that derive from their nature as women, notably their ability to bear new life and the special intimacy of their relation to it. Thus the Pope does, to be blunt, insist that in some essential ways women and men differ and that, in the measure that they do differ, must be acknowledged to have subtly different vocations.

On the face of it, many recent Catholic statements about the nature, dignity, and rights of women appear to have much in common with feminism. But, in this case, as in many others, everything depends upon the meaning we ascribe to the words Catholicism and feminism, and today the meaning of both is hotly contested. The core of feminism lies in the simple demand that women receive the same respect as men as independent, capable human beings. Yet the very simplicity of that demand raises as many questions as it answers. What does equal respect for women and men mean, and what does it require? If you listen to the more radical feminists, you would have to believe that feminism requires unlimited sexual freedom, complete individual autonomy, and absolute equality between women and men in all areas of life. For the radicals, feminism necessarily includes not merely personal dignity, freedom from sexual harassment and rape, and equal pay for equal work, but abortion on demand; sexual freedom for women, including the freedom to engage in extramarital affairs with men or women; lesbianism and bisexuality as coequal to heterosexuality, which is increasingly referred to as "heterosexism"; single-sex marriage; freedom from any special responsibility to children; single motherhood; no-fault divorce; equal participation in the military; and more. At a minimum, this agenda suggests that contemporary feminism, in its most radical and politically influential manifestations, has established itself as a resolutely, if not aggressively, secular program. In particular, in declaring uncompromising war against men's alleged domination over women and women's alleged enslavement to children, it has discredited, the ideals of service and sacrifice.

Feminists reason that women, as the victims of systematic and universal oppression, are entitled — perhaps obligated — to struggle against all of its protean manifestations, notably the ubiquitous instances of men's violence against women. Today, few Americans disagree, and most willingly support feminist campaigns against rape, the abuse of women and children, and *quid pro quo* sexual harassment. But feminists also find evidence of male violence in more ambiguous areas. Their favorite targets include, but are not limited to: the domestic division of labor, the distribution of political and occupational positions, styles of classroom teaching, standardized tests, male models of moral reasoning, scientific theory and practice, single-sex education for men, and professional sports. According to many feminists, all of these forms of violence and more may be traced to the patriarchal family and patriarchal religion, which together share primary responsibility for imprisoning women within constrictive social relations and demeaning interpretations of female nature.

Feminists seek to free women from the stereotype of womanhood that both the family and revealed religion have perpetrated upon them. And like many who seek liberation from what they experience as a condition of enslavement, they have tended to argue that freedom must mean the total repudiation or reversal of that condition. They have especially resented the tendency of churches and families to base their vision of women's roles upon assumptions about female nature, most notably female sexuality. Thus,

Feminists frequently link their campaign for women's sexual freedom to their campaign against family and religion, arguing, at the extreme, that to survive in the Christian churches, women must reclaim their sexuality from the male domination that Christianity has foisted upon them. In an attempt to impose their views, they have frequently — and with considerable success — turned to the government to implement them. To date, their campaigns against religion have primarily been waged within the churches, but some are now proposing that all churches be denied tax-exempt status unless they comply with an anti-patriarchal agenda in their allocation of institutional positions and use of language. For Catholicism, the implementation of this program would mean women priests and the deletion of all references to God the Father. For people of all faiths, it would signal the end of the constitutional separation of church and state.

The radicalism of some feminist attacks on religion was captured by the fourth and most recent "Re-imagining" conference, which began by inviting the participants to bite into one of the apples piled in bowls on the tables at which they were sitting. The point of the exercise was to reclaim Eve and, with her, a woman's right to the knowledge of good and evil. In a similar spirit, a school of Catholic feminist theologians has enthusiastically turned the tools of postmodern cultural analysis against the Virgin Mary, whom it has little patience — at least in the form in which the Church has presented her. And, at the same time, many ostensibly Christian feminists call for goddess or Sophia worship on the grounds that the God and Savior of Christianity do not reflect women's experience. These feminist critiques of patriarchal religion have begun to make a serious impact upon the churches, most of which suspect that they have not always treated their female members with the respect they deserve. But this laudable openness to acknowledge women's dignity may be blinding many to the nature of the challenge they are being asked to accommodate in a proper Christian spirit. For feminist demands upon the churches have inevitably and invariably hewn more closely to the imperatives of politically radical secularism than to those of Christianity.

Feminist rereadings of religion through the lens of secular concerns has a longer history than many may expect. In 1848, at Seneca Falls, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a group of colleagues assembled to defend women's right to the same civic freedom as men enjoyed on the grounds that "all men and women are created equal."^[2] But even at Seneca Falls, Stanton turned her attention to the ways in which man held woman spiritually and morally hostage. "He has made her, morally, an irresponsible being," by assigning to her a different code of morals than that which obtains for man. In sum, "He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her and to no other."^[3]

Nine years later, in *The Woman's Bible*, Stanton launched an open challenge to religious authority in the name of women's emancipation and self-determination. In a spirit that contemporary feminists would find entirely congenial, she insisted that women's freedom required liberation from artificial laws and customs that, by freeing women, would transform society.^[4] In *The Woman's Bible*, Stanton offered a series of harsh commentaries on the Old Testament, reproaching Moses for not having been "more merciful in his judgments of all witches, necromancers and soothsayers," who "possessed the same power and manifested 'many of the same wonders'" as he and who "should not have been so severely punished for their delusions."^[5]

Stanton nonetheless reserved her real fire for the New Testament, which she judged even less friendly to women. Rejecting the Christian claim that the New Testament brought "promises of new dignity and of greater liberties for women," she announced that women's inferior position is actually "more clearly and

phatically set forth by the Apostles than by the Prophets and the Patriarchs." [6] She especially deplored the position of Mary, whom she described as having belonged to the Jewish aristocracy. With this distinguished ancestry, Mary should have been granted a husband of her own rank rather than a humble craftsman. But then Stanton could not understand why Mary had to be human at all. "If a Heavenly Father is necessary, why not a Heavenly Mother? If an earthly Mother was admirable, why not an earthly Mother?" Above all, she objected to the idea that Mary's motherhood of Jesus honored women as a sex. In her view, "a wise and virtuous son is more indebted to his mother than she is to him, and is honored only by reflecting her superior characteristics." These and similar complaints amply prepare Stanton's reader for her concluding observation that "Biblical mysteries and inconsistencies are a great strain on the credulity of an ordinary mind." [7]

Armed with a postmodern theory that insists upon the social construction of all religion, contemporary radical feminist theologians are carrying Stanton's impatience with the Virgin Mother to new levels. They contend that Catholic moral theology, formulated by a misogynist male hierarchy, has used Mary to guarantee "the perpetuation of compulsory heterosexuality, the valorization of virginity, and the denigration of female sexuality." [8] Incensed by Pope John II's devotion to her, they insist that reverence for Mary as the virgin Mother of God imprisons women within the traditional feminine stereotypes of virginity or heterosexual marriage. The scope and intricacy of the attack exceeds my purposes here, although it should give Christians pause to see Jesus described as an "illegitimate child." [9] Indeed, the prevailing feminist attitude toward Christian doctrine is well captured in Uta Ranke-Heinemann's title, *Putting Away Childish Things: the Virgin Birth, the Empty Tomb, and Other Fairy-Tales You Don't Need to Believe to Have a Living Faith*. [10]

Underscoring the fundamental secularism of most feminist goals, I am passing no judgment on the inherent worthiness of the goals themselves. Many of those goals, notably equal pay for equal work, are not merely admirable, but necessary as a matter of simple justice. Others may be open to civilized debate, but nonetheless reflect a serious attempt to permit women to move as freely in the world as men and equally with men to enjoy the fruits of their talents and labor. But the worthiness of the goals should not blind us to their single-minded focus upon the goods of this world and, beyond them, to the liberation of each individual woman from binding ties or obligations to others. This inherent feminist secularism obviously poses serious problems for Catholic women, all the more since most feminists have tended to be hostile to Christianity and downright hostile to Catholicism. It is in this context that Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, both Catholic feminist theologians, have joined the attack on the reported oppression, patriarchalism, and male dominance that have deeply compromised Christianity.

In many interlocking political and theological debates that pit feminists against Catholics and all orthodox Christians touch upon virtually every aspect of our society, culture, and faith. At their core, however, lies the feminists' visceral hostility to Catholicism's male priesthood and opposition to abortion. Feminists see Catholic teaching on these and other matters as the negation of Catholicism's profession to honor the equal worth and dignity of women and men. Yet belief in the equal dignity of women and men lies at the heart of Catholicism. Catholicism has always insisted upon the freedom of each individual to follow or rebel against the Holy Spirit. Catholicism has always acknowledged the special dignity of women, the ideal of which is embodied by the Virgin Mary. Historically, these teachings coexisted with Catholicism's tacit or unspoken acceptance of significant inequality between women and men. Recently, however, Catholic theologians, beginning with the holy Father, have increasingly insisted upon the fundamental equality of women and men. Consider, for example, the words of Pope John Paul II in *On the Dignity and Vocation of*

men: "both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God's image" [12].
 ther, however, can exist alone, but only "as a 'unity of the two,' and therefore *in relation to another
 nan person.*" For both women and men, "being a person in the image and likeness of God also involves
 sting in a relationship, in relation to the other "I" (25).

great twentieth-century theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, also insisted upon the exemplary quality
 he feminine for all human beings. Insisting that the word for "answer" or "response" is feminine, he
 w the lesson that "woman is essentially an answer [*Ant-wort*] in the most fundamental sense. . . "[12]
 "if man is the word that calls out, woman is the answer that comes to him at last" (254). Thus Balthasar
 stled with the same problem that angers feminists today, namely, how can the idea of equality between
 men and men be reconciled with the idea of man's primacy? Unlike feminists, however, Balthasar
 used to agree that the difference between men and women diminished women's dignity and
 ertance. To the contrary, he insisted that "the word that calls out only attains fulfillment when it is
 nderstood, accepted and given back as a word." In his view, man's dependence upon woman thus
 ifirms that "man can be primary and woman secondary" because "the primary remains unfulfilled
 out the secondary. The primary needs a partner of *equal rank and dignity* for its own fulfillment" (254).

oughout the most compelling modern Catholic teachings on the nature and dignity of woman runs this
 phasis upon a complementarity of women and men that in no way diminishes women's importance or
 rding. Indeed, if we follow Balthasar, man himself is "responsive" or feminine in relation to God. In this
 pect, it is tempting to argue that, as the answer that fulfills the word, women embody the exemplary
 nan posture — that of receptivity or confirmation. None of this has satisfied feminists who persist in
 eting the role of the word that is answered for themselves, presumably on the erroneous assumption
 t Catholics see a direct analogy between man and God and thus deify man in relation to woman. They
 not, and we might do well to recall that the teachings of the Church consistently question — indeed,
 y defy — the deification of any human being. If pride constitutes the first of the capital (mortal) sins and
 nility the first of the capital virtues, how do we insist upon the equality of women and men in the world
 he premier standard for Christianity?

ninists would counter that their real object is to ensure the equality of women and men within the faith
 heir equal "personhood." Yet their equality of personhood has been there from the start. It is the
 ality of roles — of worldly authority, standing, and freedom — that is at issue. Neither Christianity in
 iversal, nor Catholicism in particular, has taught that standing in the world testifies to a person's
 rthiness. If anything, they have taught the contrary. The Catholic Church's recent teaching on abortion
 nistakably focuses upon the intrinsic, spiritual value of the most impoverished and most vulnerable
 nan life, which has been created in God's image, not upon women's condemnation to the status of
 ond-class citizens.[13] The point of the prohibition against abortion is to protect human life, not to
 nean women. Women's bodies do bear children, which places women at special risk to live the direct
 irectsequences of the Church's teaching on life. Some might even hold God responsible for having given
 men such bodies, but the teaching on life bears no necessary relation to the Church's teaching on the
 je of women's personhood. Eve's punishment for her part in the fall was not to bear children, but to
 rg them forth in pain.

most, then, the Church implicitly acknowledges a difference between women, who can, and men, who
 not bear children. If anything, the Church celebrates women's ability to bear children as a reflection of
 ry's having borne Jesus and thereby having redeemed Eve's trespass. And, given the unique position of

ry, Queen of Heaven, in Catholicism, it seems difficult to argue that a reverence for women's ability to bear children demeans and oppresses women in religion or theology. That women's unique ability in this regard may, in some way, make their worldly lives more difficult or complicated is an entirely different question. Yet Christian feminists turn naturally to that worldly standard to imagine what women's dignity as Christians requires.

Feminists, including many Catholic feminists, regularly attack the Vatican's general conservatism, specifically its teaching on women "in which women's role is circumscribed, which underscores women's reverence from men, and which romanticizes and exalts women's 'special' purpose and duty." And though they sometimes concede that the Vatican claims to agree with feminists that the position of women must be improved, they deplore its wish to link that improvement to "women's 'unique nature' as mothers." [14] Above all, these feminists cannot abide the thought that anyone, especially the Pope, might claim that women differ in any way from men, that women have a "unique nature," and that women have a special responsibility or vocation to ensure the well-being of families.

The more outraged they become at official Catholic pronouncements on these questions, the clearer it becomes that they detest the very idea that the capacity for or experience of motherhood might in any way distinguish women from men. And they angrily condemn the Pope's claims in *Evangelium Vitae* that it depends upon women "to promote a new feminism which rejects the temptation of imitating models of male domination," and that "the experience of motherhood makes you acutely aware of the other person, and at the same time, confers on you a particular task." [15] In writing thus, the Pope was arguing that women occupy a unique place, in thought and action, in the work of transforming culture so that it supports life. Now if these words are cause for objection, we are entitled to ask why. Do pro-choice Catholic feminists deny that women have a special affinity for the support of life? Do they want women to embrace the male model of domination? And why should we regard a reluctance to support life and oppose domination as especially Christian — indeed, as Christian at all?

Increasingly, feminists seem to be insisting that women's equality with men requires that women be liberated from the consequences of their bodies, notably the ability to bear children. It has become a theme in many feminist circles to suggest that women may have different tastes, proclivities, virtues, and vocations than men. Justice and equality require that women be able to do everything that men do, which means that their power and success in the world must not be compromised by the special, much-valued "unique," ties to children and the family. As more and more women have begun to compete directly with men in the world of work and politics, feminists have become increasingly reluctant to acknowledge a difference between women and men out of fear that the acknowledgment of difference might in some way compromise women's chances for success. Thus, they have declared war on the notion of sexual difference itself. For they know that should they agree that men and women differ they might have to concede that each sex has distinct responsibilities, and they cannot agree that anyone has the right to hold men from any responsibilities they do not freely assume.

Many Catholics, including Catholic women, have understandably reacted to the feminist attack on their faith by repudiating feminism entirely, but I do not believe that that is what the Holy Father is asking us to do. Rather, in reminding us of the abiding importance of women's special responsibility to families, especially children, he is inviting us to formulate a Catholic understanding of feminism's most generous goals. It is difficult to imagine a Catholic feminism that does not take account of children or that liberates women from any responsibility to them. Each day, our media offer new examples of the desperate

dition of children who lack the love and security that a strong, two-parent family provides. And we all know that such families still depend heavily upon women, even if many fathers are doing more than in the past. Women do have a unique relation to the children they bear, and that relation should be understood both as a vocation and a sacred trust for which women should be honored, in the exercise of which they should be supported, and in which they themselves should take pride.

We also know that even the most devoted mothers cannot completely insulate their children against the outside world. We further know that today motherhood and family responsibilities do not normally take up most of the years of a woman's life. Above all, we should know that the world desperately needs the active participation of Catholic women. Motherhood may manifest an essential aspect of women's nature and, in turn, help to define, shape, and fulfill many women's sense of their vocation. But as a specific social role — or set of tasks and responsibilities — motherhood rarely accounts for the entirety of any woman's, even a Catholic woman's, vocation. And well-educated Catholic women face very special responsibilities in this regard. First, the world, beginning with their own families, sorely needs their talents. Second, their daughters and other women especially need them to develop and represent the dignity and vocation of women's combined with their own at home and in the world. Finally, the example they set and the values they advocate might powerfully influence our society's sense of an honorable and responsible feminism.

More than a generation ago, Edith Stein, Jewish convert to Catholicism, Discalced Carmelite, student of Thomas Aquinas, philosopher, and teacher, reflected upon the role and vocation of women in the modern world. Above all, she reminded her readers that the contemporary roles of women — like those of men — reflect the fallen condition of all humans. Firmly defending women's opportunity to enter any profession they chose, Stein nonetheless insisted upon a difference between women and men, including men's leadership and responsibility for women within families. Men, she noted, may be more likely than women to desire that lordship over the world which was denied them by original sin, while women, for their part, may be more likely to nurture not merely their young but the earth. But, she cautions, a man's

one-sided endeavor to achieve perfection easily becomes a decadent aspiration in itself; our desire for knowledge does not respect limits placed on it but rather seeks by force to go beyond these limits; human understanding may even fail to grasp that which is not essentially hidden from it because it refuses to submit itself to the law of things; rather, it seeks to master them in arbitrary fashion or permits the clarity of its spiritual vision to be clouded by desires and lusts.[16]

Stein did not, however, restrict women's roles to their family responsibilities. To the contrary, she insisted upon women's independent right to vocations in the world and, especially, to the intrinsic value of those vocations. But her enthusiasm about women's vocations did not change her belief that woman's nature differs from that of man in important ways. Many contemporary feminists choke on the notion that women are especially called to a life of service, presumably because they assume that service primarily means service to men. Some traditionalists, including some Catholics, have done their part to encourage this view by emphasizing women's responsibilities as dutiful and long-suffering wives and mothers at the expense of their pursuit of vocations beyond the family. Yet there are no grounds to believe that it is more appropriate for women than for men to bury their talents, just as there are no grounds to believe that families do not need the devotion of men as much as they need the devotion of women. The opportunities, pressures, and complexities of the modern world, as Stein insisted, challenge us to rethink the ways in which women and

n meet their respective responsibilities — a rethinking that does not require that we view men and women as identical.

eminism at its angriest depicts the world as dangerous to women's self-respect and ambition, it simultaneously suggests that a properly reconfigured world will promote women's happiness and fulfillment. Both visions have troublesome aspects. It remains unproven that the world is as uniformly hostile and detrimental to women as feminists contend. Indeed, key indicators like women's college attendance and their earnings suggest that we have seen dramatic improvement in a remarkably short span of time.[17] Furthermore, it remains unclear that these gains have dramatically increased women's satisfaction with their lives. My point emphatically is not to minimize the importance of these and other improvements in women's position, but rather to suggest that happiness and fulfillment do not necessarily flow from them. Happiness and fulfillment flow from our relations with other people and with God, and they may as often derive from self-denial as from self-promotion. A Catholic feminism must be flexible and gracious enough to encompass human and divine love and all of the constraints and rewards that both afford.

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acknowledgement

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3.9 Martha and Mary

■ Jesus' visit

“As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' 'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.' ”

Luke 10:38-42

According to John's gospel, Martha and Mary lived in Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem. Jesus and the disciples were travelling towards Jerusalem and perhaps Jesus knew what awaited him there. They stopped at Martha's house, which she shared with her sister Mary. While they are there, Mary behaved in a way that would have been considered inappropriate.

A woman's place

In 1st-century Palestine, the place of women was in the domestic area and with the children. The men would sit in the public area and debate and argue. Mary is described as sitting with the men and listening to Jesus teaching. She is behaving like a man when she should be doing women's work.

Martha is well aware of this. It may be true that the preparation for the meal was a difficult task. Her major concern, however, may have been the awkward social position that Mary has taken.

Jesus is sympathetic but tells Martha not to fuss. Mary has chosen something better – she has chosen to listen to the teaching about the Kingdom of God – and this should not be taken away from her. This can be interpreted to mean that once she has heard the message it will stay with her, whatever happens.

Jesus is shown in Luke as being very concerned for the place of women. Luke sees women as important to the narrative and part of God's creation. Women feature prominently in the life of Jesus and are also used in the parables to illustrate his teaching. Christians can learn from this that women have a full part to play in the church and in society. Jesus was not making a statement about women's rights – he was emphasising God's teaching that all people matter equally.

Objectives

Study the incident of Martha and Mary.

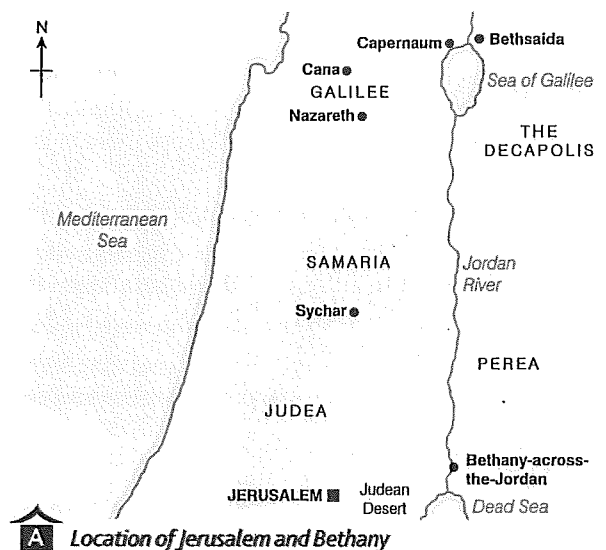
Understand Luke's description of Jesus' treatment of women.

Understand the meaning of 'Lord' as title for Jesus.

Understand the significance of this story for Christians.

Key terms

Lord: this was a messianic title given to Jesus by the early Church after his resurrection. By the time Luke wrote his Gospel, the title was in common use, so Luke uses it.



Martha and Mary

Some scholars have seen the difference between Mary and Martha as one that shows different styles of belief. Some people are very active (Martha) but others are more thoughtful and contemplative (Mary).

People need to be a bit of both: 'Without the first you wouldn't eat, without the second you would not worship' (T Wright, *Luke for Everyone*).

■ Jesus as Lord

In the passage Jesus is described as '**Lord**' twice. In the Old Testament, the word for 'Lord' occurs over 9,000 times and almost always refers to God.

Luke uses the word more often than anyone else in the New Testament. It can be a way of addressing Jesus politely (or anyone else for that matter), but it can also mean that people recognised Jesus as someone God-like.

Later writers in the New Testament refer to Jesus as Lord, indicating that Jesus is the one who rose from the dead.



B Jesus in the house of Martha and Mary

Activities

- 1 Why was Martha upset with Mary?
- 2 What does Jesus' reply teach about his attitude to women?

AQA Examiner's tip

The titles of Jesus are important in understanding Christian beliefs about who Jesus was. Make sure that you learn the ones you have studied and their meaning.

Research activity

- 1 Look up some other references to women in the Gospel of Luke and explain to a partner what you have learned.
- 2 Make notes on the passages that you have studied.
 Luke 7:11; Luke 7:32; Luke 8:2; Luke 13:11; Luke 15:8ff; Luke 18:1ff; Luke 21:1-4; Luke 23:27ff

Summary

You should now know an incident when Jesus was called Lord and the significance of this title and understand that Jesus respected women and valued those who made time to consider spiritual issues.

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Mary and Martha Sisters Who Served

Shawna R. B. Atteberry

In Luke 10:38-42 we meet Martha and Mary who are apparently two single sisters living together. While John's Gospel tells us about Jesus' resurrecting Lazarus from the dead (John 11), Luke makes no mention of Lazarus.

10:38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 10:39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 10:40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."

When Jesus and the twelve come into their village Martha welcomes them into her home. At his point, often interpretation pits sister against sister to elevate "being" with the Lord (Mary) above "doing" for the Lord (Martha). But this approach misses what Luke is doing in this narrative. As Fred Craddock points out, the "radicality" of this story should not be overlooked: "Jesus is received into a woman's home (no mention is made of a brother) and he teaches a woman" (Craddock, 152).

For the first century Jew, sitting at someone's feet did not bring to mind children sitting at the feet of adults listening to stories. Sitting at someone's feet meant higher, formal education. Jesus was known as a rabbi, a teacher. To sit at his feet meant that one was being trained as a disciple (cf. Luke 8:35). Mary was not quietly sitting contemplating all Jesus said. She was in active training with the other disciples (Grenz, 75). This was an unusual activity for women. It was Martha, not Mary, who was doing what women were supposed to do: be good homemakers.

In first century Jewish thought the women's sphere was the home. A woman learned everything she would need to know to be a wife and mother and run a household. She was not required to learn the Torah or to engage in religious activity that would take her out of the home for an extended period of time. This included the three feasts men were commanded to attend in Jerusalem (Spencer, 47). Jewish thought also believed that something done that was obligatory carried more merit than an act that was not obligatory, so learning the Torah and studying carried no merit for a woman (Spencer, 48). The only way a woman could earn merit was to perform those acts that were obligatory for her: be a wife and mother. In Jesus' time there was no reason for a woman to be sitting at a rabbi's feet. Mary should have been helping Martha.

When Martha came to Jesus in verse 40 and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to

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help me," she was expecting Jesus to agree with her and send Mary to help her. The verbs used to describe Martha show that this was probably no small gathering. Martha is distracted, she asks for someone to help her, and Jesus tells her she is worried and distracted by many things. Martha is doing exactly what she should be doing: entertaining and feeding her guests, and by all the cultural expectations of the day, Mary should have been helping her. That was her proper place. But Jesus responds:

10:41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 10:42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

With these words Jesus set the traditional belief of a woman's place on its head. Jesus turned the priorities of a woman's life upside down with his belief that women should learn the word of God. By placing the study of the word of God above the socially and culturally imposed gender role of homemaker, Jesus made it clear that "a woman is greater than what she does. She has worth and dignity apart from childbearing. Her status is not dependent on her relationship to a man or her role in society but is dependent on her relationship to God (Cowles, 86-7). Jesus affirmed what God had done in creation: woman was "a human being in her own right" apart from any roles imposed on her since creation (Cowles, 87).

In John's Gospel we meet Mary and Martha again. This time they are mentioned with their brother Lazarus. In John 11 Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. In chapter 12, six days before Passover, Jesus returns to Bethany and is having dinner with the siblings.

12:1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 12:2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 12:3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 12:4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 12:5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 12:6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 12:7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 12:8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

As in Luke, Martha is serving. Mary is once again at Jesus' feet. In a wanton display of affection Mary anoints Jesus' feet with perfume that costs a year's wages. When she is condemned for this waste of good money, Jesus defends her saying that she has prepared him for his upcoming death. There are those who say this anointing for death is an unintentional or "unconscious" prophetic act; Mary simply anointed his feet out of her gratitude for the raising of Lazarus (Brown, 454). Jesus was the one who gave it the prophetic meaning.

But is it that simple? In Luke we saw that Mary sat at Jesus' feet as one of his disciples. Given that John elaborates on the intimate relationship between Jesus and the three siblings, we can also infer that Mary is a disciple in the Johannine tradition as well. Jesus has been telling the disciples that he was going to Jerusalem and would die there by the hands of the religious leaders and be raised on the third day, a teaching his male disciples did not listen to or understand (cf. 2:19-22). What if Mary got it? What if she listened, and she believed what Jesus had said? He was going

to Jerusalem to die. Her act of extravagant love is not solely one of gratitude, it is a symbolic prophetic act (Owen, 145). Mary sees what the others do not and prophesies what lies ahead for Jesus: the grave (Owen, 145). The single woman who sat as a disciple at the feet of Jesus, now anoints his feet proclaiming what is ahead for him. As Jesus defended her right to be a disciple, he now defends her prophetic act, which prepared him for his death.

Mary is not the only perceptive sister. Martha's faith and understanding of Jesus are seen in the previous chapter.

11:20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 11:21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 11:22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

When Jesus arrives four days after Lazarus has been buried, Martha is the first to meet him. She states her absolute conviction that Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had come sooner.

11:23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 11:24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 11:25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 11:26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 11:27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Jesus assures her that Lazarus will be resurrected, and Martha voices her belief in the resurrection of the last days. Jesus then said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26). Mary's response of faith follows, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (v. 27). "Martha's statement in John is virtually identical to Peter's confession reported in the other three Gospels" (Cunningham and Hamilton, 121). -1- Peter's confession does not appear in John; Mary's does. In Matthew's version of Peter's confession, Jesus says that his church would be built upon the rock of this confession of faith.

This foundational confession of the church was declared by both Martha and Peter. "Both understood who Jesus was," and both Martha and Peter declared the truth, which had been revealed to them by the Holy Spirit (Cunningham and Hamilton, 121). If we accept the foundational confession of the church from a married man, we must also accept that same confession of faith from a single woman. And if that confession of faith is part of Peter's qualification for spiritual leadership, shouldn't the same be true of Martha?

Both of these women were single. Mary who learned at Jesus' feet like the rest of his disciples. Martha who made the same proclamation of faith upon which the church is built that Peter did. Most of the other women portrayed in positive ways in the Gospels were also single. The Samaritan woman who brought her village to Jesus (see **The Samaritan Woman**). Mary Magdalene who was the first to see the risen Christ and proclaim the gospel of his resurrection. Even the women who stood at the cross and then went to the tomb are identified by their sons, not their husbands (see **Apostle to the Apostles**). This indicates that they were probably widows. If these women are connected to men, it is as a sister or mother, not a wife. The man their lives revolved around was Jesus. He was the one who raised them to the equal standing that was their right through creation. He

restored them to their rightful place as daughters of Abraham and daughters of God. He healed them, taught them and spent time with them. He entrusted to them the greatest news humanity has ever heard: "He is risen!" All of them were single, but that did not matter to Jesus. He did not require them to have husbands before he allowed them to minister. He only required that they follow and obey—and they did.

Notes

1. Matt 16:16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Mark 8:29b Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." Luke 9:20 Peter answered, "The Messiah of God." <return>

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Mary and Martha Meet the Lord Everyday!

by: Marcellino D'Ambrosio

One day, the fullness of life and truth came walking into the living room of a pair of sisters named Martha and Mary. They immediately recognized the privilege of having Jesus in their home and set to work fulfilling the sacred duty of hospitality.

The problem was, they had conflicting ideas of what that duty entailed. Martha's response is very recognizable, especially by those familiar with Mediterranean culture. "Bring out the coffee, the wine (what kind do you prefer?), make sure the china and silverware are laid out in proper order, get out a full assortment of hot and cold hors d'oeuvres (make sure the hot are really served *hot!*)."

Mary thought that the supreme compliment that she could pay to her divine guest, even more than world-class refreshments, was to give him her full attention. The fullness of truth had come to her home to nourish, enlighten, and transform her. Not to receive and unwrap this wonderful gift would be an insult to the giver.



Martha's mistake was not that she attended to the guest's bodily needs. The story of Martha and Mary is not an endorsement of laziness and passivity. In Gen 18:1-10 God visits Abraham in the form of three travelers, and Abraham and Sara pull out all the stops when it comes to food and drink, and this was good.

Martha's problem was that she allowed the activity of hospitality to become **distraction**. She couldn't see the forest for the trees. She lost her focus and actually got mad that her sister would not join her in her frenetic fussing.

Mary kept her focus. She was not **passive** – attentiveness to the fullness of truth is supremely **active**. That's why the contemplative, monastic life has always been held in the highest esteem in the Catholic Church.

I was once told by a monk that the greatest sin of the modern world is not its lewdness but its busyness. We live in the most distracted, frenetic society of all time. It is tempting in such a society to think we are good Christians and deserve applause because we look to God from time to time out of the corner of our eye.

But the fullness of truth, the fullness of life, the fullness of grace deserves our **full** attention. Jesus really cannot be merely **a part** of one's life, but must be **the center** of one's life. It does not mean that our life can't be full of activities. But unless we preserve some quiet time each day to sit at his feet as did Mary, our action will become distraction and we'll be as snappy and unhappy as Martha.

This originally appeared in Our Sunday Visitor as a reflection on the scripture readings for the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, year C (Genesis 18:1-10; Colossians 1:24; Luke 10:38-42). It is reproduced here by permission of the author.

