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Virgin, Mother, Bride, Whore: The Ecclesiological Implications of Feminine Imagery for the Christian Church

Christopher Ángel

Introduction

In 1866, the young Anglican priest Samuel John Stone penned a hymn text entitled “The Church’s One Foundation.” The first stanza of his text reads:

The Church’s one foundation Is Jesus Christ, her
Lord;/ She is His new creation By water and the
Word:/ From heav’n He came and sought her, To be
His holy Bride;/ With His own Blood He bought her,
And for her life He died.

This hymn soon became “a hymn for all occasions” and became so popular that Stone expanded it, adding stanzas so the hymn would better suit more celebrations and be suitable for lengthy processions.¹ It became popular in Christian churches across multiple denominations, appearing in literally hundreds of hymnals, and has continued to be sung frequently. As a result of this popularity, this text has informed countless Christians’ view of the Christian Church in recent generations. While the opening metaphor equates Christ with the foundation of a building, much of the text is dominated by a personified image of a single woman who waits with “longing eyes” for the glorious vision of heaven. It is this image of a woman which would stay with people who sing this text.

However, this hymn does not appear in its original form in many recent Christian hymnals. For example, in GIA Publications’ 1986 hymnal *Worship, Third Edition*, another text by another author² appears, “O Christ, the Great Foundation”, to the same melody often associated with Stone’s text. This new text is clearly aware of the scope and subject of the original, but leaves out the foundational image of bride. In a survey of the imagery of the Church in hymnody, Judith Kubicki writes that “use of the image ‘bride’ was beginning to be viewed as ‘sexist’ at the time when many denominations were revising their hymnals in the 1970s and 1980s.”³ The omission of a classic hymn from a hymnal is one concrete sign of

¹ Judith Kubicki, “Images of Church in Classic Hymnody,” *Worship* 84:5 (Sept 2010), 441.

² Timothy Ting Fang Lew’s “O Christ, the Great Foundation” was originally composed in Chinese. The text is © The Christian Conference of Asia.

³ Kubicki, 442n33.

a major theological shift that has taken place in the last fifty years.

In the ancient world it was typical to anthropomorphize cities, nations, and institutions as female; it is not surprising that early Christians followed suit and referred to their Church as female.⁴ This practice continues in some ways today; for example, ships are still often called “she.” The Hebrew Scriptures compare God’s people as a woman in multiple ways, including girl, bride, wife, mother, or widow.⁵ The ancient image of the Christian church as bride – or, more fundamentally, as a woman – has been used constantly throughout the history of the Christian churches. But is this imagery still acceptable today? In what ways could it be said to be limited? Could it even be called sexist? In this paper, I will explore the development of this related group of images – the church as bride, mother, virgin, sister, whore, and as woman in general – and explore the implications of using these images for the Christian church.

The Church as Bride, or the Beloved

The most prominent expression of a female church is the analogy of the church as a bride – of God, or of Christ. From the time of the Hebrew Scriptures, the metaphor of marriage has been used to describe the relationship between God and God’s chosen people (after Christ, the Christian Church). The institution of marriage seems to be the closest human analogy that expresses the understanding of the covenant that God has with the people of God. God’s covenant implies much more than a legal understanding, but rather a complete, reckless self-giving. Geoffrey Preston proposes that the terms covenant and marriage had the same linguistic structure.⁶ Human culture is filled with the tales of young men who do extreme or outlandish acts in order to impress, woo, or win over the women they seek to marry.

The image of bride appears in several passages in

⁴ Robin Jensen, “Mater Ecclesia and Fons Æterna: The Church and Her Womb in Ancient Christian Tradition,” in *A Feminist Companion to Patristic Literature*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Gateshead: T&T Clark, 2008), 152.

⁵ Geoffrey Preston, *Faces of the Church: Meditations on a Mystery and Its Images* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 78.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

the Hebrew Scriptures. In Chapter 62 of Isaiah, Jerusalem is compared to a bride: “For the Lord delights in you, and makes your land his spouse... And as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so shall your God rejoice in you” (Isaiah 62: 4b, 5b). The prophet Jeremiah reports that the Lord lamented that “I remember the devotion of your youth, how you loved me as a bride...” (Jeremiah 2:2b). The book of Hosea tells the story of its eponymous protagonist, who is ordered by God to marry an unfaithful wife (1:2). Hosea 3:1 makes the analogy explicit: “Give your love to a woman beloved of a paramour, an adulteress: Even as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods...” The imagery used in Hosea is vivid, as the Lord describes how he plans to woo his beloved, “speak to her heart” (2:17) and make a new covenant on that day (2:20). While his wife is unfaithful, there is no hint of responsibility or blame for Hosea (or, by analogy, the Lord). Strangely, Hosea/the Lord has no reason to love an unfaithful lover as fiercely as he does; even repeated indiscretions cause him to love his unfaithful wife all the more. This imagery conveys the great and reckless love of God for his sinful people. The use of the image of the unfaithful wife not only provides indictment, but also a model to follow.

This image of God marrying a people became prevalent in late Judaism, so much so that the Song of Songs was included in the canon of scripture based on what was seen as its allegorical presentation of the love between God and the people of God.⁷ The text contains ample praise of the physical beauty of each of the young lovers, and the woman (the people of God) hears her lover calling to her: “Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and come!” This imagery remained popular far beyond the original time and place; scholars believe that this book was the most read and commented upon in medieval cloisters.⁸ This text was seen to speak to the highest levels of divine reality, revealing the highest truths, because it was so abstract. Many saw it not only as an allegory for Christ and his church, but also for God uniting with the human soul.⁹ But for many of the Jewish people, this kind of language implied future events. As the Jewish people looked towards a future Messiah, the present age was regarded as a betrothal. When the Messiah came, then would the wedding of Israel and God be celebrated.¹⁰

For Christians, this Messiah is Jesus Christ. As might be expected, then, the gospel accounts function as a consummation of this promise; while wedding imagery is still used, it is Jesus Christ who becomes the bridegroom (and not God the Father) to the Christian community.¹¹ The parable in Mat-



The Annunciation, Chase M. Becker

⁷ Ibid., 80.

⁸ Beth Kreitzer, “Menno Simons and the Bride of Christ,” *Mennonite Quarterly* 70:3 (July 1996): 299.

⁹ Ibid., 300.

¹⁰ Preston, 80.

¹¹ Ibid., 80.

thew 25 of the wise and foolish virgins is an allegorical story of the coming of Jesus from heaven to claim the bride already betrothed.¹² In the gospel of John, John the Baptist answers questions that imply he should be jealous or resentful of the ministry of Jesus by saying, in part: “The one who has the bride is the bridegroom; the best man, who stands and listens to him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete” (John 3:29). In other words, John views himself as a “best man” at the wedding of Jesus Christ, the bridegroom. And as a best man, he is not jealous, but rather glad, at the success of his friend.¹³ There is frequent mention in the gospels of John being mistaken for the Son of Man; this passage here clearly outlines a subordinate role for John. Moreover, it links all ministry to the central mission of the “marriage” of Christ to his church.

Elsewhere in the Christian scriptures, the writer of the letter to the Ephesians uses the relationship of Christ to the church to explain marriage, and vice versa. In Chapter 5, wives are told to be subordinate to their husbands, for husbands are head of their wives, just as Christ is the head of the church (5:23). Husbands are admonished to love their wives, in the way that Christ loved the Church, and gave himself up for her, to cleanse her by water and the Word (5:26). The writer of this passage makes an implicit connection between the baptism of a Christian and the Greek and Jewish custom of a pre-marriage ritual bath for the bride.¹⁴ The passage concludes with the author’s allowance that “This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church” (5:32). In some sense, this represents a “progression” of the imagery of God as a suitor who woos his beloved. What was expressed as pure and erotic love is now given the context of cost and responsibility of that love. An ecclesiological shift here is that the Church is to be subordinate to Christ, as opposed to God. This is a major change, since Christ is not in all senses exactly the same as God. Unlike God the Father, who spoke only through prophets, Christ appeared on earth and spoke on behalf of himself and the Father. Christ was, or perhaps, became, a more approachable groom than God the Father.

The book of Revelation contains an eschatological context for this nuptial imagery. In Chapter 19, those in heaven exclaim that the “wedding day of the lamb has come” (19:7) and that “his bride has made herself ready.” She is wearing a bright, clean garment that represents, readers are told, the righteous deeds of the holy ones (19:8). The narrator of the book is then told to write “Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast of the Lamb,” words which are echoed in the invitation to Holy Communion used in the Roman liturgy.¹⁵ The city of Jerusalem is then shown to the

narrator as “the wife of the Lamb” (21:10). Preston points out that this eschatological vision of a bride at the end of time serves as a bookend for the beginning of creation in Genesis, when Eve serves as a bride for Adam.¹⁶

The eschatological imagery of Revelation gives rise to a question: is the Church to be the bride of Christ in the present age, or at the end of time? Given the Jewish thought about marriage at the time of Christ, the answer can be both. A woman was regarded as a wife as soon as she was betrothed, even before she was married; hence, Joseph could divorce Mary, even before they were officially married.¹⁷ So in some sense, the Church is already a bride, promised to Christ, even if this marriage has not yet been consummated.

Revelation 19:8 points out that purity is another attribute of the bride of Christ. This image is also mentioned in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. In Chapter 11, Paul compares himself to a father of a bride, as he “betrothed you to one husband to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (11:2). Like John, Paul is a witness to the wedding of Christ and his Church. This passage also reflects the importance of sexual purity to early Christians and their society, a concern which will lead to extensive use of virginity as a metaphor.

This image of the Church as bride continued to be formative for Christian belief about the Church into modern times. This metaphor was one of those cited in Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. In section 6, a number of metaphors for the Church are listed. Besides being sheepfold, farm, building, and temple, the Church is bride of the spotless Lamb. Of these images, bride is by far the most intimate. Theologians have not been shy about referring to this intimacy and using it as a metaphor for how close the union between God and God’s people is meant to be.

The Church as Mother

A second important dimension of the feminine imagery of the Church is the image of Church as mother. It is, in some ways, a development of the image of bride, in the sense that being a human mother is a development of being a human bride. However, while a bride is a romantic partner, a mother is a supervisory figure. This image conveys the tasks of parenting – teaching, training, and forming children in the ways of their elders. It is these tasks which the third century bishop Cyprian of Carthage alluded to in his famous observation that “one can not have the God as Father without first having the church as mother.” The teaching, and discipline, of the emerging hierarchy of the Church was part of what was necessary for the Christian life.

This use of this image also tends to emphasize the life-giving nature of the Church. Robin Jensen notes that in the

¹² Ibid., 78.

¹³ Ibid., 81.

¹⁴ Ibid., 81.

¹⁵ Ibid., 82.

¹⁶ Ibid., 83.

¹⁷ Ibid., 78.

early years of the church, the baptismal ritual was a powerful reenactment of death and rebirth. While baptismal practices varied from place to place, it was a common practice for new Christians to be stripped of their clothes, anointed, and completely submersed in water during the baptism. They would then emerge from the water of the baptismal font, a spiritual reenactment of emerging from the womb.¹⁸ As a mother can be said to love all her children equally, all of the Church's children are (in theory) equally loved siblings, all sharing equally in the inheritance. This was an image picked up by early Christian writers, who contrasted the spiritual birth of the Church to the vastly inferior human and biological birth.¹⁹ Justin Martyr, for example, contrasted the "first birth" from human parents to the second birth, one of choice and knowledge; it became common for Christians to think of the Church as mother of these twice-born children.²⁰ Augustine frequently referred to the Church as a mother with a baptismal font for a womb, comparing catechumens to children conceived but not yet brought forth from the womb.²¹ Paulinus of Nola, writing in the fifth century, carries this metaphor to a physical level when wrote an inscription for a baptistery in a basilica. His words compared the twin towers of the basilica to the two breasts of Mother Church, who joyfully receives the newborn children brought forth in the water found between the two "breasts."²² A very similar inscription is still visible today on the baptistery of the basilica of St. John the Lateran in Rome.²³ Thus, the Church was seen as very literally giving life to its members.

The image of mother also appears in the Christian Scriptures. Annette Merz proposes a reading of the New Testament that accounts for these juxtaposed images of bride and mother in the New Testament. She notes that 2 Corinthians 11 was being used to justify asceticism as the only form of life that maintained purity. She proposes that many early Christians understood the passage as both an ecclesiological and an individual metaphor. Just as the church was a pure virgin betrothed to Christ, so should each person be like a pure virgin betrothed to Christ.²⁴ She noted that the purity represents fidelity to Christian teachings, but that this metaphor was also used by Paul in a way which implied sexual asceticism, as Paul tended to use strikingly similar language of holiness and virtue in describing both the church and the behavior

¹⁸ Jensen, 137.

¹⁹ Ibid., 138.

²⁰ Ibid., 139.

²¹ Ibid., 144.

²² Ibid., 148-9.

²³ Ibid., 149.

²⁴ Annette Merz, "Why did the pure bride of Christ (2 Cor 11.2) become a wedded wife (Eph 5. 22-23)? Theses about the intertextual transformation of an ecclesiological metaphor," *Journal of the New Testament* 79 (2000): 144.

of individuals.²⁵ Her hypothesis is that the author of the letter to the Ephesians was interested in recasting Paul's teachings, for two reasons. One, to counter ascetics, the author wanted to promote marriage as an appropriate, and holy, way of life for Christians. Two, this author also needed to soften Paul's other teachings about the equality of all members of the Body of Christ, lest these teachings contradict the prevailing hierarchy in society.²⁶ Thus, Merz proposes, an unknown author redacted the text, and even invented a fake attribution to Paul, in order to promote the continuation of the Christian way of life and defend patriarchal marriage. Her argument is also an argument for the power of imagery to shape Christian life.

The Church as Virgin Mother

In the patristic era, many of the church fathers considered the Church to be analogous to Mary – a virgin mother. Augustine was one of those who made this suggestion, claiming (somewhat anachronistically) that the Lord found the church as a whore, but made her into a virgin.²⁷ Ambrose made an explicit connection to the Virgin Mary, one who is both spotless and married, who conceives by the Spirit, but who gives birth without groaning at the pains of childbirth.²⁸ The church, like Mary, conceives without sexual intercourse. Unlike Mary, though, the Church's fertility is infinite; the Church is "Mother of All Christians."²⁹ Hildegard of Bingen was among the thinkers that carried this image forward. She wrote that "...as the Holy Spirit overshadowed the Blessed Mother...so does the Holy Spirit illumine the Church...so that without any corruption she conceives and bears children naturally, yet remains a virgin."³⁰ This is an attempt to reconcile the sinfulness of humanity – and thus, a church comprised of sinners – with the divine purpose suitable for the bride of God.

One problem results, however: it seems that raising Mary so high, and making her such a model, is often associated with denigrating the status of all other human women. In the second century, Justin proposed a juxtaposition of Mary and Eve that later theologians developed. Eve was the disobedient woman who brought humankind to ruin and misery, whereas Mary was the obedient woman who brought forth the one who restored humankind to glory. In this comparison, human women were compared far more to Eve than Mary. Tertullian illustrates this in addressing women thusly: "Do you not realize that you are each an Eve? The curse of God on this sex of yours lives on even in our times. Guilty, you must

²⁵ Ibid., 142.

²⁶ Ibid., 146.

²⁷ Ibid., 144.

²⁸ Ibid., 145.

²⁹ Ibid., 152.

³⁰ Natalie Watson, *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 23.

bear its hardships. You are the devil's gateway... all too easily you destroyed the image of God, Adam."³¹ Later fathers carried forward these images, including Jerome, Augustine, and even Aquinas. Aquinas was able to argue for the inherent nature of females as defective males while at the same time describing Mary as exalted above all creatures, a contradiction that he seems to have never worked out.³²

Another challenge with the imagery of the virgin mother is noted by feminist theologian Natalie Watson. While Mary does, in one sense, represent "the feminine side of the divine," she represents a state that's unattainable for human women. Mary is simultaneously closer to humanity, as the intercessor who is close to her son and who will intercede on behalf of human beings, and farther from humanity, in having reached a state no other human being will ever reach. Watson calls this being "female without sexuality" – or, in other words, "disembodied sexuality." She sees in this image a means to discipline women in the church by holding them to an unattainable ideal. Thus, as Watson says, "Mary can be church – but not women."³³ Thus, the use of Mary as a primary metaphor for the church is problematic and can reduce Mariology to – in the words of Rosemary Radford Ruether – "the exaltation of the principle of submission and receptivity."³⁴

The Church as Sister

A more positive view of femininity is implied by the metaphor of "sister churches." Richard McBrien outlines the use of the term, particularly in the years following Vatican II. He finds it a concept that offers promise for ecumenical relations, allowing for a way that the Roman Catholic church could enter into communion with other churches without either church being asked to sacrifice its own identity or traditions.³⁵ The Second Letter of John contains one use of this term, signed by an author who calls himself "The Presbyter," who addresses another church community as "the chosen Lady," and signs it on behalf of "the children of your chosen sister" (2 John 1:1, 1:13). The term apparently first was used in the East from the fifth century, when there was a brief time when the idea of the "pentarchy," or the equal primacy of the five ancient patriarchates, was the popular model of collegiality of the Roman church. The term appeared in some letters of twelfth-century Eastern leaders, the metropolitan Nicetas of Nicodemia and the patriarch John X Camaterus, who protested that Rome

was presenting itself as "mother and teacher" instead of "first among sisters of equal dignity."³⁶ In the brief Anno ineunte, Paul VI alluded to the scriptural passage of sisters Mary and Martha and used Mary as a symbol of the Eastern churches, both given to contemplation. He also used the metaphor of "sister churches" when referring to the churches of the Anglican communion. However, more recently, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has issued explanations that nuance this concept, and in the eyes of some, seek to limit it. In 2000, under then-prefect Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the CDF cautioned that some theologians had distorted this expression to imply that the one church of Christ did not exist, but perhaps could be re-instituted through the reconciliation of the two sister churches. The CDF, seeking to safeguard the primacy of the Roman church, also expressed concern that the term "sister churches" too ambiguously presents the relationship of the Catholic Church to other ecclesial communities.³⁷

It is easy to see the reasons for McBrien's optimism. This use of feminine imagery seems to offer a strikingly positive view of women that would find resonance in modern culture. In this case, anthropomorphizing a church as a woman has the effect of portraying woman as leaders. The image of sisters portrays two human beings on roughly equal standing. There are no ancient customs of primogeniture in Western culture that would imply that an older sister is necessarily due more rights than a younger one (although custom and society may well dictate otherwise). The challenge, however, comes in the question of whether this imagery is appropriate, as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith notes.

The Church as Whore

Another oft-used female image for a Christian church is that of the "whore of Babylon." Revelation 17:3-5 describes a woman who sits on top of a "scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names," a beast with seven heads and ten horns. The woman is lavishly clad, wearing the vivid (and expensive) colors of purple, scarlet, and gold, bedecked with jewels. This woman, whose forehead is emblazoned with her name, "Babylon, the Great," is called a great harlot who lives near waters, who has had sexual intercourse with the rulers of the earth. Many scholars, particularly Catholic ones, interpret this image as a commentary on Rome, with Babylon used as a symbolic name for Rome. This, they argue, reflects the concerns of the author at the time the account was composed.

But for many churches of the Reformation, writing in a polemical era, this woman easily came to represent the Roman Catholic church. Given the sensory richness of Renaissance and Baroque Catholic liturgy, the Roman Catholic

³¹ Elizabeth Johnson, "The Marian Tradition and the Reality of Women," in *Horizons on Catholic Feminist Theology*, Joann Wolski Conn and Walter E. Conn, eds. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 91.

³² *Ibid.*, 92.

³³ Watson, 37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁵ Richard McBrien, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 238.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 239. McBrien critiqued the CDF for seemingly believing that the Body of Christ was equivalent to the Catholic Church (*ibid.*, 241).

church may well have seemed overly ostentatious to those in other traditions, particularly to some reformed traditions who were simplifying their churches and their liturgies considerably. The woman who slept with the earth's rulers is identified with the temporal power that the Roman Catholic church accrued in the era of Christendom, and still maintained in much of the post-Reformation era. But where the insult is really meant is the reference to the church as a harlot, or whore – a woman who is so captivated by earthly delights that she has lost all sight of what should be her true goals and motivations. In an era where church communities were struggling to justify their legitimacy, the most important claim that each had to make was that their own was the remnant of the true Christian church – in spirit, if not in actual history – and that all other claimants to that title were wrong.

An example of this can be seen in the nineteenth century, in the United States of America. One of the country's own native-born religions, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, faced as much denigration as the Roman Catholic church did from the country's mainstream religious practice (predominantly Protestant). As early as the 1830s and 1840s, a prominent Mormon pamphleteer was writing that “nothing can be more plain” than the identification of the Whore of Babylon with “the Roman or Latin Church.” There may well have been reason for a special animus from nineteenth-century Saints toward the Roman Catholic church, given the non-Roman background of most Mormons.³⁸ But within a generation, there was a significant strain of thought among Mormon theologians that all other Christian churches were, collectively, the whore of Babylon. Orson Pratt, one of the leading intellectuals of the Latter-Day Saints in the nineteenth century, said that Protestant churches, as “daughters of the great harlot,” possessed no special authority. He goes so far as to note the “666 different Protestant denominations that have come out of from the mother Church.” For Pratt, then, the Whore of Babylon included every previous denomination.³⁹

While other female images of the Church are multi-valent, there is little, if anything, positive that can be drawn from this image, intended as a slur. Its use as a metaphor for a church is comparative, not only drawing a distinction between communities but seeking to assert moral supremacy of one over others as well.

The Church as Woman

The underlying metaphor for all of these images is that the Church is represented by a woman. What does it mean for the

³⁸ Matthew J. Grow, “The Whore of Babylon and the Abomination of Abominations: Nineteenth-Century Catholic and Mormon Mutual Religious Perceptions and Identity,” *Church History* 73:1 (March 2004), 144.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

church to be feminine – particularly in the present age when there is a new realization of the equality of rights for women and men? Few scholars would deny that the history of the Church is largely the history of the men who led the Church or made decisions for the Church. Scholars diverge on the significance of the fact that Church leaders were all male, and to the extent that patriarchal culture shaped and influenced the Church today. Scholars also disagree on whether or not feminine imagery is a relic of a past culture or still useful today.

Hans Urs von Balthasar was one theologian who adamantly defended the use of the feminine imagery of the Church, which he noted is a compliment to the all-male structure of church ministry.⁴⁰ He describes these images as the result of much work and thought by the Church Fathers who carefully interwove them into rich symbolism. Thus, writing in the 1970s, and likely reacting to feminist movements of the time, he had concerns about the tendency to downplay this ancient imagery.⁴¹ There are two major benefits that he sees to this imagery: first, that the Church avoids becoming a self-sufficient entity, becoming an “intermediary” between God and humanity; second, that priests will not identify their role with the authority of God, as opposed to the exercise of service that it is meant to be.⁴²

Feminist theologians, such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, would counter that for much of the history of Western culture, maleness was considered normative. In many cultures, females were in some sense an anomaly. In counting a population, for instance, it would often be the case that the men were the only ones who counted; women and children were, in some sense, not people. Fiorenza quotes Simone de Beauvoir: “Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself, but relative to him. She is not regarded as autonomous being. He is the subject, the absolute; she is the other.”⁴³ Since the Church arose in a patriarchal time, feminist theologians argue, it is inevitably caught up in this androcentric view of women. Even the records of scripture and the early Church, emerging as they do from these largely patriarchal societies, are in some sense permanently biased, or even tainted.⁴⁴

This problem has been compounded in later generations, when interpreted by scholars who expect only men to have prominent roles in early Christianity. Texts that suggest a leadership role for women are quickly reinterpreted in a more androcentric perspective. For example, Fiorenza notes that many scholars interpret “Junia,” mentioned in Romans

⁴⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, trans. Andrée Emery (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 183.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 156.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

16:7 as part of a missionary team, as some form of a man's name – Junian, or Junianus, perhaps. This despite that Junia is an appropriate woman's name, and that patristic sources predominantly understood Junia to be a woman.⁴⁵ Thus, in two separate ways, the documentary evidence of Christianity has often been interpreted in a needlessly patriarchal way – the first time, when it was originally recorded, and the second time, when it was interpreted. While scholars can overcome the second level of androcentrism, trying to overcome the first is impossible and can only be approached via guesswork. What might be further implications of a church that is wholly “feminine”? The work of Susan Ross, who examined pre-Vatican II pastoral manuals on marriage, suggests the type of imagery many Roman Catholic lay people may have been taught. Many of these manuals, she notes, were written by men, particularly priests, though a few were authored by married women. Almost all of these manuals attempt to describe the difference between men and women. Women before marriage represent the “spiritual” dimension of life; the physical weakness of women is almost a given. One describes women as participating “in the great rhythm of creation”; another notes that woman is “more attuned to universe because of the periodic nature of her bodily functions.”⁴⁶ Meanwhile, men are to hold women in high esteem; one priest writes that every woman should be viewed as “someone above you, someone in whose presence you feel unworthy.” This is because men should see in all women “the shadow of the Virgin Mary.”⁴⁷ Note again the archetype of the Virgin Mary as a model of all women is used. If this is one's operating view of women, a feminine church, then would seem to have to be “spiritual.” While held in high esteem by men, a feminine church that made men feel “unworthy” could easily lead to their disenfranchisement and seem “unmasculine.”

While space does not permit a full treatment of related issues, the use of feminine imagery is closely related to several other contentious issues in theology today. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson has explored one important corollary to the feminine imagery of the Church. If the Church is also exclusively female, it is a consequence that imagery of God must be completely male. Johnson makes a blunt assessment: she regards a solely masculine God as idolatry.⁴⁸ This is especially true in the light of “new recognition of women's equality and human dignity,” a move that Johnson compares to the changes

⁴⁵ Ibid., 156.

⁴⁶ Susan Ross, “The Bride of Christ and the Body Politic: Body and Gender in Pre-Vatican II Marriage Theology,” *Journal of Religion* 71 (July 1991), 348.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 349.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Johnson, “The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female,” *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), 443.

in worldview wrought by Copernicus.⁴⁹ Another relevant issue regards those churches who limit ordination to males, like the Roman Catholic church. The feminine imagery of the Church is a key step in defending an all-male clergy, whose members are to serve in persona Christi, or in the manner of Christ. A third issue involves evolving gender roles today. In many cultures, once-traditional gender roles are no longer influential. This includes issues of sexuality; as homosexuality becomes a more prominent and accepted phenomenon (albeit one that poses pastoral questions for Christian traditions which preach against homosexual acts and their recognition), the imagery of the Church as a passive bride no longer seems universally applicable or acceptable. A Christian Church associated with feminine obedience and submissiveness to an all-male God and all-male clergy will face great challenges in a world where women have, or are working towards, equal rights. A church which claims that women have specific roles, while not being eligible for others, will face sharp feminist criticism. For example, Natalie Watson states, “The bride of Christ metaphor becomes part of a rhetoric of the supposed dignity of women as long as they perform their childbearing function or fit into the pattern of virginity and denial of their female sexuality.”⁵⁰

Many traditions have responded to concerns such as those posed by contemporary scholarship and developments in linguistics – by altering the language of their liturgies. Language is used that is both “horizontally inclusive” – referring to humankind or to women and men equally – as well as “vertically inclusive” – referring to God without gender, or by using feminine imagery. In some cases this is as simple as using the metaphors already in scripture. They include Psalm 131, in which the psalmist seeks to rest in God as a child in the arms of its mother, or Luke 15:8, in which God is compared to a woman who searches for her lost coin. In other cases, this desire to be inclusive means using language such as “Mothering God.” The Roman Catholic church's liturgy has been governed of late under a different approach, embodied in the 2001 instruction *Liturgiam authenticam*. This instruction has been sharply criticized for the slavishly literal translation principles it requires. Criticism has also focused on the fact that the document seemingly ignores the work of other social sciences and society to prescribe how words should be understood. §30 states, “Just as has occurred at other times in history, the Church herself must freely decide upon the system of language that will serve her doctrinal mission most effectively.” Thus, a word such as “man” may be used to refer to humankind, even if in large parts of English-speaking society such is no longer the case. One could argue that at least in a linguistic sense, Beauvoir's claim still holds here, as “man,” the masculine version of the human being, is being regarded

⁴⁹ Ibid., 444.

⁵⁰ Watson, 34.

as normal. *Liturgiam authenticam* also states that feminine and not neuter pronouns for the Church are to be used whenever possible (§ 31d).

Conclusion

It has been observed to take any metaphor about God too literally results in a heresy. God is not a rock, not a shepherd, nor a king, although God can be said to have aspects of each. In the same fashion, the Christian church is not a bride, nor a mother, nor a virgin, but can be said to resemble each in some ways. Preston makes an important point about the use of imagery in ancient cultures. The image of, say, a bride is an eikon of the Church – a manifestation, or representation, of the reality.⁵¹ The reality of the church would not be limited to a bride; rather, a bride points to some reality of the church.⁵² As the church is made up of people, it is not inappropriate for a single person to represent the Church. But no one person can represent the entirety of the Church – not even Mary. As it could be argued that it is constitutive of the historical Jesus, but not the eternal Christ, to be strictly male, I claim it could be similarly argued that the Church, while regarded as female, should not be limited to femininity. I contend, however, that in the current North American context gendered imagery is too potent not to be properly balanced. I believe Merz' hypothesis about the motivations of the author of the letter to the Ephesians is plausible, and demonstrates the fact that the use of these metaphors has definite and concrete consequences.

To return to the opening example in this paper, the problem is not the use of the feminine imagery in one hymn; just as one person can not fully represent a church, no one hymn could represent a faith. The problem arises if in multiple hymns the image of the Church is limited to a feminine one. Another recent Catholic hymnal, OCP Publications' 2003 collection *Journeysongs*, addresses the issue of gendered imagery by including both Stone's text, "The Church's One Foundation" as well as this twentieth-century text of J. E. Seddon⁵³:

⁵¹ Preston, 76.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵³ "Church of God, Elect and Glorious" is by J.E. Seddon (1915-1983) and based on 1 Peter 2. The copyright is held by Mrs. M. Seddon via Jubilate Hymns, Ltd.

Church of God, elect and glorious, holy nation, chosen race;/ Called as God's own special people, royal priests and heirs of grace;/ Know the purpose of your calling, show to all God's mighty deeds;/ Tell of love which knows no limits, grace which meets all human needs.

This text functions well as a compliment to Stone's. Instead of the image of a single human woman, it portrays the church as a "nation" and a "race" of people. The exhortation to "show" and "tell" functions as a more active compliment to the passive aspects of the Church in Stone's text. When used in a Roman Catholic context, the use of the word "priests" will suggest masculinity.

It is worth noting that the fourth (and present) edition of the Worship hymnal includes Stone's original text, and not the "bowdlerized" version included in the third edition a generation ago. I propose that the imagery of Stone's hymn is not any more or less sexist now than it was then; rather, further deliberation now proposes that the imagery of bride is too valuable to omit. It is further worth noting that the Roman Catholic liturgy is currently celebrated under the rules laid out in *Liturgiam authenticam*, which prescribe not only the use of feminine pronouns for the church, but the principle that words are used in the sense that members of the church hierarchy require, and not the way that society understands. This is a challenging ruling, and one that many scholars would wish weren't in place. But on a pragmatic level, since this imagery must be used, it falls to pastoral leaders who do have some say over the words heard at liturgy to provide the balance necessary for a fuller, richer understanding of the nature of Church. This is the task of the pastoral associate who writes the weekly general intercessions, the music director who chooses the congregational music each week, the priest who prepares a sermon – to be aware of the shortcomings and limitations in the usage of feminine imagery for the Church, and to provide context and balance for them. This will have to be done with great care, for there is no tradition of masculine imagery for the Church. But it is too important not to consider, for these are images which are profoundly formative in the mind and hearts of Christians.

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