Part 2: Is it God, Our Father, or God, Our Mother?

Let me tackle this complex question about how to talk about God, especially when using masculine or feminine pronouns. My responsibility is to present the Catholic position as clearly and persuasively as possible.

We should consider this topic with humility. In December 1273, St. Thomas Aquinas, perhaps the greatest theologian who ever lived, had a vision during Mass. Afterward, he declared everything he had written, which was voluminous, as straw (worthless). When we enter Heaven, all of us will be in the same boat with St. Thomas Aquinas. Whatever lofty heights about the Triune God our human thoughts may attain here on earth, they are infinitely exceeded by the greatness and beauty of God, which will be revealed in Heaven. "What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him…" (1 Corinthians 2:9)

When speaking about the Triune God, we must talk first about the transcendence of God. God is infinitely greater and more perfect than all of His works. "You have set your glory above the heavens" (Psalm 8:1). God's "greatness is unsearchable" and cannot be fully comprehended by the human mind.[1] To appreciate the enormity of the task of God revealing himself to human beings, someone once compared God communicating with us to a human being trying to communicate with a slug!

While God is immanent and present within creation, sustaining all things in existence, he also transcends the limitations of space and time. As the Catholic Encyclopedia explains, God is "truly present in every place or thing" but "transcends the limitations of actual and possible space, and cannot be circumscribed or measured or divided by any spatial relations." This transcendence of God is a core tenet of Catholic theology.[2]

That is why the Catholic Church teaches that whenever we make a positive statement about God, we must also negate or deny the human limitations implied in the statement. God's nature and attributes transcend all human categories and conceptions. Consequently, our language about God must be continually purified and elevated to avoid confusing the divine Mystery with our own finite representations.[3]

For example, while God can do all things, we must exclude from Him "all that is not intimately connected and consistent with the perfection of His nature." For example, God is not the author of evil. God's omnipotence does not imply any imperfection or weakness we would associate with when using our human categories.[4]

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[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #300, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.
[2] *Catholic Encylopedia*, The Encyclopedia press, 1913, https://archive.org/details/07470918.6.emory.edu/page/n3.
[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1992, #42, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.
[4] Ibid, #271, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

"Let's apply this rule of thumb to the many passages in Scripture where God's love is presented as "masculine" like the love of the bridegroom and father (cf. Hosea 11:1-4; Jer. 3:4-19), but also sometimes as the "feminine" as the love of a mother hen. This characteristic of biblical language - its anthropomorphic way of speaking about God - points indirectly to the Mystery of the eternal "generating" which belongs to the inner life of God. Nevertheless, in itself this "generating" has neither "masculine" nor "feminine" qualities. It is, by nature, totally divine. It is spiritual in the perfect way since "God is spirit" (Jn. 4:24) and possesses no property typical of the body, neither "feminine" nor "masculine." *Thus, even "fatherhood" in God is completely divine and free of the "masculine" bodily characteristics proper to human fatherhood."*[5]

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also teaches, "The language of faith draws on the human experience of parents, who are, in a way, the first representatives of God. But this experience also reminds us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought, therefore, to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is Father as God is Father."[6]

When the Scriptures attribute masculine or feminine qualities to God, it is God's way of bending down to our level by using human categories to help us understand who God is and how God relates to us. The Church teaches that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. As Pope John Paul II states in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, "God is spirit and possesses no property typical of the body, neither 'feminine' nor 'masculine.'"[7] Any references to God using masculine or feminine imagery in Scripture are seen as analogies that point to the truth that both man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God.[8] Again, that is why the Catholic Church teaches that whenever we make a positive statement about God, we must also negate or deny the human limitations implied in the statement.

If God is neither man nor woman, how does the Church explain the scriptural references to God, primarily as Father? To begin with, "The Catechism teaches that we can call God Father" because this relationship has been revealed to us through the Son, Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, who grants us the "spirit of filial adoption."[9] As the Catechism states, "We can invoke God as 'Father' because the Son of God made man has revealed him to us."[10]

While the Bible does use some feminine imagery for God, this is to emphasize certain aspects of the divine nature, not to suggest that God is female any more than to say the use of masculine

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[5] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, John Paul II, 1992, #2331, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.
[6] Ibid., #239
[7] *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II, 1988, #8 https://www.magisterium.com/search/0f39d9e1-173d-4165-8733-9f211be7b939
[8] *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II, 1988, #8, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html
[9] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, John Paul II, 1992, #234, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.
[10] Ibid.

imagery suggests God is masculine. As the Catechism states, God "transcends human fatherhood and motherhood."[11]

We need to remember that pagans worshipped goddesses in the first century. The Church did not adopt that language for God, given that the goddess mystery religions competed with Christianity and were viewed as a threat to Christian belief. God transcends human gender categories and is neither feminine nor masculine. Worship of a feminine divine principle or goddess is in direct contradiction to God's nature.[12]

In addition, the experience of history teaches that the worship of pagan goddesses led to the moral degradation of women and the tyranny of men over them. Jesus, who is the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, could have made the direct link with God as mother and revealed that to be true. He didn't because it isn't.[13]

Furthermore, the reference to God as "she" is widespread among pantheists.[14] They claim we came from god. However, they believe god is one with creation and is an impersonal and all-encompassing divine principle. The force in the movie Star Wars has more in common with pantheism than the Holy Spirit. The Church has not and will not adopt a pantheistic mindset. The International Theological Commission explains, "The God of Christian revelation is not a simple component of the universe, an element of the great All of nature. On the contrary, he is the transcendent and free Creator of the universe."[15] The Christian understanding of God fundamentally differs from the pagan worship of goddesses or a feminine divine principle.

Continuing with that thought, we think about life arising within a mother's womb; that life is a part of her and is within her. Pantheism will try to say that the universe and god are the same thing. That can lead to the personification of this divine principle being feminine and referring to this with the personal pronoun "she." That is what happens when the immanence of God is stressed to the negation of God's transcendence, which God as Father emphasizes and protects.

Consider that a human father begets life. Life grows, moves, and develops apart from him. Of course, we're not apart from God because God sustains the whole universe. Nothing can exist without God. However, the father imagery is better at communicating that the creator is distinct from creation. The Judeo-Christian long-standing belief is that the creator and creation are different. There is a radical distinction, an infinite chasm between creator and creation. God as

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[11] Ibid., #239

[12] Ibid., #370

[13] Pope Benedict XVI, in a 2012 general audience, said, "Perhaps people today fail to perceive the beauty, greatness and profound constellation contained in the word father, with which we can turn to God in prayer because today the father figure is often not sufficiently present and all too often is not sufficiently positive in daily life." That has led some to argue for praying to God as mother. However, mothers have shown themselves to be equally deficient in living up to the ideals of motherhood.

[14] Pantheism holds that the divine and the world are one and the same. It rejects the idea of God as a distinct, intelligent, free creator and governor of the world, distinct and apart from the created world.

[15] *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law*, International Theological Commission, 2009, #66, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20090520_legge-naturale_en.html.

Father and using masculine pronouns for all three members of the Trinity protects and best communicates that differentiation.

As an aside, the scientific method, which has led the way for the advances in civilization, is possible because God is not understood as being identified with creation but is apart from it. Consequently, creation can be studied, measured, experimented upon, etc. A pantheist would be less open to such treatment of the created world, which they regard as a "temple" where the divine principle resides.[16]

In addition, in Scripture, God is never called mother. He's never called "she". As mentioned earlier, God is called Father. Jesus told us to pray to "our Father." It's part of God's self-revelation. There's no reason to use "she" or female pronouns when we have this clear distinction.

Until recently, the use of the word man and the pronoun he has traditionally been inclusive. It could refer to either a man or a woman. It signifies a person. That is what we are trying to convey about God: that God is personal. To get beyond maleness or femaleness, "he," which can be used for either men or women in these contexts, will be more acceptable than "she," which is not inclusive. The term woman and the pronoun "she" have never stood for both women and men. When we refer to God as he, that pronoun includes masculine and feminine qualities. Admittedly, that does not appear to be self-evident to most people today.

Finally, when it comes to tradition, the norm for the saints, doctors, the Church, and theologians is to refer to God with male pronouns and to refer to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[17]

Our times favor religious discourse that stresses God's immanence or closeness to us. We need to balance that by reminding ourselves of God's transcendence. We will never know God entirely, for God will remain a mystery. When speaking of God, we would do well to "take off our sandals," as did Moses when God revealed himself in the burning bush. Following Moses' lead, we need to remind ourselves that we are on holy ground and speak of God reverently, with awe and a reverent fear of the Lord. With Mary's essential and key role in salvation, God is giving a nod to the inherent dignity of the women he created. Remember the Protestant theologian Karl Barth, whom I quoted in Part 1, "World history is the story of men! However, *in order to give God alone all the honor* in the greatest work of world history, here God excluded the man and his doing."[18]

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[16] In the past, a "separation of faith and reason" led to a "tragedy for man" and a "self-absolutization of the sciences." This suggests the Church sees a complementary relationship between faith and reason.

[17] Saint Anselm of Canterbury might be the one saint who refers to God as mother. Saint Anselm of Canterbury refers to God as mother. St. Francis of Assisi is another. The only other ones that refer to God as mother, were saints or venerable, like Julian of Norwich or John Paul I. When you read, people like John Paul II, or other saints that refer to God as "mother", when they use this language, they're explicit in saying that God is *like* a mother. It's very rare for people to make that direct connection. Julian of Norwich did and even described Jesus in maternal or feminine terms. Those are exceptions and not the norm.

[18] *Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf,* 1927, p. 278.

We do not tell God who he is. God reveals to us who he is and just enough so that our intellects are not overwhelmed. That is what the Hebrew Scriptures had in mind when we read that anyone who looked at the face of God would die. In other words, God is so far beyond our human understanding that to look directly into this Mystery would be too much for us to grasp. It is akin to looking directly at the sun and going blind or being so close to it that we disintegrate.
That is what St. Thomas Aquinas concluded when, after receiving a vision of God during Mass, he declared everything he had written, which was voluminous, as straw (worthless). He never took up his pen again and died shortly afterward.