Part 3: Male and Female He Created Them.[1]

I want to reflect on the Church's insistence that our gender is intrinsically bound to our physical bodies and is not interchangeable. As mentioned in the previous reflection, God does not have a body because God is pure spirit. Technically, God also does not have a gender. In other words, God is not male, female, or neuter. However, it is theologically correct to use he or him when referencing God, as did Jesus, the prophets, Moses, St. Paul, and all of Scripture. Still, we need to address whether God is male or female and how we are to understand this.

I also want to acknowledge some current biases against referencing God using masculine language. Some complain this is misogynistic. Consequently, references to God as male in the bible are not inspired. Instead, they are written by misogynistic writers who have a bias against women. Therefore, they carry no claims about how we understand God.

[Another bias is the claim that being masculine or feminine is a social construct. Such distinctions are imposed by society. If we were to jettison them, we human beings would be free to explore a whole range of identities, expanding our horizons about what it means to be human. Note that this line of thought severs the relationship between the flesh and the spirit or the body and the soul. The assumption is that the body is evil or that the soul is imprisoned in the body that longs to be free of the constraints that having a body, whether male or female, imposes. That is an ancient heresy called Gnosticism,[2] which plagued the early church and continues to cast its shadow well into the present. Its influence is seen in movies where human beings attach their upper torso and head to a machine, thus becoming more like robots and less like human beings. The desire to separate one's gender from one's body is a contemporary expression of Gnosticism.

Finally, some argue that to reference God using masculine imagery communicates that women are not suitable to image or carry God to the world as are men. Such thinking encourages men to see themselves as being superior to women, opens the door for women to be demeaned, and creates a climate conducive to them being emotionally and physically abused. As we will see in future reflections, the Catholic understanding of the role of Mary in salvation history is the antidote to this thinking, given that she carried God to the world when she gave birth to Jesus and continues to do so as the mother of the church, the mystical body of the risen Christ. She is understood to be the New Eve. As such, she affirms the dignity of all women and their suitability to carry or image God to the world.]

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[1] Marshall, Taylor, podcast, *Is God Male or Female,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mkvl-3gND4U. Those sections bracketed [ ] are my thoughts. The remainder of the text is taken from the above referenced podcast.

[2] Magisterium Ai. What is Gnosticism:
Salvation through knowledge: Gnosticism posits that the soul achieves its ultimate goal by acquiring an intuitive understanding of the universe's mysteries and possessing magical formulas that demonstrate this knowledge 1. Gnostics considered themselves superior due to their unique understanding, setting them apart from those who lacked this "gnosis".
Dualistic worldview**:** Gnosticism views matter as a corruption of spirit, with the entire universe seen as a degeneration of the Divine 1. The ultimate aim is to overcome the material world and return to the "Parent-Spirit," a process initiated and aided by a God-sent savior.
Gnostic Savior**:** The Gnostic savior differs significantly from the Christian understanding of the term. Gnosticism lacks the concept of atonement, as ignorance, rather than sin, is seen as the primary issue.

With that as an introduction to our topic, let me address the contemporary preoccupation with identifying God using male and not female imagery. Thomas Aquinas said that we cannot understand God except through analogy, usually in a masculine mode. For example, the psalmist proclaims, "God is the rock of my salvation." Obviously, God is not a rock. But God is like a rock because it is hard and enduring. To say that God is the rock of my salvation is to say that we can trust God because God's love for us is everlasting (enduring) and solid (unshakeable).

God chooses things from creation to be analogies of himself. However, we need to keep this important theological principle in mind. Any time we say something about God, whatever we say will always be more dissimilar than similar. God is like a rock, but much more than a rock. The rock as an analogy for God is more dissimilar from God than similar.

God has chosen a dove to be analogous to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has none of the features of a dove. Still, God has chosen a dove to be the analogy of the Third Person of the Holy Spirit. Yes, the Holy Spirit is like a dove, but is so much more than a dove. Again, the dove as an analogy for the Holy Spirit is more dissimilar to the Holy Spirit than similar.

This also applies to when we say God is love. Our understanding of love is way too small and incomplete to come close to understanding what we mean when we say God is love. Again, any time God reveals himself in the Scripture, it is by analogy.

Now, what about God and masculinity? Beginning with the first pages of Scripture, God is revealed as a he. Now, applying the principle of analogy, God is not a man. God does not have the anatomy of a male. Still, God surveyed all of creation and chose maleness to represent himself to human beings. We can assume that God could have chosen to be a female, and there would have been some obvious benefits.

Is it not true that mothers have an unending love and a great sense of forgiveness and comfort, such as when a child gets hurt? We can see how this analogy of God as a mother seems appropriate because we are wounded by sin. We instinctively can envision ourselves when we have sinned running to the bosom of our mother to receive this mercy and comfort. We may think God should have revealed who he is through this analogy. Yet, God didn't, and we must accept and respect that decision.

[However, God did recognize the need for the maternal expression of God's love when, before Jesus died, he said to John, "Behold your mother," and to Mary, "Behold your son." The tradition of the Catholic Church has been to understand these words as Jesus diverting Mary's maternal care to the Church (St. John) and the Church embracing Mary as her mother in faith.

This maternal relationship between the mother of Jesus and the Church provides the context to understand the Catholic Church's relationship to Mary and the spirituality of the Society of Mary. Regarding the latter, Marists are to think, judge, feel, and act like Mary. Let me quote Marist Father Justin Taylor:[3]

[3] Taylor, SM, Justin, A Marist Reset and Other Reflections, pp. 88-89.

> Fr. Colin was familiar with the spiritual tradition in France, which sees the spiritual life as an ever-closer union with Jesus Christ and a resemblance to him. For Marists, this translates as an ever-closer union with Mary – and so with Jesus – to the point that we have the same interior attitudes expressed in similar exterior actions.
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> …Marist hearts today will be especially touched and inspired by these lines of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* (n.241): 'Mary, the Mother who cared for Jesus, now cares with maternal affection and pain for the wounded world, just as she grieves for the sufferings of the poor and the creatures of this world laid waste by human power.' We can offer ourselves, individually and collectively, to Mary to be her eyes, her heart, her speech, her hands, and feet as she brings motherly care to a wounded world and her suffering children.

As Marists, we have to ponder God's decision in the spirit of Mary. What does that mean? When the Archangel Gabriel revealed to her that she was to be the mother of God, she asked, "How can this be since I do not know man?" It is believed that Mary had taken a vow to remain a virgin. When viewed in that context, Mary wasn't doubting that God could do this. She wasn't saying God got it wrong. She was curious about how God would accomplish this, given her vow to remain a virgin. The technical term for this line of thinking is faith seeking understanding. We ponder God's decision to reveal himself using masculine language in the spirit of Mary, and, like her, we seek to understand better this article of our faith.]

While there are places in the Scripture where God is spoken of by using feminine language, it remains true that 99.9% of the language about God is masculine. When we hear that God revealed himself, preferring to use masculine language, some of us doubt God's reasoning for doing so. We want to reveal to God that he made a mistake. After all, is it not true that those who were physically or emotionally abused by their father would better relate to God as a mother? According to this thinking, our Father should become our mother, who art in heaven.

[Unfortunately, mothers, too, are imperfect, given the number of abortions that have occurred in this nation and around the world. Then, throw in other sins that women and men commit; it becomes apparent that resorting to using masculine or feminine language is an imperfect analogy to use when speaking of God. Remember, whenever we use an analogy to reference God, it will be more dissimilar than similar.]

Are we to assume that God is not aware of how we human beings fail because of sin, whether male or female? If you look at the great men of faith who populate the pages of Scripture, they are flawed. Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Lot, David, Peter, and Paul, to name a few, have compromised themselves morally, leaving us to scratch our heads as to why God would choose them. [We can also add our names to that list.] All of them were fathers. Beginning with Adam and up to the present, we can safely say there has been a crisis in fatherhood. The reality is that we long for the perfect father. We also thirst for a mighty, honorable, and virtuous protector. The only father, by way of analogy, who fulfills those aspirations is God the Father. Some believe God has chosen the analogy of masculinity because that is where the deepest wound is.

In the pagan world, women were sexually assaulted, mistreated, abandoned, and sold into prostitution. Unwanted children were abandoned and left in the wilderness to die. [In Roman society, the father was "all-powerful," meaning he had complete control over his wife, children, and slaves. One of the reasons pagan Romans converted to Christianity, mainly slaves and women, was that Jesus revealed that God the Father was slow to anger and rich in mercy. Compared to their experience of fathers in Roman society, this was truly good news.]

What about those scriptural passages where God favors using the feminine analogy to reveal himself? Most of those are found in the prophet Isaiah. He seems to favor the image of God as a pregnant woman, as a woman giving birth with great travail, or as a protective mother. See Isaiah 42:14, Isaiah 49:15. Isaiah 42:14, Isaiah 66:13, Deuteronomy 32 11-12, and Matthew 23. Still, these verses are more of an exception than a rule. [While traits we associate with being masculine dominate in men, they also have feminine characteristics. Women who also have masculine traits. From that perspective, it is unsurprising that God would use some feminine analogies, though the masculine analogy is primary.]

Finally, Jesus remains a man. He was resurrected with the same but transformed male body. He sits at the Father's right hand and will come again, as a man, to judge the living and the dead. He has and will have a man's body forever.

What about the Holy Spirit, who some saints describe as being the spouse of Mary? We will look at that question next.