

The Word Made Flesh

A Pastoral Letter on the Language of the Eucharistic Liturgy and
Sacraments

From The Most Reverend Peter E. Hickman, Presiding Bishop
The Ecumenical Catholic Communion

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

The Word of Life through which all was created is the same Word of Life that we celebrate at Eucharist. It is the *"Word made flesh"* in the person of Jesus Christ. Yet, this Incarnation can never be understood apart from the ultimate divinization of all creation. In Christ, all share the nature of God. *"His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of the One who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His invaluable and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature. (2 Peter 1:3-4)*

We are one with God in Christ, as we pray at Eucharist: *"Through him, and with him, and in him..."* Jesus Christ is not a "stand alone" savior, distantly redeeming others. Instead, he is the first of many sisters and brothers (Romans 8:29), sharing both his humanity by birth, and his divinity by grace. We stand "in Christ," and become Christ in the world. Saint Teresa of Avila reminds us of our "Christ" identity through her words:

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion
is to look out to the earth.
Yours are the feet by which he is to go about doing good,
and yours are the hands by which he is to bless us now.*

Though the Word of God is timeless, the words we use to celebrate our faith - the words of the Eucharist and other sacraments - must be in time, and reflecting the cultures in which the Church, the Body of Christ, abides. We are *"in the world, but not of the world,"* and both aspects of our lives are reflected in the words we use to celebrate the liturgies of the Church.

Renewing Our Liturgical Language

In recent decades, many Churches have edited their liturgical books to change language that seems outdated, as well as language that is unnecessarily weighted toward masculine imagery. In the past, the Church has unwittingly promoted, almost exclusively, masculine images of God, and insufficiently used feminine **imagery** images of God's love and presence. This has been an unfortunate and inappropriate development, since the sacred scriptures are replete with both masculine and feminine images that seek to express the mystery of God, as well as non-human imagery drawn from nature.

We know that any and all images of God fall short of the ineffable mystery to which they refer. God is beyond the categories of singularity and multiplicity, gender and form, or any other designation. God is the ground of being - the reality in which we exist. How could we ever hope to capture in words this great and inexpressible mystery that is the fabric of reality itself? Christ alone is such an expression - the Word made flesh. Trinity, Incarnation, Resurrection and Redemption are expressions of this divine truth that is in Christ, expressed humbly in the words and forms of our sacred liturgy.

Nonetheless, we are called by Jesus Christ to the task of proclaiming the inexhaustible meaning of the Gospel in the easily exhaustible words of human language, and to open our hearts to the transforming presence of God in this very proclamation. We proclaim the Word of Life in the readings from the scripture, by teaching, by celebrating the sacraments, and by our works of compassionate ministry. In justice, we must balance our language to promote the inclusive character of the Gospel. At the same time, it is important to understand that the story of Christ and the Church is historical, and often expressed in phrases as iconic as the sacred actions and images we use for our collective worship and devotion.

Some observances express an essential part of the Church's Catholic identity, some do not. The Church slowly comes to understand those elements from the past **that** need to be changed and adapted in accord with the changing conditions of contemporary culture. At the same time, the Church also realizes those elements that are essential to the faith, as

handed to us through many generations from the Apostles of Christ, and therefore must not be changed. Renewal is a necessary and continuing process for the growth and cleansing of the Church. Each generation of Christians participates in this process and makes their own unique contribution, that are conditioned by the circumstances and concerns of their time. This constant dialectic and dialog between Christians is the mechanism for what we call the development of doctrine. Those things that are handed on down from the past, the forms and practices in which the Christian Tradition is expressed, cannot simply be dismissed as bad or accepted as good. They are the fruit of the efforts of the community of faith within the culture and understanding of each era. The prayers and sacramental formulas of the past can be honored, even as we embrace efforts to update them. But our efforts at renewal must be balanced, and not simply a reaction to what may seem imbalanced from the past.

An Authentic Path for Renewal

There are at least two different approaches to the use of what we presently call inclusive language, which seem to be in conflict. One is a more moderate notion which is about implementing the female imagery of the divine that is already in our Christian tradition but that has been long neglected. God as "Mother" is an important biblical image that needs to be reemphasized. This approach can also include using the feminine pronoun for the Holy Spirit while at the same time continuing the use of the masculine pronoun when referring to God as the Father, or in reference to the Yahweh of the Hebrew scriptures, as well as for the person of Christ. Yet, at the same time, we can draw upon the rich female images of the divine in Holy *Sophia* (Wisdom) and Holy *Ruah* (Spirit).

Marian theology is a powerful and rich image of the divine feminine. Mary is most highly honored in the Catholic tradition because she is the perfect feminine reflection of Christ. Jesus came into the world through the assent of Mary, his mother. She is the first to proclaim the Good News of redemption, and participates in that work as an extension of Christ. She is the new "Eve" the mother of all the living. She is also a perfect image of the human soul as Christian - transformed by grace into the image of the divine - in fulfillment of the promise of Genesis that we are reflections of God. This transformation is the goal of the Christian life. It is expressed by the

words of Saint Paul, "...It is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me."
(Galatians 2:20)

The ordination of women in the Ecumenical Catholic Communion is a powerful affirmation of the female imagery that happens in our liturgies. Like *Mary*, a woman priest can reflect the image of Christ. The best thing that a woman with a calling to the priesthood could do to enhance the feminine sense of the divine in the life of the community is to be ordained a priest. Her iconic presence as a woman presiding at the Eucharist speaks louder than the words she reads and says.

The other notion of inclusive language is much more radical. It seems, to this way of thinking, that the moderate approach is insufficient and that a much more iconoclastic practice is to be preferred. This approach seems to advocate the eradication of all male imagery and nuance from the language of the liturgy. The problem with this approach is that it is theologically simplistic. This kind of iconoclastic approach becomes another kind of literalism that reflects the error found in the Biblicism of fundamentalist Christianity, by taking words so literally that deep prayer and theological reflection are greatly diminished if not altogether eliminated.

Such an approach does violence to the whole Christian theological tradition by negating the process of renewal and the development of thought and practice in which each generation of the Christian faith participates. It detracts from our understanding of God as Trinity - beyond all names and forms - as well as to our understanding of Christology, which is an examination of the entire mystery of the Incarnation. In the mystery of the Incarnation, Jesus is the focal point of the presence of God in all flesh, entering history yet remaining beyond the limitations of the world.

This radical approach to creating inclusive language violates the sacred liturgy by eliminating all references to gender - as the focus of the renewal of worship and its rituals - rather than a sensitive focus upon balanced language that aids the average faith community in opening the human heart to God. It disturbs the normative and customary piety of the worshipping community, who embrace many beloved and ancient phrases in devotion to God. It also further fractures the unity of the Church at the very heart of the life of the church in the Eucharistic mystery we celebrate by requiring a

constant vigilance to politically correct gender balance, instead of promoting a flow of images that are both masculine and feminine to lift our hearts to prayer.

Liturgical language is poetry at its best, for only poetry can express the ineffable joy of God's redemptive love. Poetry is the language of love, not the language of the modern marketplace or the scientific laboratory. The poetic language of the liturgy is meant to speak many images of father and mother, individual and community, unity and diversity. The liturgy speaks images of many grains and many grapes made into one bread and one cup. The images of God also include fire and wind, water and rock, vine and tree, lion and lamb. All are the expressions of a poetry to open the human heart. However, it must be remembered that all images are limited expressions that fall short of the reality of God - the great mystery that can only be encountered within our human hearts.

Too often, the quest for balanced liturgical language is not seen as a continuous process to balance tradition with gender equality. Instead, the efforts become combative and adversarial, and this approach becomes sexist in its own way. Rather than being truly inclusive, advocates of this radical approach are merely giving us another kind of exclusive language which further obscures the clear justice to which we are called in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Too often, our communities suffer great controversy regarding liturgical language at a considerable cost to our shared interpersonal relationships that ranges from disunity to the extreme of abandoning the worshipping community altogether.

On the question of the use of inclusive language, the Gospel of Jesus requires a resounding "Yes." On the use of a new exclusive language in this more radical approach, that same Gospel compels us to say "No." Furthermore, pastoral experience shows that when liturgy is tipped too far toward extreme revisions, the liturgy is no longer recognizable as Catholic by the majority of parishioners. Most of the members of our faith communities want justice and balance in terms of language, but not at the expense of treasured formulations of the faith. The "Our Father" is as treasured a prayer, as are the words of Jesus - "This is my body...This is the cup of my blood..."

The designation of the Trinity as "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" were never intended as references to gender, but to relationship. This Trinitarian formula calls the mind of the faithful to the mystery of God, and are not designations of a supposed gender identity for God as either male or female. The members of our faith communities generally have sufficient education and maturity to understand the difference between a formula of faith and gender discrimination. Human relationships are between persons, who come with specific gender. People are designated as mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters, sons, etc. These are all relational terms. The Trinity is called by relational names because the very point of the doctrine of the Trinity is that God is relational, not to make reference to gender or to anthropomorphize the Divine life by attributing human sexuality to God. References to "Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier" in reference to the divine persons are not only theologically incorrect (The Trinity itself is understood by each of these names), but are also not relational terms.

Finally, we must examine our attempts at renewing liturgical language in the face of our own developing culture. I note that younger people in our congregations have not experienced the intensity of gender discrimination that so marked the past. There are now more women than men in law schools, medical schools, business schools and seminaries. Women continue to gain equality with men in the world of business and politics. It seems **that** younger people are simply not as reactive to gender issues in language because they generally experience more balance and equality in their lives with regard to gender discrimination.

Balanced Renewal in the Catholic Tradition

The traditional formulations of the Church are also not "good" or "bad." "Baptize all peoples in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit," is the command of Jesus (Matthew 28:19). It was not his intention, by this wording, to discriminate against women. The formula is a call to faith and inclusion. Some have linked this formula, and other expressions like it, to the oppression of women. Some have linked liturgical vestments to oppressive Church bureaucracies. Some have read the scriptures and sought to change the text to fit the cultural categories of our day. All of these efforts are admirable in their attempt to correct injustices from the past, but are often misguided in the real change they intend.

An ancient Chinese proverb says, "If a finger is pointing to the moon, do not focus on the finger." The correction of injustice begins with focus on the right place. In the realm of Church reform, that place is the human heart - both individually and collectively. In the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, we have pondered issues of reform and renewal. We have done so in the context of the mystery of faith and the gift of our Catholic tradition, much like Mother Mary pondered the mystery of the Christ child within her - looking forward and not simply focusing on troubles.

We have sought to wisely bring justice to the structure and policies of the Church. By doing so, we have been able to celebrate the beauty of our past traditions, yet balance them by our own contributions. Thus, a woman who is a priest of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion can start the liturgy "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," without hesitation. She is, after all, a woman presiding at the liturgy. And, she knows that later at the presentation of the gifts, she will ask the congregation, "Pray, sisters and brothers, that our sacrifice will be acceptable to God, who for us is both Mother and Father." Still later, she can pray after the Our Father, "As a mother comforts her children, comfort us and grant us peace in our day..." This is balanced and inclusive language that feels "right" to our congregations, yet honors traditional liturgy.

Our congregations know that the language of the scripture is tipped toward the masculine. But we do not have to change that historical text - except where appropriate - to be inclusive and balanced in our own language. We can use ancient texts and formulas as they are written and given because they are a part of the whole story we celebrate. We are not everything that our ancestors were, but we nevertheless stand on their shoulders and acknowledge their constant devotion to our Catholic faith, despite our developmental differences.

Personal and Communal Dedication to Renewal

I continue to promote balanced language at liturgy, the reform of Church policy, and the inclusion of all in the life of the Church. This is required of me as a follower of Jesus and a bishop of his Church. Jesus modeled this by his inclusive approach toward women, children and people of other ethnicities - at a time of immense social barriers of prejudice and

segregation. Still, I am cautious - and caution others - not to identify everything of the past as the problem. If it were, then we would be rejecting Catholicism altogether.

The sacraments, the priesthood, the Eucharist, the scriptures and creeds of our faith are proven, cherished, and reliable lights to guide us in the darkness and storms that are on the path of faith. They can be abused, and their light dimmed, but they are not the problem. The problem lies in the temptation to power, the resistance to compassion, the ignorance of the truth, and the lack of wisdom. These faults can be seen in powerful churchmen, but also in those who seek the reform of the Church. Call it sin, invincible ignorance or hardness of heart. It is found in every human heart, and only the light of God can take away such limitations.

In this coming Lenten season of reflection and renewal, let us find the remedy for our limitations in the words of Saint Paul. In his beloved passage on love, from 1 Corinthians 13, Paul says, "Now that I am mature, I have let go of the things from my childhood." In our beloved Communion we have experienced this very verse. We have joined hearts and hands in renewed Catholic communities that are enlivened by faith, fed by the weekly Eucharist, and energetically **share** in the work of justice and compassion. Though our growth is still in process, we have seen our numbers mature beyond anger and pain - leaving such sadness behind to assume the full stature of Christ in active Catholic communities. We invite all to share in this healing and growth.

Renewal is an ongoing process, but we have the words of Jesus to guide us in our quest for balance. He urges us to be like the owner of a house who brings out of the storeroom treasures that are both old and new (Matthew 15:32). We pray for the Wisdom of the Spirit as we search the storeroom of the Church. Only by Her wisdom can we distinguish what is truly valuable for the language of the liturgy - our divine conversation.

+Bishop Peter Hickman