

WOMEN AND
THE SHAPING OF
CATHOLICISM
WOMEN THROUGH THE AGES

A Symposium With

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Introduction

*Richard W. Miller, PhD, Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology
Creighton University*

This year's conference draws on the expertise of distinguished American theologians to consider the remarkably diverse ways that women have had a profound influence on the Catholic community and world from the time of Christ to the present day. The conference will not only explore the ways women religious have shaped Catholicism at certain points in its history, but will also examine the impact of laywomen in the history of Catholicism.

The first paper, *Hearing Women's Voices*, which is my contribution, describes the pervasiveness of androcentrism in the history of Western culture and the Christian community. It presents theological grounds for the particular focus of the day; namely, hearing women's voices throughout the tradition. Furthermore, it argues that the topic for the day is not just a women's issue but an urgent question for the whole community.

The second through seventh papers are organized according to the various epochs of the Christian tradition and treat various issues and figures in these periods. The second paper, by Susan Calef, treats *Women in the New Testament*. Dr. Calef's paper focuses on the two earliest generations of Christian women, namely, those around Jesus in his reign of God movement and those in the Pauline mission field. Among the questions she addresses: What was the status of women in the Jesus movement? Were women among Jesus' disciples? Were any of them apostles? What do we know about the roles and contributions of women in Pauline communities? In pursuing these questions, she will focus attention on four women: Mary Magdalene, Phoebe, Junia, and Prisca.

The third paper, by William Harmless, is called *Women in the Early Church: A Portrait Gallery*. Fr. Harmless surveys the extraordinary and wide-ranging contributions of Christian women during the patristic era (100–600). He surveys both a range of figures (e.g., Thecla, Perpetua, Proba, Egeria, Melania the Elder, Olympias) and their remarkable contributions as apostles, martyrs, poets, pilgrims, patrons, deaconesses, and monks.

The fourth paper, by Gary Macy, is on *Women of the Middle Ages*. Dr. Macy presents evidence that women in the Middle Ages played a far larger role in the life of the Church than they would in later centuries. In the early

Middle Ages, they performed sacramental and administrative functions that would be reserved for men after the thirteenth century. They celebrated Mass, distributed Communion, read the Gospel, heard confessions, and preached. Some abbesses also exercised episcopal power and, indeed, a few were considered bishops. The powerful Abbess of Las Huelgas in Spain continued to wear her mitre and exercise administrative episcopal power until 1874.

The fifth paper, by Eileen Burke-Sullivan, is on *Women of the Catholic Reformation and Early Modern Period*. Dr. Burke-Sullivan shows how women in this period achieved some small measure of personal autonomy but at the very high price of the death of thousands of women through the demented witchcraft craze that swept Europe and the New Worlds. Her paper focuses on how Teresa of Avila, Isabella of Castile, Mary Ward of England, and Leonor Mascarenhas and her daughter Leonor de Vega Osorio contributed to striking changes in the practice of faith and the structural life of the Church and culture.

The sixth paper, by Robert Ellsberg, is on *Catholic Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Through the example of women saints, he highlights the struggle of women to discern their vocation in ways that challenged the roles and expectation of the day. He looks at the shift from a concept of religious life focused on the cloister to one engaged in the world and the challenges of ordinary life. He treats two nineteenth-century nuns, Anne-Marie Javouhey and Mother Theodore Guerin and examines the extraordinary struggles of Cornelia Connelly, founder of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. Finally, he shows how the spirituality of Thérèse of Lisieux informed the practice of two twentieth-century lay Christians, Madeline Delbrêl and Dorothy Day.

The seventh paper, by Mary Ann Zimmer, is called *Which Mary, Which Woman, Which Church?* Sr. Zimmer argues that Mary has had such varied and multiple roles in influencing both women and the Church that an attempt to assess her impact can profitably begin by asking those questions. Her paper uses Laura Leming's understanding of "religious agency" to examine when and how varied understandings of Mary have acted upon and with women to shape the Church.

These papers and the lively panel discussion that follows intend to help readers become more critically aware of the destructiveness of the androcentrism that has informed Western culture and the Christian community, while bringing to their attention the extraordinary ways women worked in and around these inhibiting culture structures to further the mission of the Church. The hope is that these papers will in some way further the conversa-

tion within the Christian community concerning women and increase the community's commitment to recognizing the full humanity of women and work for their full participation in all aspects of the community's life.

1. Hearing Women's Voices

*Richard W. Miller, PhD, Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology
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There is something odd about doing a conference on “Women and the Shaping of Catholicism.” After all, we are not speaking about something alien or foreign to our experience as a Christian community. The rite of baptism for children in the Roman rite in one of the prayers over the parents recognizes the parents as the first teachers in the ways of faith and encourages them to be the best teachers. The first teachers of children in the faith are not the pope, bishops, priests, or deacons, but the parents. Since the mother has traditionally been the principal caregiver, the mother has been the one primarily involved in educating the children in the faith.

Most of the people in this room have been educated in the faith and also in reading, writing, and arithmetic by women religious; many have been cared for in hospitals run by women religious, and most of us have participated in liturgical celebrations prepared by women religious and increasingly by women lay ministers. Indeed, parish life in the United States is becoming increasingly dominated by the influence of women: roughly 80 percent of the 31,000 lay ecclesial ministers working in Catholic parishes in the United States are women, with 64 percent laywomen and 16 percent women religious.¹ Their ministry includes everything that Matthew 25 suggests is necessary to participate in God's eternal life: they feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, take the stranger in, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and imprisoned (31–46). They even sponsor theological conferences, which is oddly missing from the criterion for judgment in Matthew 25.

Women in their ministry throughout the centuries of Christian communal life have given themselves in service to others and, as such, have participated in God's life, for God is love. While God has offered women full participation in God's life, the people of God and their leadership have not offered women full participation in all aspects of the community's life.

While it could be argued that up until the end of the twentieth century, there were more opportunities within the Christian community for women to assume positions of power and authority than in the wider culture,² the overall cultural atmosphere within the Church did not recognize the full human dignity of women. The Church shared the same androcentric (male-

centered) system of values and symbols as society. In this androcentric system that has dominated Western culture, women have not, with few exceptions, been given equal access to the public sphere.

While women in roughly the first hundred years of Christian life were *relatively* active in the public sphere, Christianity has been under the shadow of an androcentric culture. For most of Christian history, women were considered inferior to men by nature and temperament. Though this is a complicated story, let me just make a few soundings in the history of thought to give us a sense of the scope of the problem. Androcentrism was not part of the message of Christ; nevertheless, Christianity would come to reflect the androcentrism of the culture in which it emerged.

This male-dominated cultural outlook was informed by many sources: the patriarchal culture of the Old Testament and some pagan literature, philosophy, and medicine. According to Elizabeth Clark, traditional attitudes toward women came from “attitudes derived from the Old Testament’s adulation of the busy housewife and warnings against ‘loose women,’ pagan antiquity’s ideal of the chaste and retiring matron, and the unfavorable representations of women in some classical literature, especially satire.”³ In addition, the views of Greek philosophers and physicians like Aristotle and later Galen and Aretaeus of Cappadocia contributed to negative views concerning women. Let me just give Aristotle’s position, although one would find similar accounts in Galen and Aretaeus of Cappadocia.⁴ While knowledge of Aristotle’s ideas among the Fathers of the Church was secondhand and not always very accurate, Aristotle’s ideas on the inferiority of women were part of the cultural background that would inform early Christianity and would become authoritative in the high middle ages.

Aristotle’s view that women are inferior was based on his understanding of physiology, which was argued from the dissection of pregnant animals. In Aristotle’s physiology, when nature is acting effectively it produces a male, when the agent cause is impaired in some way, it produces a female. Thus in Aristotle’s understanding of human conception, a woman is a mistake.⁵ She is smaller and weaker, and she is less capable than males of self-control, reason, and virtue. A slight indicator of the insufficiency of Aristotle’s science, by our standards, is that one of the ways the agent cause can be thwarted is by the moisture of the south wind.⁶ On Aristotelian analysis, we should then expect, in light of our recent rainy weather, that all children conceived in the month of June in the Midwest will be girls.

The conclusion of Aristotle that women were inferior by nature was also held by the second-century philosophers and physicians Galen and

Areteaus of Cappadocia and would be reiterated by some of the Fathers of the Church. The Eastern Church Father, Clement of Alexandria (150–215), echoes Aristotle's conclusion when he states, "A woman considering what her nature is, must be ashamed of it."⁷ Such a view also pervaded the Western Church. In Tertullian (circa 160–225), whose rhetoric was so harsh, we really have a case not only of androcentrism, but misogyny, which is a real hatred of women. Tertullian interpreted the third chapter of Genesis as a story of sexual temptation in which Eve, who represented all women, was the temptress. Tertullian's reading of Genesis 3 leads him to condemn all women in the following passage:

God's judgment on this sex lives on in our age; the guilt necessarily lives on as well. You are the Devil's gateway; you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first forsaker of the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not brave enough to approach; you so lightly crushed the image of God, the man Adam; because of your punishment, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die.⁸

For Tertullian, women were not created in the image of God, as is stated in Genesis 1, but they were responsible for the first sin and by consequence destroyed the image of God in Adam, caused the entrance of death into the world, and thus caused the death of the Son of God.

Women, however, didn't receive only blame in the Patristic period. Indeed, women martyrs and ascetics were extravagantly praised by some of the Fathers of the Church. Listen to Jerome's eulogy of the Roman widow Marcella:

Marcella fasted in moderation, abstained from eating meat, and knew the smell of wine more than its taste, taking it for the sake of her stomach and for her frequent sicknesses (see 1 Timothy 5:23). She rarely used to go out in public and scrupulously shunned the houses of noble ladies, lest she be forced to see that which she had disdained. She frequently visited the basilicas of the apostles and martyrs for private prayers, and avoided the crowded assemblies of the people.... What virtue I found in her, what cleverness, what holiness, what purity, I am afraid to say, lest I exceed what belief finds credible and excite you to greater grief by calling to mind of how great a good you have been deprived.⁹

Such lavish praise, however, did not undermine the androcentrism of the culture; rather, the achievement of these women was explained in androcentric terms. These women ascetics and martyrs were lauded in the highest terms of their culture—they were seen to have overcome the weakness of their nature such that they had become like men. As Jerome, who had many female friends with whom he investigated Scripture, put it, “she will cease to be a woman and will be called a man.”¹⁰

While Aristotle’s view was part of the cultural heritage that informed early Christianity, Aristotle was explicitly cited as an authority in the high middle ages. Thus Thomas Aquinas, when treating the question of the creation of “woman,” cites Aristotle. Thomas repeats Aristotle’s position when he says, “In respect to the individual nature a woman is defective and a mistake.”¹¹

Whether we laugh at the absurdity of such statements—and they can be multiplied in different contexts throughout Christian history—or cry at the injustice of them, it is important to recognize, in this case at least, that Thomas was relying on the preeminent authority on these issues of his time: Aristotle. In these matters, Aristotle had the same authority in Thomas’s time that the American Medical Association has in our time. Thomas did not question Aristotle as an authority on this issue. Indeed, in the context from which I have taken this text, the received view of Aristotle’s poses problems for Thomas’s theology. Instead of calling into question Aristotle’s view of conception, Thomas accepted it and had to exercise his considerable theological talent to try to reconcile Aristotle’s view that women are a mistake with the Genesis account that “woman” was created in the beginning by God and thus was integral to God’s plan in creating.

In showing how Thomas was dependent on Aristotle as the preeminent authority of his time, I have let Thomas off the hook. Thomas was not aware of the evils of androcentrism. He did not know that androcentrism was against God’s intent, thus his androcentrism was not sinful. It is only fair to read Thomas in the context of his time. We cannot judge him by the knowledge we have today. We cannot blame Thomas for not being seven hundred years ahead of his time. But in letting Thomas off the hook, have I not downplayed the serious destructiveness and injustice of androcentrism? No, absolutely not. That androcentrism was such part and parcel of Thomas’s culture that Thomas did not even question it heightens the seriousness of the problem. It is important to remember that Thomas was not shy about asking questions. Indeed, his *Summa Theologiae*, the masterwork of his over fifty works, has some ten thousand questions, articles, and arguments. That one of the great questioners in the history of Western thought did not see the destructive-

ness of androcentrism should raise a red flag for us. It calls us to a greater vigilance to bring into the open dehumanizing structures that inform our culture and Christian community.

Women have advanced considerably in the United States since they were given the right to vote in 1920. This is clear from the fact that women have held some of the highest offices in the U.S. government—three of the last four Secretaries of State have been women, the current speaker of the house is a woman, a woman very nearly was the Democratic nominee for president, and women hold 16 percent of the seats in the U.S. House and Senate.¹² Even though great progress has been made in the past hundred years and no major intellectual writing today says women are inferior by nature, sexism is still operative in more subtle ways, and it is imperative to bring it to light. The 1995 United Nations world conference on women states the problem starkly:

*While women have made significant advances in many societies, women's concerns are still given second priority almost everywhere. Women face discrimination and marginalization in subtle as well as in flagrant ways. Women do not share equally in the fruits of production. Women constitute 70 percent of the world's poor.... Women and men still live in an unequal world. Gender disparities and unacceptable inequalities persist in all countries. In 1995 there is no country in the world where men and women enjoy complete equality.*¹³

This is evidenced not only in the wider society and the world, but also in the Catholic Church. There are a host of instances within the Church. While I cannot mention all of them here, let me just mention a few. According to a 2007 study by the AFL-CIO, jobs in which women represent 70 percent of the workforce pay 30 percent less than jobs that require comparable skills but in which men are more likely employed.¹⁴ Lay ecclesial ministry fits this description, with women employed in 80 percent of the lay ecclesial ministry jobs in the United States.¹⁵ The Catholic community in its support of a just wage needs to counter this gender-based discrimination.

The Catholic community also needs to pay attention to the kind of benefits and services it provides concerning maternal leave. In a survey of women in leadership positions in dioceses across the country, women cited as a major concern family-friendly policies concerning maternal leave that went beyond legal requirements.¹⁶ An example from my own experience, which I have corroborated with other women working in dioceses across the country, can illuminate the problem. When I was a graduate student at Boston