

Relationships of Men and Women: Differentiation and Diversity

Margaret Patricia Brady, OSB
pcbrady@bethlehemcentre.com

Christian spirituality is the human response of both men and women to the mystery of the death-resurrection of Jesus the Christ and the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit and its gifts through all time. It is a journey of growth as Christians become more and more Christ like.

Human response to this mystery is conditioned as well as structured by both the individual's historical situation and their sexuality. Both masculine and feminine experience of God is distinct but not separate from one another. They are complementary initiated by the individual's gender experience.

Resisting the urge to identify either specific gender attitudes whether feminine or masculine and their subsequent responses to biology allows us to see the transcendent dimension over the material. From here we move into the qualities that may be symbolically understood as either masculine or feminine but described as trans-temporal in which all may participate.

It is impossible to give more than a brief overview of the gifts of both genders. Culturally men are generally seen as having leadership abilities and are protective and supportive of life. On the other hand, women are seen as altero-centric and intuitive with a caring, protective sense for life both physical and spiritual. Their spiritual qualities of compassion and refinement complement men's more assertive qualities by moderating and enhancing them.

Three Stages of Religious Growth

When we look at the differentiation and diversity of gifts and see them as building up what is lacking in the body of Christ, the Church (Col. 1:24), we may view men and women in religious communities as "living laboratories of the kingdom of God." (Simon-Pierre Arnold, OSB, Guest Speaker at the 2016 General Assembly of CRC)

Both communities would work towards building up the *koinonia*, ultimately in oneness, unity and communion. Since communities are made up of individuals, we must also take into account three stages of religious growth through which members will hopefully pass. They are:

- 1. Systemic control**—keep the rule or the law and it will keep you.
- 2. Idealization** is the stage in which one can identify and experience the ideal—God is love and Jesus is the perfect embodiment of love toward God and the human person. This is a highly emotional experiential stage where the ideal has not yet become a permanent inner reality. This interiorization leads to the next stage.
- 3. Personal process.** Here one begins to understand on an experiential level that life comes out of death and the paschal mystery is a lived reality. Is not this what religious

communities are challenged to live so as to open themselves to the kingdom of God? From here we move to communal dimensions of growth.

Ecclesial Mysticism

As members of communities collectively open themselves to experientially live communally in the mystery of the divine indwelling through prayer and contemplation of the Scriptures and celebrate together this mystery's permanent actuality in the liturgy; they have returned to ecclesial mysticism. This leads to radical involvement in the mission of the Church, to the transformation of society.

In this prophetic dimension of ecclesial mysticism communities begin to challenge oppressive societal structures giving themselves selflessly to love and care for the poor and marginalized. All of this is done in community and such a community is a sign of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. We live in the already and the not yet. It anticipates the goal of all Christian communities—communion with the Triune God and with one another in faith, hope and love.

Discussion Questions

1. From your own life experience can you give some concrete examples of the three stages of religious growth?
2. Do you see your community moving into ecclesial mysticism? Are there some things that may facilitate its growth?