

The Trinitarian Family and its Meaning

By Tarcisio Beal

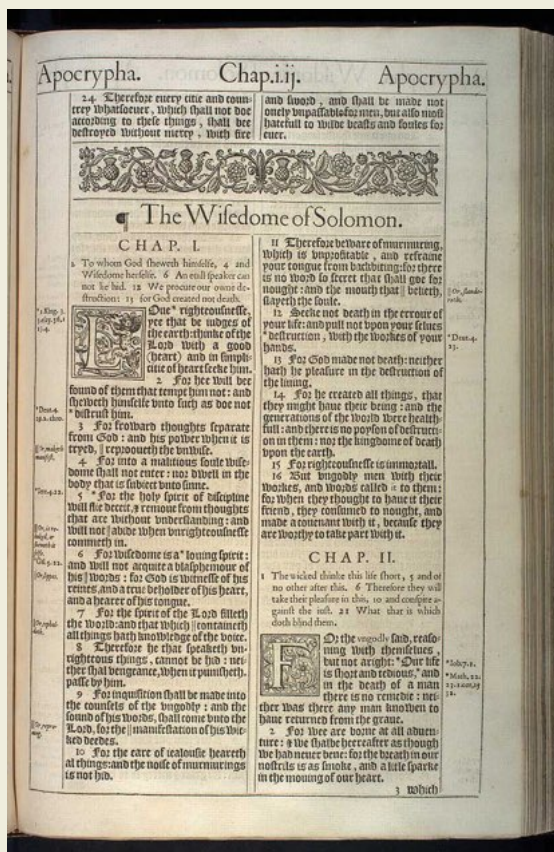
This article is a follow-up to two others that appeared in La Voz: Sept. 2020 ("Androcentrism Weakens Church & Society") and Oct. 2020 ("Jesus, Women, and the New Testament").

Christians frequently speak of and worship God, the Father and Jesus, his Son, but usually refer to the Holy Spirit only as the source and inspiration to carry out good deeds. They seldom think of God as a true family of father, mother, and son as the model for the human family. However, since the 1960s, an increasing number of theologians, including many women, have been looking into specific, biblical feminine traits that point to the Holy Spirit.

We have already discussed how, since the 4th century, androcentrism has dominated the Western world and Christianity, often fully allied with the State, has deprived women of their most basic rights by justifying it with a misogynistic interpretation of the Scriptures. The Inquisition, for example, took the life of more than one million women falsely accused of witchcraft. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Roman Church's policies regarding women were ridiculously misogynistic.

Gn 1: 26-27 says clearly that God created **male all human beings after his own image and likeness**. Since motherhood is the source of all human beings, the later version "**Priestly Version**" (**Gn 2: 18-24**), mirroring the androcentrism of Judaism, implies that God created a **hierarchical relationship** between the two sexes so that the female was made from and for the male; that only the male carries the make-up and the likeness of God, and that the woman was formed from one of Adam's ribs.

In a fascinating 1986 article in the *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira*, Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer zeroed in on the specific issue of how a proper understanding of the Tri-



Wisdom title page in King James Version
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nitarian God points to the ultimate source of femininity and also to the full equality of male and female in human society.

The divine Mystery who creates, saves, and sanctifies us does not identify Itself by privileging one of the sexes but, on the contrary, integrates and harmonizes both sexes. A God identified only as He, the masculine, is incompatible with the Christian Revelation and his commitment to salvation for all human beings. If God created the human beings as male and female after his own image, thus setting the format for the human family, then the trinitarian God must also be the ultimate source of the feminine. It is more than time for the Church to draw the proper conclusions regarding the biblical and logical consequences of her teaching. Says Bingemer:

A new Trinitarian theology will have a decisive role in integrating the masculine and the feminine as carriers of God's image of Father, Son, and Mother/Holy Spirit... A proper reading of the Scriptures reveals not a lonely and distant Patriarch but a God as a family, a community of love between the Persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.1

Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff reminds us that "God is prototypically both masculine and feminine, so it would be more logical to call God our Eternal

Mother.”² Adds German theologian Juergen Moltmann: “The human family as God’s image tells us that God is a mystery of never-ending love. If the woman, the man, and the child are the image of God upon the earth, then the eternal paternity, maternity, and infancy are revealed inside the Trinitarian God.”³

The androcentric view that presents God only as Abba/Father, King and Lord, Patriarch and Judge, ignores quite a number of references found in the Holy Scripture that point to the femininity of God, to his caring love for his own creation, for all human beings. The Old Testament, besides referring to God’s mercy as *rahamin* (compassion), a term connected to a woman’s uterus (*rehem*), alludes to other feminine traits that denote God’s motherly caring for his people:

“But Zion said, “The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me!” Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child in her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you!” (Is 14-16; cf Is 63: 4; 42:1; Jr 31:20).

Several other terms used in the Hebrew Scriptures to describe God’s actions also reveal his motherly tenderness: *ruah* (wind, spirit, breath of life), is always used in its feminine form. It refers to Yahweh, to life breathing itself, to God as producer and carrier of life and movement (Is 11:5, 57:13, 63: 10-11; **2 San 22:16**). After punishing Israel for its unfaithfulness while under the control of the Edomites, Yahweh says: “I have looked away, and kept silence, I have said nothing, holding myself in; **but now I cry out as a woman, gasping and panting** (Is 42:14). The *Book of Proverbs* equals Wisdom to God the Creator who passes on his wisdom to humans like a mother does it to her children. *Shekinah*, another feminine term which refers to Yahweh’s mediating presence and action, is also widely used in the Old Testament (cf Is 42: 14, 63:13). The *Book of Wisdom* also describes the motherly presence



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and action of God in history as **Wisdom (Sophia)**, another feminine word. Ironically, the author has King Solomon relating how he benefitted the most from Wisdom (cf chs. 7 & 8) when, in fact, he was anything but wise. The *Book of Kings* describes him as a tyrant and the worst abuser of women: he had 700 wives of royal rank and 300 concubines living in luxury

(cf. 1 *Kings* 10: 14-29; 11: 3-4; 2 *Chron* 9: 1-28).

Now, as several theologians have been pointing out, it is more than time for the Church to draw the proper conclusions regarding the biblical and logical consequences of her teaching. Says Bingemer: “A new Trinitarian theology will have a decisive role in integrating the masculine and the feminine as carriers of God’s image of Father, Son, and Mother/Holy Spirit,”² and Juergen Moltmann adds: “The human family as God’s image tells us that God is a mystery of never-ending love. If the woman, the man, and the child are the image of God upon the earth, then the eternal paternity, maternity, and infancy are revealed inside the Trinitarian God.”³

We have already discussed how Jesus’ treatment of women contradicted the heavy *machismo of the pharisees* (cf *La Voz de Esperanza*, October 2020). A central message of the New Testament is that **God is a community of love** that Jesus constantly exemplifies. The first Epistle of the apostle John uses the Greek feminine term *agapé*, even if referring to God as “He”: Bingemer translates it as **God’s love** poured over the world to create a paternal community on its way to eternal happiness.⁴ In fact, *agapé* is the best description of the meaning of the Eucharist which congregates the Christian community within the invisible presence of Jesus. The apostle John speaks constantly of love as the way to God:

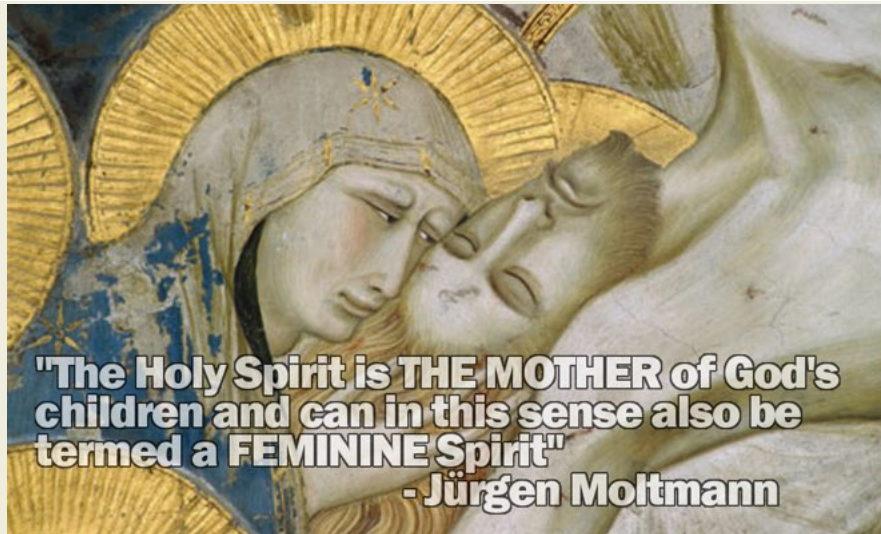
“Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love... Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another... Thi is how we know that we remain in Him and He in us, that He has given us of his Spirit... God is love,

whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him" (1 Jo 4: 8, 11, 13).

Furthermore, evangelist Mark specifically refers to the trinitarian reality by mentioning the presence of the Holy Spirit in his narrative of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan river:

"It happened in those days (when John the Baptist appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance) that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. On coming up of the water he saw the heavens had been torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him, and a voice came from the heavens: "You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased... (Mk 1: 9-11).

A major sign of male insecurity has been the refusal to allow women to be close to the altar or to preside over any part of divine worship. Women were even prohibited from singing inside the churches at least until the last decades of the 20th century. In Rome, in order to extend the soprano voices of the choir boys for a few more years, the boys were castrated. The *Motu Proprio* of Pius X (1903) decreed that "if there is a need for high voices, these parts must be sung by boys, according to the ancient custom of the Church." In later 20th century, women's choirs were allowed inside the parish church, but only as far back from the altar as possible. In 1955, Pius XII's encyclical *Musicae Sacrae* still ordered the separation of men from women inside the church, with men on the right and women on the left genuflectories, and no mixing in singing prayers and songs; in 1980, the Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship remem-



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ded pastors that women are not permitted to be altar servers, although quite a number of parishes across that Catholic world simply disregarded the order; John Paul II's *Mulieris Dignitatem* encyclical

(1988) and *Letter to Women* (1993) argued that the Church cannot justify the ordination of women, adding, in 1995, that such policy is part of the "deposit of faith" and requires the assent of the faithful. What about the 82% of American Catholic women who, in 1986, declared their support for the ordination of women to the priesthood?!

Another major way to end clericalism would be to allow deacons, priests, and bishops to get married and have a wife to advise and enhance their ministry and also be an integral part of the sacred ministry. Until the 4th century, church ministers were not required to be celibate. The Hebrew language did not even have the word "celibant" in its vocabulary.

The Church should be like a grand family and turn into reality the true meaning of *agapé*. Pope Francis' leadership is moving the Church to end male clericalism and grant women equal rights, ordaining them as deaconesses, priestesses, bishops, cardinals, even creating the possibility of, one day, having a woman as the head of the world Catholic community.

BIO: *Tarcisio Beal is professor Emeritus of History at the University of the Incarnate Word who has written extensively in La Voz de Esperanza.*

1. Bingemer, Maria Clara Lucchetti, A Trindade a Partir da Perspectiva da Mulher. Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira, vol. 46, fasc. 181, pp. 73-99.
2. Bingemer, op. cit, pp. 96-97.
3. Boff, Leonardo, O Rosto Materno de Deus. Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes, 1979, p. 101.
4. Moltmann, Jürgen, O Pai maternal – O Patripassionismo trinitário vencerá de patriarcalismo teológico? In Concilium 63 (1981), pp. 65-66.