

On Language and Equality

by Lucinda Marrs

[ED. NOTE: Among the draft pastoral's principal short-term objectives is to use the authority of the bishops to endorse and promote feminist (or "inclusive") language in the Church's liturgy. In fact, strenuous efforts to change the language in which the Church worships and prays have been made by feminist liturgists and their collaborators for years, and revised texts and "guidelines" have been produced for this purpose. No doubt many bishops and priests genuinely believe that most Catholic women not only want the feminist changes in the language made, but are actually offended by the use of ordinary English. Pastors may readily accede to demands for change, believing that it is an essentially inconsequential concession which will make women "feel better" about the Church. Such a concession would be misguided.]

It is worth noting that significant scholarly contributions to the discussion of feminist politicization of the language have been made by women: Dr. Joyce Little of the University of St. Thomas in Houston, and Suzanne Scorsonne of Toronto, for example. Many literary scholars, liturgists, historians, political scientists, theologians, linguists, poets and ordinary users of English have noted with alarm the trend to force a living language into the confining mold of a particular ideology. WFF's May, 1989 joint statement on Feminism, Language and Liturgy (see Appendix I) responds, in part, to this problem.]

A discussion of generic "man" and generic "he" and "his" might start with the idea that words take their meanings from their context. As Thomas J. Cox, a linguist, has said "...the primary unit of semantic analysis is not the morpheme or even the word, but rather the sentence (and ultimately, its context). Rather than being the locus of these temporal, logical, and causal relationships, a given (verb) form or combination of forms

assumes these functions by its systemic occurrence in contexts from which these relations can be deduced."¹

From age to age, from Beowulf to Richard Wilbur, as Ralph Wright, O.S.B., has shown in his article "Generic Man Revisited," generic and specific "man" have existed side-by-side throughout English literature. As we English speakers learned grammar we learned quite easily that the context indicated whether "read" was past or present tense, or whether "reed" was meant. Generations of listeners and readers of English of whatever level of education have had no difficulty with "man" having two meanings.²

Given this long unbroken usage of "man" in both its forms, can one by fiat eliminate one of them from the language? Father Wright, in the same paper cited above, offers this view:

"Although sometimes we may pretend otherwise, when we are born and learn to speak we inherit a language. We do not inherit it as the potter inherits the clay — a highly malleable substance that can be formed in myriad ways. A language is more like a genetic code. At the moment of conception we are landed with our physical and even mental make-up and it has taken all the human beings down to our mother and father to produce the precise code that we are. Environment is going to have significant influence on how we turn out but if the genetic code has not provided the potential no mere environment will be able to substitute for it. The case with language is analogous. We may hope that our language rests freely in the hands of our literary experts, our grammarians or even our liturgists so that they are free to do with it what they will or what society bids them; in fact this freedom is severely limited. Those hands are tied. They are tied by all the literature, and all the oral tradition that comprise the genetic inheritance of a language, stretching from the distant past right up to the very moment when we ourselves learned how to speak. And,

because our language is living, it is constantly evolving and adapting and growing. New ideas, new discoveries, new inventions — all needing to be named. But there is an important distinction to be made between the creations of new words like “byte” or “biochemistry” and the manipulation of words already in the language which may already have a history of usage stretching back five hundred years or more. The way such words grow and develop is much more mysterious and only in a very limited sense can this growth be controlled by the editor or the grammarian. When the language is English, spoken by so many different peoples on the planet, this process is even more complex.”

Even if one could eliminate from English a word with such deeply-rooted usage, and the generic pronouns that go with it, what would be the results?

First: a confusion when reading our English literary heritage. Are we women to shift gears every time we read works from another century or culture and think, “am I included or not?” As Suzanne Scorsone says, “Many women, feminist women, and I among them, refuse to allow other feminists to exclude us from the word “man,” to which we have as much right as do men. We will not be excluded from all the English literature of the past fifteen hundred years, nor do we want a misdirected political agenda, however well-meaning, to create in us a false sense of consciousness-raised (or razed) “rage” every time we read the word “man” used in the generic sense. We love the English language and its literature too much, we understand it too well...”³

Second: degradation of literary style. Ask someone who is required by an editor to use inclusive language what grammatical distortions and displacements are necessary to cope with “him/her” and other gender-specific pronouns if the generic is eliminated. (Consider the difficulties of applying “inclusive” language to a Romance language where all adjectives and past participles have number and gender and must be used generically as well.)

Third: elimination of certain contexts such as God-

Man-Nature. As Suzanne Scorsone says: “The generic sense of ‘man’ carries its own connotations of emphasis on the individual person representing the whole (a form of synecdoche). It is only very imperfectly replaced by such alternatives as ‘person’ (Greek-derived, with its legal and role implications) or ‘human’ (Latin-derived, with the implied taxonomic distinction from animal, alien or even angelic species).”⁴

Fourth: Since poets, novelists, dramatists and translators continue to use generic man and its generic pronouns, as Wright’s paper shows, allowing “trade and textbook publishers, journalists, television commentators, and feminist grammarians [to act as] pace-setters for the development of the language”⁵ would be unwarranted and divisive.

Is this really what we want for the English language? Do we want our literary history and literary style forced through the grillwork of a radical feminist agenda? How much more “inclusive” might it be to teach the best of literary expression, no matter what its provenance, to allow a standard of literary excellence to prevail, and to allow our English language to flow unimpeded through ourselves to the generations to come?

1. Quoted in *The French Review*, Vol. 63, No. 5, April 1990, p. 908.

2. Even today in less lofty literary forms such as advertising, the generic man is obviously necessary in certain contexts. In an ad put out by MADD (“Mothers Against Drunk Drivers”) that I received in the mail last week the following quotations occur: “No man is such a conqueror as the man who has defeated himself.” — Henry Ward Beecher; “You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him find it in himself.” — Galileo; “Defeat never comes to any man until he admits it.” — Josephus Daniels.

3. “In the Image of God: Male, Female, and the Language of the Liturgy”, *Communio*, Spring, 1989.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Worship: Renewal to Practice*, by Mary Collins, O.S.B., p. 202.

Lucinda Marrs is a member of WFF's St. Louis staff.