
Feminism, Sexism and Original Sin in 'Called to be One in Christ Jesus'

Susan J. Benofy

IT IS GENERALLY ACKNOWLEDGED that the condemnation of the "sin of sexism" is a primary purpose of the Pastoral on Women's Concerns. Press accounts of the release of the third draft, *Called to be One in Christ Jesus*, like those reporting the releases of the first two drafts, generally emphasized this, mentioning the "sin of sexism" in the headlines or at least in the lead paragraph. This does not seem to be merely an exaggeration by the media. In the summary of the third draft in the Bishops' official publication, *Origins*,¹ we find 'sexism' mentioned first in the list of topics discussed in the pastoral, and 'sexism' and the related adjective 'sexist' may well be the most frequently used words in the document. In one fairly short passage of four paragraphs [16-19] 'sexism' appears nine times and 'sexist' five times.

Since the term is given such prominence we naturally ask: "What is sexism?" In the draft, the term first appears in [16] where we are told: "...women acknowledge as a main cause of personal and societal discrimination the evil many today term 'sexism,' defined simply as unjust discrimination based on sex." This last clause of this sentence seems to give a sort of definition of sexism as "unjust discrimination based on sex." If this is taken seriously as a definition however, the sentence is reduced to saying that a main cause of discrimination is discrimination. which is meaningless. Still, in [17] we again read "sexism, a form of unjust discrimination based on sex." This paragraph ends with a reference to "the sin of sexism" and the next sentence begins "Unjust discrimination of this sort..." [18].

On the other hand, [16] refers us (in footnote 8)

to an article by Sr. Margaret Farley,² which states:

Sexism refers primarily to the belief that persons are superior or inferior to one another on the basis of their sex. It includes, however, attitudes, value systems, and social patterns which express or support this belief. It is a contemporarily coined term, rising out of the women's movement, and not ordinarily used neutrally in its application to men or women. Rather, it indicates almost always the belief that it is men who are superior and women who are inferior because of their sex.³

This definition makes 'sexism' a *belief*, while the earlier definition made it a *practice* (discrimination). Using the same term for two different ideas causes confusion. The "belief" idea of sexism seems to be the one used in [19], for example, where 'sexism' is termed "a fundamental disorientation", although then it is hard to see how we can "uproot" its "underlying causes" as the previous sentence says we must do. It is, of course, reasonable that a *practice* like discrimination would result from a *belief* in inferiority, but it should be clearer whether such a key concept represents a belief itself or the practices arising from it.

Note also that the term 'sexism' is one coined recently by feminists. We have been told in [8] that the bishops' purpose is "to make known...the depth of our tradition so that... we may...penetrate it more deeply with right judgment and apply it more fully in daily life." Certainly in two millennia this rich tradition must have developed *some* concept of the problem the bishops wish to discuss and corresponding vocabulary with which to discuss it. Why, then, in a statement of Catholic teaching is there this dependence on an ill-defined feminist neologism for the expression of a key concept? The difficulty with the use of this term is com-

pounded by the fact that "it is not ordinarily used neutrally" so that, for all practical purposes, women are not capable of committing the "sin of sexism."

It is particularly disturbing that this discussion of 'sexism' appears in Chapter 1 of the pastoral. This is the chapter which is supposed to discuss Christian anthropology and to have been revised extensively after a consultation with the Vatican. In a sidebar in the *Origins* edition of the pastoral⁴ Bishop Clark is quoted as saying that this consultation "had its most significant impact on the first chapter" and that this chapter was "strongly influenced by the current pope's thinking on the subject." Although Pope John Paul II has discussed the topic of the dignity of women extensively, especially in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, but also in *Christifidelis Laici*, and in his set of talks in which he developed a theology of the body⁵ he never uses the term 'sexism' in his discussion. Certainly no reference is given to a papal definition of sexism nor is any indication given that sexism is being used as an equivalent to any term in the papal documents. Does the "significant influence" of the Vatican consultation extend to the definition and condemnation of sexism? If so, why is there a total absence of citations on this point?

A KEY THEME in the Catholic understanding of human nature especially as elucidated in the recent writings of Pope John Paul II, is the idea of the complementarity of masculine and feminine. How extensive is the influence of recent papal teaching in the treatment of complementarity in the pastoral? There is some treatment of this topic in the pastoral but there seems to be a lack of conviction, even a defensiveness, about it. We are told in [27] that: "Masculinity and femininity is [*sic*] ... not an obstacle to be overcome." In [17] it is stated that we "...must acknowledge and value sexual difference while resisting the sin of sexism." There seems to be an excessive concern here with the possible problems resulting from recognition of sexual differences; especially since there is no concern at all with the devaluing of the feminine which can result from an exclusive concern with equality, especially when this is measured in terms

of such things as power, status and income as the feminists tend to do. Moreover, there is no discussion of how sexual differences might lead to some legitimate distinction of roles for men and women. Treatment of this topic is necessary, especially since we have already been referred to the Farley article on 'Sexism' which also states:

"No longer is it argued that...wholly passive roles should be assigned to women either biologically or theologically.... Nonetheless, at least one theory remains which continues to support gender-role differentiation in a way that limits women's roles ...and makes them subordinate to roles open to men. This is the theory that women and men are essentially complementary in a way that justifies distinction of roles without violating equality."

Note that here 'complementarity' is called a "theory" not a fundamental teaching about human nature. There is also an assumption that any distinction of roles necessarily means that women are treated as inferiors. There is no explicit refutation of this view in the pastoral.

The Farley article concludes with this assertion:

"...exclusion of persons from major roles in the Church...on the basis of sex constitutes unjust discrimination, the perpetuation of sexism in thought and social structure."

This statement clearly charges that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is an example of the "sin of sexism" yet it is not specifically refuted in the pastoral.

It is extremely disturbing that this article, which was *not* cited in the second draft, was *added to the references of the third draft* while the explanation of the reason for the tradition of an all-male priesthood was dropped from the text and citations of the studies of Hauke⁶ and Oddie⁷ which defend this tradition were eliminated from the new draft.

PERHAPS THE MOST SERIOUS PROBLEM with the use of the term 'sexism' occurs in [32] which deals with "... sin's entrance into history " as depicted "in the third chapter of Genesis..." This is a subject to which Pope John Paul II has given much attention in his recent writings. Probably the most complete discussion is contained in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 9 (a section never cited in the pastoral). In this

passage we read:

“But there is no doubt ... *that the first sin is the sin of man, created by God as male and female. It is also the sin of the “first parents”, to which is connected its hereditary character. In this sense we call it “original sin”.*

...

At the same time, however, as the author of the evil of sin, *the human being—man and woman—is affected by it.* The third chapter of Genesis ... shows the perspective of “toil”, by which the man will earn his living (cf. *Gen 3:17-19*) and likewise the great “pain” with which the woman will give birth to her children (cf. *Gen 3:16*). And all this is marked by the necessity of death, which is the end of human life on earth.” (Emphasis in original)

Compare this to the treatment of the same topic in [32] of the third draft of the pastoral, where we are told that:

“The biblical account of sin’s entry into history in the third chapter of Genesis depicts the particular way *women* have suffered as a result of sin: the unjust domination of men over women, the violation of equality in relationships and the failure to respect women as persons. These sins, described so vividly in Scripture, are characteristic of what we have termed the “sin of sexism.” (Emphasis added)

The contrast is striking. The Holy Father emphasizes that both man and woman are responsible for the sin and that both suffer the consequences, though to some extent in different ways. The pastoral, on the other hand, mentions only how *women* have suffered. No mention is made of any consequences for men, and, since “the unjust domination of men” leads the list of the consequences suffered by women, we are left with the impression that men alone are responsible for sin and women suffer the consequences. This impression is strengthened when the sin described in Genesis is called, *not* original sin, but “the sin of sexism”! (Recall that the term ‘sexism’ is “not ordinarily used neutrally in its application to men or women.”⁸)

This is the clearest instance of the intrusion of feminist ideology into the pastoral. This ideological focus produces serious distortions of even the most fundamental teachings about the nature of man and woman. These distortions in turn affect the entire discussion in the draft pastoral, including its recommendations.

No number of revisions of the text will be sufficient to correct these flaws, because they are inherent in the very process by which the document was produced. This pastoral should be rejected and the process terminated.

NOTES

¹ *Origins*, 21:46 (April 23, 1992) p. 761.. Numbers in brackets { } refer to paragraphs as numbered in this edition.

² The citation of Sister Margaret Farley, RSM, a signer of the controversial 1984 *New York Times* ad sponsored by Catholics for a Free Choice, is new to this draft. In its 1988 critique of an earlier draft the militantly feminist Center for Concern complained that “work of some of the most creative and prophetic women scholars are not apparent”, and they cited examples including Sr. Margaret Farley, Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ (also an ad signer), Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, Sr. Sandra Scheiders, and a few others.

Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza is cited in footnote 37 of the new draft as an example of “pioneering scholarship [which] has helped the whole church recognize the place of women in the biblical accounts.” Schussler-Fiorenza regards the scripture itself as oppressive of women. Her book *In Memory of Her* demands that the oppressive texts be “demythologized as androcentric codifications of patriarchal power” that “cannot claim to be the revelatory Word of God” (page 32); further, she insists that scripture be subjected to a “hermeneutic of suspicion” in order to transform and ‘re-construct’ it according to feminist notions.

³ Margaret Farley, “Sexism,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Supplement), Vol. 17 (Washington: Publisher’s Guild, 1979), p. 604.

⁴ *Origins* 21: 46, p. 763

⁵ Published in three volumes:

Original Unity of Man and Woman, (St Paul Editions: Boston, 1981)

Blessed are the Pure of Heart (St Paul Editions: Boston, 1983)

Reflections on Humanae Vitae (St Paul Editions: Boston, 1984)

⁶ Manfred Hauke, *Women in the Priesthood?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988)

⁷ William Oddie, *What Will Happen to God?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988)

⁸ Farley, “Sexism”.

Susan J. Benofy holds a doctorate in physics from St. Louis University. She is a member of the staff of Women for Faith & Family.