

THE PRIEST AND THE FEMININE

By MARIA BOULDING

IT MIGHT have been easier for the reader to see what is, and what is not, being offered if the title above had been 'Are you on speaking terms with your *anima*?' This article does not propose to discuss friendships between priests and women, or the controversial issue of women's ordination. It is concerned with the fact, familiar to every priest, that his vocation and ministry involve him in tasks, roles and experiences traditionally regarded as 'feminine': he has to listen, comfort, heal, sympathize and nurse the weak and sickly growth; he must be compassionate, receptive and gentle. Any priest who has ever reflected on this is in good company. Christ compared himself to a hen gathering her chicks under her wings; Paul groaned in labour pains as he bore his galatian converts to fulness of life, and reminded the Thessalonians that he had been as gentle with them as a nurse taking care of her children. Whether a priest be a man or a woman, priesthood includes feminine dimensions, and it is worth considering them positively.

Sexual differentiation is from God; more, it is Godlike. 'God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them' (Gen 1,27). Bisexual humankind reflects him in whom all fulness dwells, all opposites meet in loving, creative harmony. The gods of the nations were paired with their goddesses, but Israel never put a consort alongside Yahweh. Of his fulness we have all received; we come from his dynamic peace, and we share in a harmony and wholeness more original than our sin. Fragmentation and disharmony, polarization and conflict, are not the first word, nor will they be the last.

Christ calls us, as individuals and as a people, to the new wholeness of the redeemed. 'There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . male nor female . . .' differences and contrasts remain, but are transfigured. Christ's peace is no levelling-down of creation to sterile uniformity, but the holding together of great forces in the creative tension of love.

Maturity implies a certain capacity to live with tensions and allow them to be creative. Becoming fully human by the power of Christ's Spirit demands a reconciliation in oneself of the claims and possibilities of body and spirit, conscious and unconscious, the child

and the adult, heart and head, *animus* and *anima*. In each human person there is male and female, and they are better acknowledged and lovingly harmonized than denied. This does not mean sexual ambiguity; rather each person has the task of integrating the positive qualities characteristic of the opposite sex under the clear sign of his or her own sexual identity. A man unrelievedly masculine or a woman unalloyedly feminine would be difficult to live with and a poor essay in humanity. An affectively mature adult feels no need to be continually asserting or exaggerating his sexual identity, nor does he fear that it will be jeopardized if he does something supposedly characteristic of the opposite sex. So a mature man is not afraid of being compromised by showing gentleness, tenderness and compassion, nor need he wear a mask of aggressive self-sufficiency. A mature woman can use her intelligence and, if necessary, gifts of leadership without fearing the loss of her femininity.

Happily we have a model: 'Behold the man'. The gospels put us in touch with a man wholly alive, a man who had accepted and integrated the feminine in himself to the enrichment of his own virility. Both men and women loved Jesus, and his relationships with people of both sexes were marked by a rightness that makes our hearts leap. His encounters with women throughout the gospels are particularly vivid, and he always gets it right. He is comfortable with women, he trusts and likes and respects them, he never patronizes and is not afraid of his own emotions.

The mighty tensions are held together, because Jesus consents to be the still centre where they meet. He is compassionate and tough, brave and gentle, outgoing and receptive, incisive and delicate. He is the Servant who will not break a bruised reed or snuff out a smouldering wick or raise his voice in the streets, but also the Servant who sets his face like flint. *Animus* and *anima* are beautifully, creatively, lovingly wedded in him, because he is man in God's image, the Creator's primal dream.

A man, it has been said, is oriented to the many, to the plurality and variety of the world which he must conquer and consecrate. A woman is oriented to the one, to the unity of inwardness. We may question such polarizations, yet there may be something in it. Clearly a balance between the two tendencies must be struck in the life of each individual. Outgoing confrontation with the realities of the world is implied in the apostolic vocation of the baptized, but we need also to keep homing back on our centre of unity and find our roots again. Knowledge controls the many; wisdom contemplates the one. We may feel that we never get it right, or we may see-saw between them, but we recognize the need to harmonize the two.

Jesus grappled with this task. His home at Nazareth had been a place of anchorage, simplicity and peace. His mother's influence throughout his formative years must have been of incalculable importance, and he presumably learned a great deal from her about the strength of silence, waiting and prayer. The crowded years of his public ministry demanded continual outgoing effort, confronting him with people and work, and draining his energy. He had to travel, endure noise, make decisions, assess tricky situations, formulate realistic plans and watch them fall apart. He was pulled in all directions and stretched to the utmost. He had dire need of a place of unity and quiet. Neither a looking back to Nazareth, nor the occasional escape to Bethany, nor the odd week-end away with the apostles in some lonely place could be enough. His home was in the Father. His imperative need for prayer grew in proportion to the generosity of his self-giving love for people. Alone with the Father at night, or whenever he could seize a few minutes (or, indeed, in the midst of hubbub, surely), he could gather his being in 'recollection', listen to the Father's word, and let himself be known, loved and healed. In that communion he responded to the love that asked his unconditional surrender.

Here, it seems, we are at the heart of the matter. Was the man Jesus *feminine* to God? The question is asked tentatively; what follows is not an answer, but a few thoughts towards one.

Jesus Christ is himself the Covenant of grace between God and man. As mediator and high priest he is on both ends of the divine-human relationship. He is the gracious presence of God, Immanuel, God-with-us and for us; but he is also mankind responding to God in faith, love, prayer and openness to grace. As Yahweh's Servant he is sent to gather Israel, but in accepting his mission he is the embodiment of the servant-people, the Covenant-community at its most real.

Revelation plays on a range of relationships familiar to human beings in order to portray the Covenant between God and his people. He is their Shepherd, they the flock; he is their King, they his subjects; he is even their friend who calls them friends. Two relational bonds have a primacy, however: that of Parent¹ to child and Bridegroom to bride. Not only are these the most fundamental in human experience; they are specially suitable images for the union of grace because they connote a communion of blood and flesh, a shared life, as the basis for love. In the New Testament's development of these two old testament images Jesus is again at both poles of the relationship, divine and human.

The love that spoke to Israel in father-terms is really present in Jesus: 'He who has seen me has seen the Father'. Yet he is also

Israel the son, the beloved child of God, and he translates into the terms of human growth, learning, trust, love, listening, prayer and obedience all that Israel's vocation to be Yahweh's first-born implied, and much more. There is a real human correlate to that being-from-the-Father and for-the-Father which is the ecstasy of trinitarian life. Through human maturing he worked it out, and it was perfect only in his passover. The risen Jesus is Son to the utmost depths of his human body and mind.

It is for us a source of wonder and love, but not of difficulty, that Jesus is on our end of the relationship when we think of God as our Father. The other primary image of the Covenant is another matter. It is harder for our imagination and our language to conceive of Jesus on both ends of the relationship of divine Bridegroom to human bride. Yet he must be.

Yahweh was Israel's Bridegroom. After Hosea's breakthrough with this imagery it was taken up by Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Second Isaiah and possibly the Song of Songs. All the ups and downs of the Covenant experience could be described in these terms. Yahweh had found Israel like a forlorn child in a wilderness, chosen her, cleansed and clothed her (cf Ezek 16), entered into a covenant of marriage with her at Sinai, led her through a honeymoon in the desert, endowed her with his gifts and looked for her answering fidelity. She was habitually unfaithful, and the adulterous nation was eventually stripped of everything, even the land itself. God's faithful love was stronger than her sin, however, and there was no divorce. She was led home, forgiven, clothed anew in beauty (cf Isai 61,10) and promised a fruitful motherhood beyond the narrow horizons of her earlier hope. There would be a new Covenant; the marriage had hardly begun as yet.

The New Testament takes up the promise and the image. Jesus is the Bridegroom of the Church, and the *agape* which binds him to his bride is the *agape* of God incarnate in him:

Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the Church to himself in splendour . . . (Eph 5,25-27).

Real and indissoluble already, their union will be consummated at the end, at the marriage-time of the Lamb.

This is still no problem: since Jesus is God really present, he is the divine Bridegroom. We can go further, however. It was not only the women in Israel who were insistently described as Yahweh's bride, but the people of Israel as a whole. The prophets who passionately

asserted this were men. Apparently it gave them no qualms. Jeremiah in a bleak moment even accused the Lord of seducing him (cf Jer 20,7). Jesus is Israel, and all that can be said of Israel as she responds to God, of Israel united to God, can be said of him. Hence there must be a human correlate here too, as truly as in the case of his sonship. All the human reality of the marriage-covenant must have registered in his heart. We are not dealing here in metaphors, for the new Covenant is the primordial reality after which human marriage is patterned, not vice versa. Jesus is the complete openness of our finite being to God, and he must have worked out in his earthly life the most intimately personal experience of receptive, responsive, loving, trusting creaturehood caught up in a marital bond by a divine Lover and made one spirit with God. If he worked it out then, he is living it now in all its glory.

All this suggests a good deal about priesthood in the service of the new Covenant, since christian priesthood is sharing in that of Christ the mediator, who belongs to both ends. Every priest is primarily a member of the People of God, before becoming a minister to it, as Vatican II emphasized. By baptism he is a 'layman', that is, a member of the holy *laos*, and he does not lose this charism by being ordained. He is in the Covenant of grace on the human end both before and after his special call to mediate the Covenant. It follows that whatever is said in revelation about the reality of the Church is true of him.

In addition to all the obvious implications of this, there is that reality of the Church which tradition has expressed in feminine terms: she is 'Holy Mother Church' because 'Bride of Christ'. As with Israel, these assertions are made of the whole Church, the Church as such, and not merely of its female members.

It would seem, then, that the 'feminine' activities in priestly ministry, as well as today's psychological insights concerning the task of integrating *animus* and *anima*, have a sound theological base. A theological base is something from which one operates, confidently and with enrichment. A man may be growing Christlike and enriching his priesthood by integrating the feminine, and making room in his life for some kind of real, human, experiential coefficient of the theological facts of life.

'Motherly' qualities are required in much of a priest's service; but a woman develops motherly qualities most strongly when she has a child, and she has a child only because she has first had sexual union. The prior surrender in love is the source of fruitfulness. The same holds for the world of spirit. This idea has powerful, unsentimental support in the Church's mystical tradition, a tradition developed by saints of both sexes and certainly intended for

both. A glance at some of its principal exponents may strengthen our confidence in the solidity of the theological foundations.

The nuptial imagery of the Song of Songs and the New Testament was extended by Origen, and by many writers after him, to the union between Christ and the individual Christian. For the patristic tradition generally, individual mystical experience is inseparable from, and an expected prolongation of, the contemplation of the whole Church as she is fed by the Bridegroom on the spiritual bread of scripture and eucharist. Origen emphasized the soul's passivity to God and consequent fertility. The love of which he speaks is a moral and intellectual love for the divine Logos: faith is in search of deeper understanding of the mysteries, and its union with the Word endows it with wisdom. Through this marital union man recovers the image and likeness of God: he is deified. Unabashed, Origen uses the word *eros*² for man's love of God, a word avoided by the New Testament but inevitable in the end, because human love is the least inadequate analogue for the Christian's journey through Christ to God.

The same themes of wisdom and the recovery of the soul's lost likeness to God are the heart of Bernard's doctrine of spiritual marriage. His tone is much more affective, but there is a strong cognitive element in his mysticism, as in that of the Greek Fathers. Even in its sin, confusion and degradation the soul retains the image of God by its very nature, and so carries in itself a perpetual reminder of the Word. On its conversion it begins to be reformed by him in charity. Such conformity marries the soul to the Word; their marriage is a union of wills, and engenders in the soul an increase of wisdom:

Truly this is a holy and spiritual marriage contract. 'Contract', did I say? An embrace, rather; yes, an embrace, wherein concord of wills makes of the two beings but one spirit. . . . Not indeed that they pour forth love with like abundance, the lover and Love itself, the soul and the Word, the bride and the Bridegroom, the Creator and the creature, for then would the thirsty man be equal to the spring. . . . Yet though the soul, being less, loves less, still if it loves with its whole self nothing is wanting to its gift. And to love thus is to be married. . . . Happy the man to whom is granted the experience of so sweet an embrace, for this is a mutual, intimate, powerful love which unites the two not in one flesh but in one spirit, so that the two are two no longer, as Paul says, 'He who cleaves to God is one Spirit with him' (Sermon 83 on the Song of Songs).

This may be a bit strong for some stomachs, but it is neither confined to Bernard nor intended primarily for women. John of the Cross, spokesman of the tradition at its most explicit, writes similarly of the summit of mystical union, which is the final

flowering of grace on this side of death. It is a marriage in which man's transformation by grace is so total that the old language of deification or divinization is appropriate, yet the human person remains (or becomes) fully human. Here again there is stress on wisdom, knowledge and communion with the mysteries of faith, for the Lord 'communicates to the soul the sweet mysteries of his incarnation and the ways and manners of human redemption' (*Spiritual Canticle*, annotation to stanza 23, 2nd redaction). Mystical marriage means mutual possession and surrender, a consummation of love through union with the Trinity.

In a modern idiom the same point is made by C. S. Lewis; 'What is above and beyond all things is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it'.³ Each of us, man or woman, has to be open to penetration by Word and Spirit: open to the Lover who always has the initiative, is always the stronger, and comes to dwell and take possession at the central depths of the human person. This is the glory of the male human person no less than of the female. Closeness to God realizes and enhances created being in its every mode. The surrender which a man makes to God in love and prayer, in acceptance of the invading, possessing Lover, he makes as a man.⁴

Openness to love implies listening, for us as for Jesus. We cannot speak God's word to others except as a fruit of much contemplative listening in poverty of spirit and purity of heart; if we try to by-pass the listening we shall preach ourselves rather than the word of the Lord. Like Mary, the Church receives the word, ponders it in her heart, gives it life within her life, and brings it forth for every generation. God speaks in the scriptures, in our prayer and in the whole life of the word-bearing people. In daily life we have to listen, in weakness, need, compassion and forgiveness. A priest must be the listening centre of the Covenant-community, the man with his ear to the ground, the man ideally placed. This is not a utopian suggestion, but a fundamental condition for the ministry of the word. Sowing the seed of the life-giving word, in preaching and sacrament, is a masculine role that consecrates a priest's virility, one by which he exercises a true and glorious spiritual fatherhood; but he must himself receive the word first and let it live and grow within him.⁵

Patiently he has to wait, watching and hoping for the growth of the new life, in himself and in others. Sensitivity to young, weak, growing things is often characteristic of a woman; naturally so, because she has invested more heavily in the child. No individual is expendable for her; each one uniquely matters since she has borne each in labour and pain, in waiting and hope. The same can be said of a priest who, gardener-like or mother-like, nurtures the small and

feeble thing, waiting for God's time, never tearing open the bud or trying to hurry the harvest, confident in the power of the new life to triumph in the end. He has invested a great deal too, and he needs the supposedly feminine ability to enter sensitively into the world of another person, to discern individual need, and to foster the gifts of others while remaining in the background himself. Sensitivity to life and individual growth enables him to care and sympathize, to heal and encourage and direct, to be a sacrament of Christ's compassion.

Compassion there has always been, but perhaps at times in spite of the prevailing model of priestly ministry rather than because of it. Leadership has often been understood in terms of power and domination. We are moving away from this distortion towards a more evangelical idea of authority, and since the mistake was partly due to an unbalanced maleness, a greater recognition of the 'female' element in priesthood may help.

The lyrical temperament of a Bernard is not required. To surrender in love to God is to yield to him freely what is already his, unrestricted rights over one's person and life.⁶ It is to worship him alone, and no idol, and it entails an inner availability for his will. All his life Jesus tried to be open to the Father, and to hold together the competing tensions in the precarious balance of a fully human love. It took him to the cross, the place of ultimate tension and the heart of every paradox. His risen life, of which we are heirs, is not the elimination of tensions but their consecration in the dynamic peace of God.

Peace, like charity, begins at home. If we pray and work for peace and reconciliation in the world, we are the more committed to seeking it in ourselves. Christ's gift is free, but never cheap, and the new life lays responsibilities on us. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, and we are bearers of his message of reconciliation in a society with special needs. It would be tragic if the Women's Liberation Movement seemingly achieved its aims but ended by making the same mistakes that men have made in the past: falling into exclusiveness, arrogance and a lack of sensitivity to the other sex, and forgetting how much the complementary qualities are needed.

A priest is above all a reconciler, and he cannot effectively bring the good news of reconciliation unless he has begun to be a reconciled person himself. By balancing his outgoing thrust with a capacity for pondering and savouring and living with mysteries only partly understood, by being still and receptive as well as generous and energetic, by reconciling in himself *animus* and *anima*, he can be a reconciler in our society too. A far-fetched claim? But one has seen it happening.

NOTES

¹ Usually Father to son, but Isai 49,15 speaks of God's love in mothering terms. Medieval devotion dwelt on the mother-love of God, and of Jesus; cf Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, especially chs 57-63. The same idea underlies the use of the pelican in art: like a mother, Jesus feeds us in the eucharist with his own substance.

² St Ignatius of Antioch seem to have been the first to do so, alluding to Gal 6,14 in his statement, 'My *eros* has been crucified'. Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa follow suit.

³ Lewis, C. S.: *That hideous strength* (London, 1965), p 391.

⁴ The stereotype which attributes 'passivity' to women is false even in ordinary life, since a woman is often the active centre of a family and is characterized by the immediacy of her response to persons and events. It is more misleading still to suggest that the special kind of 'passivity' here evoked is the prerogative of women; it is simply the response of the human person to God.

⁵ The traditional image of the seed as masculine and the welcoming ground as feminine is in some degree misleading, since it is the product of pre-scientific cultures which believed that the male truly generated life, while the female was only a receptacle for it. Modern biology recognizes sperm and ovum as equal contributors, and the new human being as heir to twenty-three chromosomes from the father and twenty-three from the mother. At the empirical level, however, the image has some validity, especially in terms of the different investments of time by the two contributors.

⁶ Another throw-away remark of C. S. Lewis in a similar context is: 'Obedience — humility — is an erotic necessity', *op. cit.*, p 179.