Christianity cannot change or reject God's self-revelation.

Femininity in God's Plan

Though God is never addressed or referred to as "mother" in the Bible's 73 books, there are those who would argue that the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, provides support for the practice of referring to God as "mother." Often cited is a passage from Isaiah in which God is compared to a mother:

But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?" Even these [mothers] may forget, yet I will not forget you (Is. 49:14-15).

This passage is actually a weak defense of "mother" language for God, because Isaiah's comparison is a negative one. Mothers might forget their children, however unlikely, but God will never forget. The other Old Testament passages that these advocates cite merely use similes or metaphors to highlight the tenderness and mercy of God. The larger context of such verses—the rest of the Old Testament—subordinates motherly comparisons to the image of God as Israel's Father and Husband. It is not problematic to compare God to a mother or, indeed, any created thing, because God is the source of all virtues mothers exhibit. But the use of simile and metaphor does not justify equating God with a mother because God is not feminine in relation to His creation.

This does not, in any way, downplay the roles of women or femininity in the plan of God. God's creation, which He willed to redeem through His Own sacrifice (cf. Mk. 16:15; Rom. 8:19-21), is usually considered feminine in relation to God. Israel, God's chosen people, is presented as feminine in the Old Testament (cf. Hos. 2:14-20). The Church, for which Christ the Bridegroom gave His life, is feminine (cf. Eph.

5:25-32). Jesus' mother Mary, considered by Catholics and many others as the greatest of saints, is a woman (Gal. 4:4) who actively received the Word of God through faith (cf. Lk. 1:38). Each human soul, beloved of Christ, is feminine in relation to God, as is beautifully illustrated in the poetry of St. John of the Cross, the Church's Doctor of Mystical Theology. All of Jewish and Christian teaching reveres femininity as something dignified, glorious, and lovable, something God Himself considered "worth dying for." To call God "He" or "Father" does not negate this feminine dignity, because He loves "her" with a perfect, self-giving love.

The Blessed Mother, the greatest of all the saints whom we are called to imitate, said at the wedding feast of Cana, "Do whatever He tells you" (Jn. 2:5). We should humbly heed her words and do whatever He, Jesus Christ, tells us. This includes calling God "Our Father."

Pamphlet 243

God or Goddess?: Our Heavenly Father Knows Best

ISSUE: Is it proper for us to refer to God as our mother?

RESPONSE: When asked how to pray, Jesus told His disciples to refer to God as "Father" (Lk. 11:2). While God is neither man nor woman, Jesus revealed God's "fatherhood" to us. God is Father from all eternity, and becomes "Our Father" through our rebirth in Christ. God has not revealed Himself as "mother," and so it is inappropriate to address Him that way.

DISCUSSION: "Imagine God as your loving mother, she from whom all things are born." At first glance, this may seem to make some sense. God is the Creator, so an argument might be made that He "gave birth" to the world. But God is pure spirit, has no biological sex, and reveals Himself as "Father." It may sound flippant on first hearing, but we can't pray to God as a "she" instead of a "He" because He said so. As will be discussed further, Scripture teaches that "He [God] cannot deny himself" (2 Tim. 2:13), and therefore He will not deny who He is.

Father does know best. He always has; He's God. If you open your Bible to any of the Gospels, it's easy to find Jesus' prayers to His Father. God always refers to Himself in the masculine in both the Old and New Testaments. More specifically, Christ tells us to address God as "our Father" (Mt. 6:9). The examples of Jesus are many. He refers to God as Father at least 170 times in the Gospels. Jesus tells us constantly of His Father in heaven, His Father's kingdom, His Father's love (cf. Mt. 11:27; Mk. 13:32; Lk. 11:02; Jn. 6:32; 8:49). This is not an arbitrary

choice by Jesus. Jesus is God the Son revealing the Father to us in a way that we could never grasp without divine Revelation (cf. Catechism, no. 516).

The Power of a Name

In light of other Jewish and Christian traditions, "because God said so" is not as flippant an answer as it may seem on the surface. Consider the significance of names in our ancient Jewish roots.[1] To know or use a person's name is, according to Old Testament tradition, to have a certain knowledge of that person's identity—because the name and person were intimately connected. A name was not merely a convenient label in Jewish and Christian thought, it was an expression of the person. To change a man's name changed the man's mission and role, and the change required a certain authority over that man. Good examples of this include Abram (Abraham), Jacob (Israel), and Simon (Peter).

Jewish and Christian tradition also teaches us that God Himself taught us how to speak about Him. He revealed His name to us; He referred to Himself with masculine pronouns in both the Old and New Testaments; and Jesus—God the Son—addressed Him as Father. If we claim that we may just as well call God "she" or "mother," we are claiming, contrary to orthodox Judeo-Christian teaching, that we have authority over God to change His identity, mission, and role. This simply is not possible.

Before continuing, a radical distinction must be made. It is common in modern English to use the words "masculine" and "male"—likewise "feminine" and "female"—interchangeably. People have also acquired the habit of using "gender" and "sex" interchangeably. This is not how these words are used in this FAITH FACT. In this FAITH FACT, "masculine" does not mean "male" and "gender" does not mean "sex." God, prior to the Incarnation, is Spirit with no material body and therefore without a biological sex.[2] God is not male—a male human person,[3] and God is not female—a female human person or woman; these words represent the two biological sexes. The biological sexes are a physical expression of gender, which is itself not merely a physical distinction but a principle that reveals something about a person's innate being or nature, and which may also apply to spiritual relationships. In this sense, God is masculine—in gender—in relation to His creation. That is, He is masculine in relation to all created things.

God's Masculinity

Though it may be asserted by some radical feminists, Catholics do not refer to God as Father "because the Roman Church is primarily a male-centered hierarchical structure." God is referred to as Father to express a theological reality, not a social paradigm. The word "father" means "to beget, to make oneself founder, producer, or author of." Christians and Jews believe that, "In the beginning God created . . . " (Gen. 1:1). Christians also believe that the Son is "eternally begotten of the Father." The terms "creator" and "begetter" reveal to us that the Godhead actively produces. It's the reality of God's creative activity, and not a male-centered misconception, that makes it appropriate to refer to God as Father rather than mother. Referring to God with masculine and fatherly terms therefore eliminates many possible theological problems that may arise from using feminine and motherly terms.

To be a mother, a woman needs to be actively fertilized by a man; a man can beget with or without feminine activity.[4] Referring to God as a "mother" may imply that His creation is passively produced, or an emanation from Him.[5] It also calls into question God's aseity: the fact that God is not dependent, and does not have need of any other being. Masculine terminology preserves the fundamental theological truth of God's transcendence: He is not part of the universe, nor the universe a part of Him. He created it from nothing and enters creation from without. God did not have a biological sex prior to the Incarnation; yet in relation to the creation He has made, He is masculine and He assumed humanity as God-man to express this relationship physically.

To call upon "God" as "mother" is not entirely without precedent in the history of religions. There are ancient religions and cultures, e.g., Canaanite, Hellenic, Egyptian, and Persian, which have had goddesses and priestesses as part of their worship. As one of their arguments to advance the use of "inclusive language" in reference to God,[6] some Catholics cite the practice of these ancient religions. However, in the ancient world, Judaism always distinguished itself from surrounding pagan religions in practice and beliefs. Why? Because the pantheism and polytheism of these pagan religions, which would make gods and goddesses either part of the created order or identical with the created order, were not compatible with the truth of Judaism that God is the active author of the created order. The Jews, often accused by moderns of "giving in to cultural conditioning" for using masculine terms were, in fact, counter-cultural in their practice of referring to God strictly as "Father" and with masculine pronouns. If feminine terminology were considered by the Jews, they rejected it for a reason other than mere social norm. It was not theologically compatible with God's self-revelation. There is no precedent in the Jewish religion for referring to God as "mother."[7] Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism, which keeps and clarifies all of Judaism's truths.