TRANSLATING THE DIVINE

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IT IS PROBABLY TRUE TO SAY that God addressed as Father, or King, or Shepherd, God as Lord and Master—God as 'He'—still has pride of place in prayers, public and private, as well as in hymns and readings, in many parts of the Church where English is spoken. Nevertheless, God seen as 'Mother' (for example in Isaiah 61, where God comforts Jerusalem as a mother comforts her child), as 'Woman' (working leaven into bread, seeking the lost coin, as seamstress, as midwife) or as 'Wisdom' (personified as Sophia) is in most places no longer simply acknowledged as an afterthought. So it is also true that, in the English-speaking Church or at least in some parts of it, there is a growing awareness that our images of God can and should be inclusive of both masculine and feminine elements.

There is a link, it seems to me, between giving the feminine dimension its rightful place in theological discourse (by accepting and creating feminine images of God and giving them due attention), and developing and encouraging the use of inclusive language in liturgy, paraliturgy and personal prayer, as a natural consequence of our contemporary recognition of the lacuna that is left when appropriate reference to the feminine is omitted. But does inclusion of the feminine always need to be demonstrated in the actual language we use in our prayers and scriptural translations? In other words, does the language we use in addressing or speaking about God or one another, or the language we use in church services, always need to reflect the equality of the sexes? Indeed, is 'inclusive language' in its widest sense an issue of importance in the Church today? If the answer to these questions is yes, it raises a further question: is inclusive language a matter of concern only in the English-speaking world?

We can and do relate to God personally. Although the Church has consistently held that God has no bodily form and is therefore neither

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feminine nor masculine, neither male nor female, yet it is clear that God, who is transcendent Spirit, and therefore possesses no physical body, can be and is accommodated in human ways of description and self-disclosure. A long Christian tradition, especially marked in Clement of Alexandria (150–215) and Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), had no hesitation in speaking of God in both male and female terms, and in attributing to the Divine characteristics most commonly associated with motherhood. Julian of Norwich confidently followed this tradition: 'As truly as God is our Father,' she wrote, 'so truly God is our Mother'.[1] She even spoke of the Creation in maternal terms: '… we were created by the motherhood of love'.[2] Moving beyond simile to metaphor, for her, God is not 'like' a mother, but rather a good mother in some way resembles God. Happily equating 'him' with 'mother', she wrote: 'That fair and lovely word "mother" is so sweet and kind in itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone except of him who is the true Mother of life and of all things'.[3]

The fact is that physical, relational images expressed in any of the three genders can help us to talk about what Hopkins has called the 'incomprehensible certainty', the mystery that is God.[4] There is a human need to articulate the Divine in a tangible form; for God, though beyond all names and words and symbols, is not for that reason abstract. We are visual people, and we want to picture what God looks like, to 'see' God with our own eyes, to relate to God as persons do. We know that it is not simply a question of physical seeing, but of inner perceptiveness or 'insight', but we know too that we gain insight into God through imagery and metaphor.

Images can be sacramental, they can put us in touch with that inward element which the outward aspect hints at and suggests. They can help us (to paraphrase Francis Thompson) to view the invisible, touch the untouchable, know the unknowable, clutch what is inapprehensible. A 'true' image emerges when these two worlds, the material and the spiritual, in which we live and between which we move, converge. When that happens, the image discloses something of

[1] *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, edited by Edmund Colledge, Jean Leclercq and James Walsh (London: SPCK, 1976), long text, 295.
[2] *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, long text, 297.
[3] *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, long text, 298.
[4] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Selected Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 194.

the invisible, the inaudible, the intangible, the inexpressible. What we 'see' and 'hear' in and through these images may be fleeting, but it is not illusory. The 'touch' of God is real, the 'taste' of God is real; we know this instinctively because, usually in retrospect, we have 'felt' it.

The way we see people affects the way we speak about them and speak to them. So if we have expanded our images of God to include the feminine, our words too must reflect this broadening and enrichment of our theological horizons. It is here that liturgy plays a key role. When faith communities gather in God's name, language is an important vehicle for conveying the sacred, and, as we know, for many centuries the Divine Presence was almost exclusively described in masculine terms. Not only that, but until very recent times, at least in the western languages, humankind was referred to collectively as 'men' and 'brothers' in the secular sphere as in the religious. The masculine context, which seems to have been widely accepted by most men and women from time immemorial, began to be seriously questioned by English speakers only in the mid-twentieth century.

I remember my own awakening on this matter, when, in the mid-1960s, in the wake of Vatican II, a new English-language version of the Roman breviary was published. Entitled *The Prayer of the Church*, it contained the daily offices of lauds, midday prayer, vespers and compline, and was used for many years by religious communities in England. In those days, there were as yet few concessions to inclusive language. I was regularly overcome by a fit of the giggles when, as the response to the intercessions on a particular day, our community of sixteen sisters solemnly recited, 'Lord Jesus, we are your brothers'.

In the years since then, people in English-speaking parts of the world have become sensitised to the whole issue of inclusive language, largely through the efforts of the feminists. And these efforts have borne fruit. For a fair-minded person, once awareness has been raised, it is impossible ever again to say or write the generic 'man' when this refers to the human race, or 'men' when the term equally embraces women and their concerns. To say 'they' or 'he or she', when in the past 'he' would have been thought sufficient, has become common currency in many places. Though some still resist it, there is a far more inclusive feel to the way English is spoken and written today, at least in North America and, perhaps to a lesser extent, in the British Isles.

No doubt women are particularly conscious of this—I, as a woman, certainly am—but it seems worth asking the question: might this be because I am also a native of one of those same English-speaking parts of the world? And if it is, might it arise not so much from English itself as from the fact that that is the language spoken in the areas where, historically speaking, the struggle for the comprehensive recognition of gender and sexual equality has been the most vigorous? Although this is an interesting question, it is not one I would presently feel qualified to answer definitively. However, what I can offer are some reflections, stimulated by a recent stay in continental Europe, on the way that

French, the other language with which I am most familiar, deals with gender and the Divine.

In Brussels, where I spent several months last year, I found, in the francophone church circles I frequented, a different approach to the issue of gender inclusivity in the French language—different, that is, from my experience of this in English. No one seemed to mind using '*l'homme*' or '*les hommes*' to speak of humanity, and God was unashamedly '*le Seigneur*' and '*Il*' or '*Lui*' in prayers and hymns and readings. 'They', which in English is the nearest thing to a gender-neutral word and, though used ungrammatically, is increasingly accepted, has no real equivalent in French. The word for 'they' is specified as '*ils*' or '*elles*', and the masculine form '*ils*' is always used when referring to a mixture of masculine and feminine elements, whether people or things. Certainly, at the beginning of mass and in the *Confiteor*, I noticed that '*frères et soeurs*' was said, and in the intercessions and homilies the priest or reader usually said '*ceux et celles*', as appropriate. But in general my impression was that inclusive language was not a topic of much concern in the French-speaking Christian community of Brussels, and indeed I noticed some of our own French sisters mutely dismissing the question with an eloquent Gallic shrug. With my antennae on the alert after many years of living in England, I could not help but notice this as I spent time in a predominantly French-speaking culture.

Somewhat to my surprise, I found myself untroubled by this apparent lack of inclusivity. Wondering why this should be, I began to ponder on the way God came across in what I had been hearing and reading in French on the liturgical scene. I discovered that almost all the epithets applied to God (in French, '*Dieu*', undeniably a masculine word) are feminine in gender. Some attributes of God such as love ('*amour*') and forgiveness ('*pardon*') are masculine, but by far the majority are feminine. A few examples, and there are very many more, are mercy (*miséricorde*), light (*lumière*), beauty (*beauté*), goodness (*bonté*), compassion (*tendresse*), glory (*gloire*)—even power (*puissance*) and truth (*vérité*), divinity (*divinité*), wisdom (*sagesse*) and transcendence (*transcendance*) are feminine. Are such words an expression, an image, a reflection of the 'femininity' of the Divine? It seems that it is only natural—even inevitable—that, to return to the particular language problem I started with, in this process of making the Divine more 'real' to ourselves, we

will tend to think in a gendered way. And the francophones do it differently from English speakers.

I have to say that at one level my experience in Brussels made me see the whole emphasis on inclusive language in English as quite amusing, even ironic. After all, English, unlike French and some other languages, does not give words gender …. But I also wondered if, on that issue, it is simply that French-speakers are less literal-minded than English-speakers. After all, the French are said to be more interested in ideas and their philosophers are famously less pragmatic in their approach than Anglo-American ones. Overall, I think I came to the conclusion that the distinctive character of French, with its Latin roots, makes the question of inclusive language less pressing, perhaps less relevant to those who use it. God transcends and yet includes what we know as male and female. In French, that transcending and including are somehow very clear.

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