

Reflections on the Peace Pastoral: A Feminine Critique

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A response to the adoption of the historic pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, by the US Catholic Conference of Bishops on May 3, 1983.

Anima/Animus: A Basic Flaw

In the history of Christian conflict, then, is the microcosm of the psychological conflict of *anima* in struggle with *animus*. In every man, most schools of psychology now agree, there is a woman and in every woman a man. The problem is that these secondary selves are seldom encouraged in the human development process. We want our men to be macho, our women to be feminine, despite the fact that research indicates that far from diminishing us, the development of these undersides of the human personality add character components which enrich and enliven. As a result of this suppression of psychological growth, only half the human value system has been institutionalized in major social systems. We want reason, not feelings, in the public aspects of life – in business, in organization, in government. Feminine values of compassion, nurturance and conciliation are domestic, not international, in scope. Nevertheless, attempts to integrate the two human dimensions, *anima* and *animus*, into the military sphere have been constant: there have been rules made for war, agreements on the treatment of prisoners, peace treaties and weapons negotiations. But the rules have been broken; the agreements have been flaunted; the treaties have been ignored and the negotiations blocked. Over and over and over again. Never has the best of both human dimensions, the masculine and the feminine, been brought to the center of world affairs. On the contrary, in a world designed solely by males whose theology has told them that to be male is to be a forceful and superior being, the feminine qualities of the human soul have often been both repressed and resisted as signs of weakness.

Masculinity/Femininity

There is, in other words, both a masculine and a feminine, a confrontative and a cajoling skein in the Christian carder. The feminine strain – the prophets, the psalmist, Job – has tended to trust in God; the masculine strain - the Maccabees, the Zealots, the Crusaders – has often chosen for chariots.

The question is, where are we now as Church? The recent publication of the *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response, A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace* may give us our clearest clue.

To analyze its underlying theology, it is essential to identify the propositions the document makes and to ask what kind of propositions those are: the kind that nurture and create or the kind that conquer and divide?

The tenets of the document are profound. In the first place, it proclaims pacifism as a legitimate and necessary charism in the Church; in the second, it declares the just war theory equally moral but a narrow platform indeed upon which to rest the case for politically legitimate murder. To be “just,” the document reminds us, a war can be fought only to maintain basic human rights for everyone concerned; only after negotiation and compromise; only with the probability of success; only if the damage inflicted is not disproportionate to the good that is accomplished; and only if combatants are discriminated from non-combatants, “so that those who do not make war do not have war made upon them.” From that ground, the document draws conclusions about contemporary American military policy that are both logical and prophetic.

Commonly considered feminine and masculine traits have been identified and defined by psychologists for years now. In simple terms, it is **feminine** but not necessarily female to value and reflect spontaneity, flexibility, submission, intuition, support, feeling, *eros*, and self-sacrifice.

In this culture, on the other hand, it is considered **masculine**, not necessarily male, to value or reflect a sense of order, control, aggressiveness, logic, competition, reason, *logos* and self-development.

Either behavior pattern taken to its extreme is a sign of mental illness. Worse, either behavior pattern applied indiscriminately to the problem of human security is destructive on a grand scale. What is even more important, perhaps is to realize that research is consistent in its report that masculine traits are in general more valued in society than feminine ones, even among women themselves. To choose to act out of feminine values in this society, then, would be at least charismatic, if not absurd. Even women work hard to prove that they have the personality qualities acceptable to the white, male society around them: not too soft, not too caring, not too trusting, not too giving, but tough-minded, shrewd, on top of things.

But the foolish femininity of a Gospel centered on a cross is of the essence of the Christian dispensation. It is not of the essence of the political relations of the Christian world, however. In the document, *The Challenge of Peace*, American Bishops are clearly struggling between the two.

In a world where competition, coercion, and control put collaboration, compassion, and consensus at a premium, the document makes steady strides toward the Jesus whose private life was humble and whose public life was powerless but empowering. The document looks at life through other than masculine eyes. It is important that the document be read that way or else both what is and is not being said may be lost. It seems to me that people who value the feminine dimensions of life and wish dearly that those kinds of values would inform the public as well as the domestic arena will sense a strong feminist perspective in the Bishops’ attempt to bring the Christian Gospel to the nuclear question. At significant moments, the choices between a masculine power paradigm and the feminine principle of peacemaking emerge in the document

with prophetic clarity. The following overview is representative of the struggle but not exhaustive of the feminine values that the work emphasizes.

Spontaneity/Order; Intuition/Logic

In its present form, the document is an admittedly unfinished and, in fact, an initiating exploration of the present military posture and policies of the United States. Without claiming all the answers, in other words, the Roman Catholic Bishops of the country have been moved as a body to the level of a pastoral letter on peace because “the world is at a moment of supreme crisis and the effect of this crisis is evident in the lives of people.” In fact, despite the claims of the Pentagon of the orderliness of tactical weapons on the battlefield, the document disputes the ability of field commanders to make rational and disciplined responses about the use of nuclear weapons by foot soldiers of NATO forces in Europe. Some of these weapons are the size of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima but now called “small” by the military strategists of the nation. The bishops, in other words, doubt the value of order and logic in a situation of such destructive proportions. They ask us to let our intuition be our guide here.

Flexibility/Control

Rather than assert the traditional ideology of American civil religion that it is a moral duty for the world to support or toward capitalism or at least to resist communism, whatever the cost, the document says simply but with far-reaching ramifications: “There is no justification for submitting the human community to the risk of nuclear war,” even though “limited.” Even the threat to use nuclear weapons is unjustifiable, say the Bishops. Clearly, control either through force or through fear is abrogated here and flexibility even in foreign relations is endorsed.

Submissiveness/Aggression

By arguing against counter-population warfare, the legitimacy of threat as a national policy, and the use as well of retaliatory action that would take innocent lives, the pastoral comes down squarely against the male code of making people say “uncle,” not a small step in the erosion of male power play.

Support/Competition

In contrast to the present competitive public policy, the pastoral argues for sufficiency of defenses rather than for nuclear superiority. What it does not argue for is support of the Russian people as people, whatever the paranoia or dishonesty of their own government. The document says quite clearly that “sovereignty is not an absolute value” and calls for sincere support of the United Nations but does not go so far as to imply that the United States itself may have to be content with less, so that others, having more by right, will seek less by force.

Feeling/Reason; *Eros/Logos*

Whatever the arguments for deterrence – that only the arms race keeps the world at peace, that only the willingness to use nuclear weapons prevents their use, that first strike arsenals are logical responses to conflict in a nuclear world – the Bishops argue feelingly that the situation is “neither tolerable nor necessary.” More, the pastoral takes the position for the first time in modern history that pacifism and “selective conscientious objection,” the right of individual’s to make a moral decision about their willingness to participate in this particular war or with this particular weapon, are acceptable responses in a world gone mad with the “logic” and “reason” of military supremacy.

Self-sacrifice/Self-development

By affirming the relevance of the age-old theory of the “just war,” the document asserts the need for a country to negotiate and compromise before war, any kind of war, is waged. What the pastoral does not do is question the notion of unrestricted development itself or the need to sacrifice self for the sake of others even as a nation. Self-sacrifice, however, is not a natural part of the male model. Men overcome weakness; only women accept it.

Weaknesses/Strengths of the Pastoral

There are some feminine values which the document stops short of claiming. For instance, the document does not call for unilateral disarmament, the really feminine ideal; the document does not call for World Government, the ultimate act of national equality and concern; the document does not expose the male value system as the basis of world tension and the very antithesis of the new forms of conflict resolution which it requires be developed. In significant ways, nevertheless, the pastoral is basically feminine. It rejects control, aggressiveness, competition and reason as ultimate and unassailable values of human growth and calls by implication for flexibility, submissiveness, support, feeling, *eros* and self-sacrifice. It is precisely on those grounds that it is being criticized as “foolish,” “incompetent,” “weak”, and even “ridiculous.” Women have known the criticism for eons.

At the same time, no document of the American Catholic Church sounds more like the Gospel unglossed, unwarped, and undistorted.

Strange.
Interesting.
Disturbing.
Hopeful.

