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## Could Christ Have Been a Woman?

An Interview with Father Basil Pennington  
by Simeon Alev

"Could the Virgin Mary have just as easily given birth to a female Savior?" I remember the moment it first occurred to me to ask this question. It was at the end of a rather frustrating conversation with a very conservative Orthodox Christian Father who kept insisting that in his tradition, despite all evidence to the contrary, there are no differences between men and women. The monks in their monasteries and the nuns in their convents, he explained, keep identical hours, do identical work, and say identical prayers. "So, you see?" he challenged me. "Everything is the same!"

I could feel the conviction and the truth in his words and, upon hearing them, I thought I'd perhaps understood the significance of the Apostle Paul's declaration that "in Christ there is neither male nor female." So was it simply a coincidence, then, that "God the Father" was male, that Christ and his twelve apostles were male, and that in most traditional Christian denominations the priests, bishops, deacons, etc., were still exclusively male? What did this historical preponderance of maleness mean, if, as I had been assured, "everything is the same"? More importantly, what was the significance of gender on the Christian path? What were the implications of Christ's divinity, or enlightenment, for his own relationship to the very human facts of maleness and femaleness? As the confident words of this Orthodox elder swirled in my mind, it became increasingly clear that we had to speak with someone who could bring real depth and open-mindedness to these challenging questions.

I immediately thought of Father Basil Pennington, the man who had initially referred me to this passionate spokesman for the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Himself a Catholic priest, Father Pennington has the distinction of having traveled widely to visit the great Spiritual Fathers and Mothers of the Eastern Orthodox Church. He describes his pilgrimages in his anthology, *In Search of True Wisdom*, coauthored with Sergius Bolshakoff. An important contribution to the Catholic ecumenical movement, the book is a moving account of contemporary efforts to rediscover the riches of the Christian mystical and contemplative tradition. According to Father Pennington, these powerful Eastern Orthodox masters represent the last remaining link in an unbroken lineage directly traceable to the early Fathers who helped to shape the Church's views on gender centuries before the allegiances of the Christian world came to be divided between East and West, Constantinople and Rome.

Father Pennington had first come to our attention as someone with firsthand experience of Mount Athos, the fabled Aegean island of Orthodox monasteries on which, for fifteen centuries, no woman has set foot. Legend has it that not even female animals are allowed there. As we began our investigation into Christian views on gender, the "Holy Mountain" represented yet another metaphor for patriarchal Christianity: male God, male Savior, male priesthood—why not a male island? We wanted to ask Father Pennington: Why was the "Holy Mountain" wholly male? He wasted no time in informing me, during one of our initial telephone conversations, that there are Orthodox convents of equal renown throughout the world—though, he admitted, no all-female islands—and that Mount Athos, like the rest of our planet, abounds in fauna of both sexes. Given his obvious appreciation for the dimension of living transcendence embodied in

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Eastern Orthodox practice, we wondered what Father Pennington would have to say about some of the subtle questions our investigation was beginning to raise.

The three-dimensional, larger-than-life Basil Pennington who greeted us at St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts, was rather different from the soft-spoken priest his voice on the telephone had led me to imagine. A huge bear of a man attired in the traditional Cistercian monk's habit—white robe, black tunic and a brown leather belt—he had the snowy hair and full white beard of the archetypal patriarchs he'd met in his travels, and his clear blue eyes radiated dignity, humor and a timeless and palpable peace.

Father Pennington had recently returned to St. Joseph's after seven years in residency at a Cistercian monastery in Lantao, China, during which, as has been his custom for the past three decades, he'd also traveled extensively to lead retreats and workshops on the contemplative practice known as Centering Prayer. Along with Father Thomas Keating, he has become one of the world's best-loved teachers and exemplars of the Western revival of this ancient Orthodox practice. Father Pennington is also, like fellow Cistercian the late Thomas Merton, a prolific writer, with over fifty books to his credit, many of which describe his own direct experience of—and his profound appreciation for—the teachers and teachings of traditions other than his own. We fully expected that a man of Father Pennington's renowned erudition and open-mindedness would have much to say about the relevance of gender and sexual orientation to the pursuit of true spiritual freedom, and we weren't disappointed. It was obvious from the start that his responses were animated by an infinite reverence for the revelation and example of the historical Christ, as well as an earnest conviction that God had introduced Jesus into humanity's midst when He did, and as He did, for very specific reasons. But this only made Father Pennington's independence of thought, and the consistency with which his views reflected his own deeply considered personal experience, all the more striking. Throughout our talk, he demonstrated a breadth of perspective and a flexibility in his approach to this most challenging of subjects that clearly stretched (and sometimes strained against) the limits of his tradition. "These are wonderful questions!" he exclaimed. "Looks like you're going to have a very interesting issue!" How right he was.