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Could Christ Have Been a Woman?

An Interview with Father Basil Pennington
by Simeon Alev

Interviewer: It seems to be the case for most of us that our identification with being men or women is quite primary. Freud went so far as to assert that gender distinctions constitute the core of the individual personality and the basis of our civilization collectively—that our ideas about gender form the very foundation of who we believe ourselves to be and are the very source of the way our civilization is put together. In your view, does this fundamental identification with our gender ultimately inhibit or support the realization of our full potential as spiritual beings?

Fr. Basil Pennington: Theoretically, I'd say it would inhibit it, in the sense that any kind of box we put ourselves in inhibits our growth. We are an expression of the Divine and are open to full divinization, and so anything that tries to define us is going to fall short and has the danger of inhibiting our full blossoming. I would certainly say that if a person is too conscious of his maleness or her femaleness, and if that's become something of the agenda of their life, then it definitely would inhibit their spiritual development. It can become part of that project of building up the false self. In my own experience, I don't believe I personally think of myself as a man, or as gender-specific, and I don't know if I ever did. But just looking at today's advertising, I think you can see that there's a lot of playing at what it means to be a "real" man or a "real" woman, and that's all usually fairly superficial. So obviously, if you're putting a lot of energy and intentionality on that, then the spiritual dimension is going to be lost.

Interviewer: You said that you may actually never have thought of yourself specifically as a man?

Fr. Pennington: Well, I don't think I meant that exactly, but that I've tended to give primacy to my being. And yes, perhaps I have thought of myself specifically as a man at times, but that's only to say that at times I celebrate my maleness and feel very happy that I have a male body. And it's not just physical, either; I think there's a whole attitude toward life that comes with that. But my point is that it's more a matter of just being who I am. And I must say that I don't like categorizing at all—you know, "These are female characteristics; those are male characteristics."

Interviewer: In contemporary society, though, these ideas about what it means to be a "good" or "real" man, or a "good" or "real" woman, tend to exert a very powerful influence on most of us. And we generally experience a lot of insecurity about whether or not we measure up to our gender ideal, and tend to put a lot of energy into trying to live up to it. Spiritual liberation teachings, by contrast, have perennially stressed that we have to be willing to give up all of our preconceived ideas and live in a state of perpetual "unknowing," a condition of genuine openness to the discovery of what is. One of the things we're exploring in this issue is what this kind of "unknowing" would mean in relation to our gender identity. Would it be possible, for example, for an individual to come to a point in their spiritual development where they're completely free from any fixation on gender differences, superficial or otherwise, while at the same time feeling no need to avoid or deny whatever real differences may actually exist?

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Fr. Pennington: Yes, and I think that's where the real challenge lies. If we rise to a sufficient level of humanness, or Christification, we realize that there is essentially neither male nor female. But at the same time we find that this somehow gives us a larger perspective on our body's reality—the reality of our maleness or femaleness—and the particular emotions and sensitivities that go along with it. Here at the monastery, for example, we live in a male community rather than a mixed community, and I'd say that as a result, the men here are largely free from any need to prove that they're "real" men or that they're "masculine." But the other side of that is that in having so little contact with women, this whole perception of the differences between male and female can get a bit distorted. We're having much more contact with our nuns now than we did in the past, and it turns out that most of the men are finding that very enriching. In fact, just this past Sunday morning one of the monks was talking about the three large group meetings we've had here this past year—three occasions where monks and nuns came together—and how these meetings had given him a much stronger and clearer grasp of his true identity as a monk. Being with the nuns, he said, had helped to bring him into a fullness of self-understanding that was truly beyond male and female. We were just doing various things together—discussing basic problems, concerns, challenges and so on—but it freed the monks from some of their lingering presuppositions about the differences between men and women because we were meeting in a fuller human and divine realm. And so all those ideas just got left behind, that was all—they just got left behind! At the same time, I think we were probably more conscious in the end about some of the real differences. I mean the nuns—well, nuns do things differently from monks, you know!

Interviewer: For example?

Fr. Pennington: Well, I don't know if we stopped to think about it all that much, but there's definitely something . . . a greater delicacy about things, I guess. They challenged the monks to be a little more spruce, a little more careful, not so rough in their expressions—and to behave a little bit more like gentlemen than we usually do. And while, again, I don't like to generalize, having listened to their discussions, I'd also say that the nuns have certain insights, or have generally more of a feel precisely for the things that are felt, while the men tend to be a little more intellectual. Anyway, the point is that while there was a growing experience that in the things that really mattered there wasn't a difference, at the same time there was also an enrichment. And that enrichment was due to an appreciation of our tendencies to come at things somewhat differently, and to the challenge, through recognizing those differences, of coming to see our reality more integrally.

Interviewer: In many mystical or contemplative teachings, spiritual liberation is described as the transcendence of opposites. Because we're talking about being in a spiritual environment in which all kinds of opposites are recognized and gone beyond, I'd be interested to hear about your own experience of what transcendence means in relationship to gender. What does it actually mean for an individual to transcend gender differences while still inhabiting a male body or a female body?

Fr. Pennington: Well, again, these kinds of differences are a part of the journey, but they mean different things at different points. I would say, for example, that when you're starting out, they're quite apparent, and that you're also pretty conscious of being male or female. I was a model before I entered the monastery, so I was very conscious of my body and my appearance and things of that sort, and especially before I wore the habit I'm sure I tended to stand out as a very present male in some ways. But the habit takes a little bit of that away from you; it's kind of

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like you don't know what's under there, and in letting go of that male image you take on a new image. You're much less concerned about the body, and in fact the purpose of many of the monastic disciplines is to put the body down, in a sense—the fasting and the not getting as much sleep and so on. And in the early days, when I first entered the monastery, we were still very much in a more primitive tradition of monasticism where cleanliness was not considered next to godliness by any means. You just didn't bother with it; you'd take a shower and change your clothes once every couple of weeks, as was the practice of the poor. We did a lot of hard manual labor too—building this monastery, for one thing. We really worked very hard.

So the idea, you see, was to subdue the whole physical side, and I think the gender side went with that a good bit, too. We just didn't think about it; we were on a spiritual quest, looking at and moving into transcendence. But it seems to me that, after years of becoming more and more spiritually attuned and more in touch with the divine reality, as your spiritual consciousness and your awareness of the Divine in everybody and everything grows, at some point you come back to an appreciation of your body and what you could call your "maleness." And while a lot of that is socially or culturally defined and is certainly quite open to and in the process of evolution, it's still, as I said, a part of that reality that you've become more aware of. And because you're more in touch with it, you can more easily distinguish the essential from the superficial.

Interviewer: You seem to be saying that at a certain point you start to have a more direct experience of gender rather than one that's filtered through all of your ideas about it.

Fr. Pennington: Yes, exactly. Because the reality of the situation is that God did make men and women. And I am a man and this is what He made me, and so I celebrate this—who I am, physically, psychologically, emotionally and spiritually.

Interviewer: It's been very interesting for us, in exploring with various people this question of going beyond gender identification, to find out how many different ideas there are about what this kind of attainment might look like. Some believe, for example, that what it would ideally lead to is a condition in which sex and gender aren't really an issue anymore at all—that if you were to encounter someone who truly embodied freedom in relation to gender, you would find yourself face to face with an individual who had no maleness or femaleness to speak of, no particular sexual characteristics, or perhaps a kind of perfect blend of the two.

Fr. Pennington: Yes, well, I wonder if I'm really comfortable with that because, as I was saying, as you grow spiritually, you begin to realize the divineness in your maleness or femaleness, and I don't think you'd want to lose that. If you're a man, it's because you were called to be male. That being said, you wouldn't want to go along with any of the superficial stuff that people say is "male" and "female" but, at the same time, you wouldn't want your freedom from those ideas to in any way inhibit you from celebrating the fullness of the true maleness in a man and the true femaleness in a woman. So the point, I think, is that if you're a man or if you're a woman, then you're still a man or a woman when you come into your fullness, and so you celebrate that. God likes variety, you know, and hopefully there always will be variety. I personally believe that we want the full richness of the human person there, which is ultimately still male or female because that's the way we're made—and that's good, and that's complementary, and I think that in some way it offers another vehicle for the Divine to express the fullness of the Divine. There is something precious about the differences between men and women in that they uniquely express something of the Divine, and, rather than wanting to lose that, I think you want to get more and more in touch with it! Why? Because that's when you become so aware of how much everything you've thought or said or heard about "male" and

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"female" is really not it. It's superficial stuff, it's cultural stuff, and you just don't want to get caught by any of that.

But it's very hard, you see, because we are so culturally conditioned. It's very hard for us to find any articulation that really touches that realization, or to find any kind of expression of it that really satisfies us, especially when we're trying to talk about what's beyond the physical. The spiritual dimensions of my being that are coordinated with the fact that I have a male body, with the fact that my wholeness is male in form, are very hard to articulate without getting caught up in that cultural conditioning, and I don't want to get caught there.

Interviewer: Early Christian interpretations of Genesis seem to support the notion of a disparity between the capacities of men and women for spiritual attainment. For example, in I Corinthians the Apostle Paul states, "For man was not made from woman but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman but woman for man." And religious historian Elaine Pagels writes that according to Paul, like Eve before them, "women, being naturally gullible, are unfit for any role but raising children and keeping house." And some of the writings of the early Church Fathers state that man alone, and not woman, was created in the image of God. What is your understanding of the significance of the Genesis story?

Fr. Pennington: The other day I was writing a letter on the computer, and you know how the keys get away from you every once in a while? Well, I suddenly realized I had the date up there as "1999," and I just stopped for a second and thought about that. You know, that year is going to come, and people are going to look back and think we belonged to the primitive Church in the year 2000. I mean, what's 2000? It puts a lot of things in perspective if you just sit with that a little bit. Yes, we've seen a good bit of evolution of human consciousness since the time of the primitive revelation or the development of the Hebrew/Christian scriptures. And while we can be grateful that we've got all those centuries behind us, we should also remember that we may still be a lot more primitive than we think we are.

Now in the writings of Saint Paul, which have had an enormous impact on Christian thinking, he affirms very simply that in Christ there's neither male nor female, and that the primary goal is becoming this divinized person that is Christ. But then, secondarily, much of what he says is directed to the prevailing social climate of his time—"How do you handle this situation?" and so on—in the context of that social climate. That's why he'd tell slaves how to behave, and masters how to behave, and lay all sorts of strictures on the way men and women were supposed to function in the Roman household or the Hebrew household that are very difficult for us to hear in such a vastly different cultural context. But if we accept all this from the point of view that God meets people where they are, and that the divine dimension in us is always growing, then suddenly the challenge becomes: Are we really hearing the divine consciousness as it's coming forth in our time? I mean, that's not easy either—we've all had acculturation, too. I think the greatest challenge for the human race now is to fully accept the equality of men and women and the fullness of humanity and divinization that we share. I think that is what the divine consciousness is calling us to at this point in our evolution.

Interviewer: I'm sure many people would agree that is what has to happen, but some would no doubt also assert that a critically important part of that process involves addressing the repercussions of these kinds of sexist ideas having been propagated for so many centuries. For example, feminists such as Mary Daly cite the traditional notion of "God the Father" as quintessential proof that Christianity is really the source of an oppressive global patriarchy. They publicly revile the Church—and particularly the Catholic Church because it has so much power—as a universal oppressor of women. Now, some people say, "Well, that's too extreme, and it's not

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really productive to focus on all that in such a negative way." Yet, when I asked your friend Father Panteleimon, a charismatic elder in the Greek Orthodox Church, whether the Virgin Mary could just as easily have given birth to a female Savior as a male one, he dismissed that notion as impossible, unnatural and absurd, citing the doctrine of one of the early Church Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa, that since Eve's fall from grace, woman's reproductive role has rendered her constitutionally unfit for spiritual leadership.

Fr. Pennington: Well, I certainly would not agree with that. Father Panteleimon and Christian Orthodoxy as a whole—though again I probably shouldn't generalize—say that everything stopped with the Seventh Council. What he's saying there is much more in line with the early Patristic outlook.

But at the same time, as I said, we still have an awful lot of cultural conditioning that's holding us back enormously, and just to fill that out a little, the truth of the matter is that most of us men still wouldn't exactly want a woman to be our boss. So I often say that the first thing women have to do is to help men to grow up so that men are able to be equals. The reason we men try to keep women down is that in reality we're scared to death of them—because when they are truly empowered, and we're not, well, what's going to happen?

Of course I certainly don't think that the physiological differences, as you just quoted there from Father Panteleimon, pose any kind of problem. And what may come out of those differences isn't, in the integral person, a problem either. As I said before, I think they're a complementarity and an enrichment. And I certainly don't think that they dictate any kind of hierarchy, either. But one of the great challenges that the Catholic Church has, precisely because it's Catholic, or "universal"—unlike, say, the Episcopal Church, in which the national church in the United States could do one thing and the one in Indonesia could do another—is that there is a universal teaching authority and a kind of moving together. Now if you've traveled around the world as I have, you're especially aware that this whole evolution of consciousness with regard to the equality of men and women is at very different places in different countries. In some countries, they're just not ready for it at all. And so the Catholic Church is like a good teacher who meets the students where they are and only takes them to the next step they can master because the teacher knows that if they're too far out in front of their students, they'll lose them. And when you're talking about a class that is universal, or even just one parish for that matter, you just have to try to get a sense of what the next step is for the group as a whole. I was talking to a parish priest yesterday and he was telling me that when you get up in the pulpit, and you've got people in that parish from one end of the spectrum to the other, somebody's going to damn just about anything you say.

You know, the Catholic Church took quite a leap at the Second Vatican Council and changed a lot of things for the first time in four hundred years, and that really has stretched and strained a lot of people. So moving ahead with the women's thing has been a matter of doing it gently. Women have moved into the sanctuary and are taking new roles as lectors, ministers of the eucharist, parish counsels, officers of the diocese and so on, so gradually people are getting used to that. But we're in a country where this evolution is perhaps the most advanced and yet, even here, we still see all the drag that's around! And when you go to a country that's been cut off, like China, say, it's quite clear that they have a long, long way to go.