

Could Christ Have Been a Woman?

An Interview with Father Basil Pennington
by Simeon Alev

[continued]

Interviewer: Is it conceivable to you that Christ could have been a woman?

Fr. Basil Pennington: In his time and place? No. I mean, look, he had a hard enough time as a man! Could he today? Well, yes, if God had chosen this as the time and place for the Incarnation, I think it could have been possible—though I still suspect he probably would have chosen to be male because the contemporary world is still far from being a place where a female Incarnation would be universally accepted. You know, we've seen women in different countries rise to the highest position, but that's often because they've stepped into a male expectation, or what would be called a "male" way of looking at things. And I think the great thing will be when women, as women, can really lead and help society to move ahead. But we're still a good way from that as far as I can see, in this country and probably every other country in the world.

Interviewer: Sociological considerations aside, though, is there anything to Panteleimon's insistence that there is some inherent limitation on a woman manifesting an attainment equal to Christ's?

Fr. Pennington: No. And our Lord used the feminine image when he could—like a mother hen gathering her chicks to her breast and so on. He was very comfortable with men and women. He wasn't afraid to have John resting at his bosom, and at the same time, he wasn't afraid of letting Mary Magdalene anoint his feet and kiss them — which was an enormously sensuous and exciting experience! But he had to work in the time and place he chose to come to, which was a very pivotal place inhabited by a Semitic culture, which, because of a certain simplicity and earthiness that it had, made it possible for his message to be absorbed into every other world culture and philosophy. That's where and when he chose to come, and in that situation I don't think there would have been much hope, as a woman, of his fulfilling the mission that he'd set for himself.

Interviewer: Is it your impression that, as a woman, Christ would have been a different sort of Savior?

Fr. Pennington: I would say yes. Because Christ expressed himself in a very complete way, and so because he was a man, there was a maleness about that expression that, if he'd been a woman, probably would have been different. Even though he tried to use feminine images, I think that, being a man of his time and place, he was probably more comfortable with male images. And so he says, for example, "What father among you would give his child a serpent when he asked for a fish?" If he had been a woman, I think he might well have said, "What mother among you would do that?" He was more comfortable with praying, "Our Father." In fact he almost always spoke of God as "Father"—and if he'd been a woman, he might well have spoken much more of God as "Mother" and used more

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womanly images. Not that he didn't use them; I mean, he complemented the story of the good shepherd immediately with that of the housewife who'd lost a coin, or the story of the farmer selling the seed with that of the woman selling the leaven. So he tried as much as he could, given his people and their situation, to bring out both sides. But he was obviously a man and probably would not have chosen twelve men as his key group, with the women just kind of serving in the background, if he had been a woman.

Interviewer: In my talk with Father Panteleimon, he went on to assert that this seemingly discriminatory aspect of the Christian tradition — the Twelve Apostles and the priests all being male — is in fact inspired and sanctioned by God "Himself," and that allowing the tradition to be toyed with by misguided reformers who want to ordain women can only have disastrous consequences. But some liberal voices within the Catholic Church, such as yours, insist that traditional Christianity's attitude toward women is not sanctioned by God but has its roots in the patriarchal ambience of the Church's early history and now can be modified to suit our more socially enlightened times.

Fr. Pennington: You know, our present Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, is a very sharp person, and I wonder if he wasn't sending that very message to the Church and his people when he spoke on this a couple of years ago. According to Catholic belief, you know, he has the power to speak infallibly, but very rarely has it ever been invoked. And when people have tried to push him to speak infallibly about this particular subject, as well as about other things, he's always refused — so that's already a message. But it was even more significant to me that two weeks after his very sweet apology for the way his predecessors had treated Galileo, in which he said publicly that they had failed because they'd taken the scriptures too literally, he spoke out against this question of ordaining women, himself explicitly arguing, just as Father Panteleimon does — from a very literal interpretation of scripture — that this male-only priesthood is simply the way it's always been and always will be. Now, again, he's a sharp man and I don't think he was missing that. I think he was sending a message that said, in effect, "Just as they were too sure about Galileo back then, we're a little too sure about this thing now. Just wait around, boys, and you'll see." In other words, I think that by using the very same arguments he himself had said were wrong in the Galileo case, he was saying to us, "Hey, this could change, too!" And not only that it could change but that it will!

Interviewer: I wanted to ask you about some other models for the kind of freedom we've been speaking about in relationship to gender because there are different approaches to this. For example, there are many spiritual practitioners who see the differences between men and women as being solely the expression of cultural conditioning, and believe that any gender-based conditioning must, like all forms of conditioning, be transcended if we're to become truly free. Certain religious traditions, on the other hand, adhere to a kind of "tantric" model in which there are strictly defined spheres and roles said to be divinely ordained for men and for women. In Orthodox Judaism, for example, the men devote themselves to study and prayer and the women find their spiritual fulfillment in bearing children and maintaining the sanctity of the home. And, according to this paradigm, it's only by each sex giving themselves wholeheartedly to the fulfillment of their respective roles, and then coming together in their differences, that divine union can be achieved and God's will can become manifest on earth. Similarly, in more eclectic or secular circles, a number of contemporary thinkers and practitioners have asserted that women are generically suited to pursue a path of immanence that involves, as in the Jewish model, deeply connecting to their bodies and to the cycles of nature and

finding the sacred in the ordinary events of daily life, while men tend to seek for the transcendence of all that is worldly and to look beyond themselves for the sacred mystery that lies at the source of all existence. Do you feel that this notion of distinct paths for men and women holds true in practice?

Fr. Pennington: Some of those distinctions are certainly true. I mean, a woman will find holiness in bearing a child, while a man will never find holiness in carrying a child in his womb for nine months. So there are some things that are just realities, and they will remain. Others — like study or prayer, for example — well, I don't see how you could put them specifically in a male or female category. But the point, I suppose, is that even if we were to go beyond all social conditioning, there is still some difference that remains, as I was trying to say before, and what that difference is isn't always as easy to understand as the physiological capacity to bear a child. The way men pass on life and the way women pass on life are different, and because that is a tremendous expression of divine energy going through us, it certainly is a part of our innate holiness, and the significance of that difference is easy to see. And, when you come to things like immanence and transcendence, there may ultimately be some difference there too — something that reflects itself in the physiological way we each pass on life. But having said all that, I'd still want to be very cautious because I think that our socialization, our acculturation, would tend to see concepts like transcendence and immanence too imaginatively — or too physiologically based — and also because I think that transcendence and immanence ultimately come together. There may be more naturalness to a woman moving through the immanent and into the transcendent, or to a man moving out of the transcendent and into the immanent — that may be so. And that may not be just sociological, either. But when people make these sorts of generalizations, the tendency is so to debase these things — if that's not too strong a word — that I would be very cautious in saying anything like that. I'd want to put a lot of signs around it that say, "Be careful here," because certainly the indwelling Divine, once a man really goes on the spiritual path, is as strong in him as it is in a woman, even though physiologically he functions differently. And at the same time, women can certainly be as transcendent and ecstatic as any man. So I would be hesitant to make too much of that.

Interviewer: Continuing in this vein, in our time there are also many people who view their own experience of gender or sexual preference as the very basis of their spiritual path. For example, there are women who worship the Goddess; there are men who champion a distinctly male spirituality; and there are many gays and lesbians who regard their sexual orientation as requiring unique forms of practice and worship. In fact, some advocates of a distinctly "gay spirituality" have even suggested that because the male and female polarities are theoretically more fully integrated and balanced in homosexuals, theirs is an inherently superior form of spiritual practice. For all of these individuals, gender and sexuality are seen as central to the path and as giving rise to fundamentally different paths for men and women, homosexuals and heterosexuals. What do you see as the advantages and limitations of a view that focuses on gender identification or sexual orientation as a path in itself to spiritual freedom?

Fr. Pennington: I would say that the differences are not that fundamental. What's much more fundamental is that we are all in some way expressions of the Divine Being and Life. Of course it's a reality that we come out male or female, but once again, those are secondary. They're a part of reality, such that when you come into the fullness of who you are in God, and the expression of God that you are, they'll still be there. But sexual orientation is even farther down the road and also a little

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more problematic than gender, because even though we pride ourselves on having learned and understood so much about sex, I don't think there's anybody who can tell you what the basis of sexual orientation really is. And I think that ultimately we're all bisexual anyway, which makes me even more hesitant to speak about sexual orientation as being a fundamental part of one's spirituality. So while I have no doubt, as I said, that the male/female distinction is an essential though not a fundamental part of becoming fully, integrally divinized, I'd be much more hesitant to say that in order to be that full expression you're going to be gay or straight. And, as I said, ultimately I think that a person who's really free knows that they're bisexual—that we all have the capacity to relate to our sexuality in these different ways.

Interviewer: What do you mean, exactly, when you say that "we're all bisexual"?

Fr. Pennington: It was established by the Kinsey Report, I think, that virtually nobody is right in the middle of that spectrum, or totally at one end or the other, but that it's a question of dominance. But most men are so afraid of their homosexual side that they totally ignore it or repress it if they can. And I think that many gay men and women have been so hurt by homophobia that they repress their heterosexual side—though probably not as strongly as many heterosexuals tend to repress their homosexual side. All I'm really trying to say, though, is that both elements are there in everyone to varying degrees.

Interviewer: So in terms of a person who's liberated realizing that they're "bisexual," what that would mean is not necessarily that they would practice bisexuality, only that they would be fully aware of the potential within themselves to be both heterosexual and homosexual?

Fr. Pennington: Yes. I think that someone who's really free knows that they can relate with others in whatever way is appropriate and that they're not bound by a particular orientation that would make it impossible to relate with others in one way or the other.

Interviewer: And what about the notion, prevalent in some gay spiritual circles, that being homosexual makes one more predisposed to the Divine, or more open in some way to direct contact with the Divine?

Fr. Pennington: Well, if you're speaking about the human race as a whole, many people would probably accept the generalization that women are more disposed to spiritual or contemplative life and, based on that generalization, it could seem that those men who are more comfortable with their so-called "feminine side" would be more disposed to spiritual life than those who aren't. But again, I think that's all still kind of superficial because how much of that is sociological acculturation is difficult to say. To the extent that gay men tend to be more gentle and maternal and all those sorts of things, they might be more disposed to spirituality. But you see, we've labeled those characteristics as "feminine" without knowing whether, in their nature, they really are.

Interviewer: In the Christian mystical tradition, how is Christ himself thought to be a model for true spiritual freedom in relation to gender?

Fr. Pennington: Some people would respond to that, I suppose, by saying that Christ was obviously very comfortable with both men and women and had no problems there, but to me that's also kind of a superficial answer. Obviously it's true and obviously he's modeling something that we should try to follow. But I think there's also something deeper there, because we know Christ not only through the scriptures and the tradition, but also through our own personal experience. And through one's personal experience, one can discover for oneself what a total reverence Christ has for the person, and for what it is that is the quintessence of the human person, which is the power to love and the power of free choice. This is an expression, in a way, of the humility of God. He makes his creature and then lets his creature decide what he's going to do; he can tell God to go to Hell if he wants to, and God will let him! So in Christ there is a profound reverence for the person, and that is absolutely equal for every person, male or female, and God expresses himself in this essence of all-embracing love as much in men as in women. It's only a limitation in our way of seeing or listening that makes us think it could be different for one than it is for the other — although there's also something in the male and female expression of the Divine that is different. And God uses that difference. So Christ would have been totally respectful of that as well. He chose to be male, for example—and I think he celebrated his maleness—but then he created a specific role for Mary, who was female. He could have just come to earth in a human body, but he chose a woman and did the greatest thing that he could with that woman, which was to let her be, in the fullest possible sense of the word, his "mother". So in these ways, and through these differences, I think that he was trying to express something — a reality so full, so beyond words, that our language cannot begin to describe it. And this is why scripture is written so much in parables and stories and mythology, because the message it's conveying is far beyond the words. But at the same time, given that there is an equal capacity in male and female for full and authentic expression of the Divine, I think that feminists, and women in general, may have a real beef against God in the fact that he did choose to come as a man. I mean, they could always say, "Well, why didn't God do it the other way? Why didn't he come as a female and have a father or something?" Well, that's true, but — God's free! He can do anything he wants to do! In the end, I think you've got to say that, too. I mean, God is God, you know? But I can certainly see their point.