

## The Authority of Women

**MONICA MIGLIORINO MILLER**

Many theologians, especially feminists, consider the Church Fathers the last place to look for any positive statements on the authority of women.

Mary Daly, an arch-feminist theologian who teaches at Boston College, accused the Church of misogyny in her book *The Church and the Second Sex* by copiously quoting the Fathers on the nature of women.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, a well-known feminist theologian, totally rejects the New Eve theology of Irenaeus, even though it is one of the most positive views of women taught by any Church Father. For Ruether the teaching that Mary is the New Eve is still “theology on male terms” which scapegoats women as the cause of sin in the world and promotes a male tendency to divide spirit from matter. (1)



The Church Fathers are a special and beloved target of feminist rage. It must be admitted that these early thinkers are not well known for their support of women's liberation. Most Church Fathers (those great bishops and theologians of the first five hundred years of Christianity) were heavily influenced by Neoplatonism, a radically dualist philosophy that associates men with good and women with evil.

In the Neoplatonic view, men represent spiritual realities — God, the soul, the intellect — realities that are permanent and unchanging and thus good. Evil is all that has fallen away from the spiritual realm, namely the earth and material existence. Women, by their nature, are in this fallen realm. There can never be inherent peace between the two realms. They are inherently antagonistic.

In a perfect world all human beings would be male. Better yet, there would be no sex at all. Sexual difference is the first and most obvious indication that something is wrong with the world. In Platonic thought, a world filled with difference is fragmented. It has no unity because it is fallen from the One, the monist god of unity in whom the fragmentation of temporal existence is swallowed.

Order in such a disunified and antagonistic world is achieved through domination and suppression by the superior force, the male, over the inferior force, the female. The elimination of chaos is accomplished by the rational male's control over the irrational female. And so this totally false and unnecessary battle of the sexes continues even to the present day.

In the time of the Church Fathers, this dominant pagan philosophy, with its degrading view of women, comes up against the faith of the Catholic Church, which teaches that men and women share equal dignity and are partners in redemption. In the writings of the Fathers, Greek philosophy is not obscuring Christian

revelation; the Church's revolutionary teaching is slowly and painfully displacing the dominant philosophical view that women are inferior to men.



### **Redemption dependent on a woman**

When the Fathers base their writings on the revelation of Christ, a view of women begins to emerge which recognizes their essential role in the fulfillment of the world's redemption in Christ. This redemption is dependent upon women — a dependency rooted in the created goodness of women.

Augustine taught that the salvation of the world was historically accomplished by a covenant between Christ and Mary. Indeed, Augustine defended the honor of Mary against the heretics of his day who denied the goodness of the body and the female sex.

The Gnostics denied that God in Christ could or would have anything to do with a woman, much less be conceived and given birth to by one! Such a thing was utterly scandalous to them, but not so for Augustine, who wrote:

Those likewise are to be detested who deny that our Lord Jesus Christ had Mary as His mother on earth. That dispensation did honor to both sexes, male and female, and showed that both had a part in God's care, not only that which he assumed, but that also through which he assumed it, being a man born of a woman. (2)

For Augustine the Church is the New Eve. He affirms that femininity is part of the order of redemption. Augustine's exegesis on Psalm 127 states that salvation is centered on a pair, Christ and His Church, prefigured in the first couple. Consider this beautiful quotation:

But where did He sleep? On the cross. When He slept on the cross, He bore a sign...He fulfilled what had been signified in Adam: When Adam was asleep, a rib was drawn from him, and Eve was created; so also while the Lord slept on the cross, His side was transfixated with a spear, and the sacraments flowed forth, whence the Church was born. The Church, the Lord's Bride, was created from His side, as Eve was created from the side of Adam. But as she was made from his side no otherwise than while sleeping, so the Church was created from His side no otherwise than while dying. (3)

Augustine gives no indication that one sex is superior to the other. The fact that God entered human history as a male does not mean the male sex is superior. Through the Incarnation God acknowledges both sexes. Moreover, both sexes are actively involved in the world's redemption. Augustine is not afraid to affirm that Christ is dependent on Mary.

It is important to note that Christ does not effect salvation alone. Salvation is effected through the Church, His Bride, who exemplifies all that is feminine. In Augustine's theology there is a sense in which the feminine Church is a co-cause of salvation.

The Church, for instance, gives birth to Christ's children. Eve, who bore children in suffering, is the sign of the Church, who bears children spiritually, specifically as Christ's Bride. As a mother she suffers over her children, groaning over them. In this way the Church is the true "Mother of all the living" who looks forward to the time when her children shall rise from the dead and all "pain and groaning shall pass away". (4)

Augustine does not disparage what is feminine. Indeed, salvation is accomplished through the feminine. His theology implies, at least, that an equal dignity exists between the male Christ and the female Church. This is, of course, the "whole Christ," the *Christus totus*, the Head and the Body, *sponsus* and *sponsa*.

Jerome also taught that the female sex participates in a special way in the order of redemption — in a way that is equal in importance and dignity to the male existence of Christ. In Jerome's letter to Eustochiam, salvation is presented as dependent on a woman. The "rod of Jesse" is the Virgin Mary. The flower of the rod is Jesus. (5) The passage speaks of a certain equivalence between Christ and His Mother, and Jerome implies that Christ is dependent upon the human Mary.



### **Mary and Christ: Exemplars of virginity**

Furthermore, Christ alone does not exemplify virginity. Christ and His mother share the dignity of virginity: "For me virginity is consecrated in the persons of Mary and Christ." (6) Jerome does not hesitate to compare Mary in her fruitful virginity to God Himself because she conceived and gave life without a loss of her purity.

Irenaeus, as no other Church Father, developed a theology of Mary as the New Eve. In *Against Heresies* he teaches that salvation is accomplished by a woman. The bodily presence of Christ is dependent on the body of Mary. (7) Christ is the New Adam only through the obedience of the New Eve: "Inasmuch as He has a preexistence as a saving Being, it was necessary that what might be saved should also be called into existence, in order that the being who saves should not exist in vain. In accordance with this design, Mary the virgin is found obedient, saying, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to thy word.'" (8)

Mary's obedience does not mean that she is just God's passive instrument. Her "yes" is causative of salvation, as Eve's disobedience was the source of man's damnation. As Irenaeus states, "But Eve was disobedient, for she did not obey when as yet a virgin. And even as she, having indeed a husband, Adam, but being nevertheless as yet a virgin...was made the cause of death, both to herself and to the entire

human race, so also did Mary, having a man betrothed [to her] and being nevertheless a virgin, by yielding obedience became the cause of salvation, both to herself and the whole human race." (9)

The Fathers do not reject the feminine as something unworthy of serving as God's vehicle of grace. Woman is placed at the very center of salvation according to God's design for Incarnation. Mary's consent to become the Mother of God undoes the cords of death forged by Eve's disobedience. Through a woman grace bursts forth into the world. In this way Mary is a co-redemptrix with Christ.

Pagans of Augustine's time utterly rejected any idea that the human body would rise from the dead and participate in salvation. Most certainly the female body, so tied to the earth and far from the spiritual power of God, would not rise from the dead.

Augustine, whom feminist theologians especially hate among the Fathers, defended the female body as being nature, not vice. Being nature, it is made by God, and thus it is good. The female body is not only nature, but it has a sacramental value: The woman from the beginning of creation prefigured the Church in union with Christ. God created both the man and the woman. "He then who created both sexes will restore both." (10)

As God "built up" Eve from the rib of Adam, Christ builds up His Church. For Augustine a woman's body stands for the Body of Christ. Christ has built this Body, and the unity between Him and the Church is marital, prefigured by the marriage between Adam and Eve. Augustine's theology of the resurrection of the body rests on the sexually symbolic meaning of the body, first given in Adam and Eve. It is ultimately fulfilled when the body is raised from the dead. Augustine breaks with Neoplatonism when he unequivocally affirms that the significance of gender is not erased in the eschaton (end times). Redemption means that both sexes, imbued with religious meaning, shall be raised up.

Augustine's teaching demonstrates that the equality of man and woman is part of the Church's tradition, and the Fathers assert this truth despite their Neoplatonic tendencies. They teach that women contribute to and are a necessary part of the salvation of the world.

The authority of women is recognized especially in the covenant of marriage. At a time when women had few rights regarding marriage, the Fathers upheld the woman's right to consent to marriage. Like men, women should be free to choose their vocation in response to God's call. A woman could not be compelled by her family, even by her father, to marry against her will. Clement of Alexandria taught that a man could not force a woman to marry him or love him. (11)

Ambrose, in his work *Concerning Virgins*, supported the Roman Law which allowed women to choose their own husbands or to choose perpetual virginity. He also severely criticized the dowry system because it treated women like merchandise to be sold for a price. "Slaves are sold under more tolerable conditions and possess more dignity, as they can often choose their own masters, but if a maiden chooses it is an offense, if not an insult." (12)

A woman's freedom and authority are most clearly defended by the Fathers in her choice to be a consecrated virgin. Young women were even instructed to defy angry parents. They were not to be concerned about losing the security of their home or their father's inheritance. (13)

In Jerome's letter to Eustochiam he taught that consecrated virginity is something that, by God's design, can only be freely given. Mothers should not hold their daughters back from this choice. Indeed, the daughter's vow bestowed a new status on her mother as she becomes "now the mother-in-law of God." (14) The freedom and authority to choose consecrated virginity has its preeminent model in Mary. Such a choice could never be imposed. (15)



## **Marriage**

The Christian teaching on marriage as a sign of the New Covenant mandates personal freedom. The radical insight of the Christian faith in the Fathers' time was that the woman's free consent was as necessary to the validity of the marriage bond as was her husband's. The bride's consent, equally with the groom's, entered into the causality of the sacramental sign.

The free consent of the spouses is necessary for the exercise of conjugal rights, that is, the authority spouses possess over each other's body. Because such authority is mutual, the ban on divorce was equally binding on husband and wife. Augustine recognized that the mutual authority spouses have over each other's body is the foundation of marital equality. (16) He teaches, based on 1 Corinthians 7:4, that a husband could not make a vow of perpetual continence without the consent of his wife. (17)

Women exercise tremendous authority over their husbands in the area of fidelity. First of all, there can be no double standard. In contrast to the surrounding culture, Christian marriage demands complete fidelity, not only from wives but from husbands too!

In Augustine's sermon "To the Married" he is adamant that wives not tolerate infidelity from their spouses. (18) Augustine tells Christian husbands that they are under the guardianship of their wives, and he says to the wives:

Do not allow your husbands to fornicate! Hurl the Church herself against them! Obstruct them, not through the law courts, not through the proconsul...not even through the Emperor, but through Christ...The wife has not authority over her body, but the husband. Why do men exult? Listen to what follows. The husband likewise has not authority over his body, but the wife...Despise all things for love of your husband. But seek that he be chaste and call him to account if his chastity be amiss...

Who would tolerate an adulterous wife? Is the woman enjoined to tolerate an adulterous husband?...Those of you who are chaste women, however, do not imitate your wanton husbands. May this be far from you.

May they either live with you or perish alone. A woman owed her modesty not to a wanton husband but to God and to Christ. (19)

Augustine teaches that wives can call their husbands "to account" if they fail in chastity. He sees specific warrants for female authority in the area of chastity. Chastity is one of the three goods of marriage taught by Augustine. It, along with the goods of children and indissolubility, is of the essence of the marital bond.

The wife has authority to require her husband to live up to these, and her authority covers any of his spousal duties. A wife is not only there to serve her spouse. A wife's vocation means she has the authority to call her spouse to serve her and their children in his vocation as husband and father. This is the true sense of male and female authority. Equality does not mean that the man and woman have the same responsibilities. They don't. But the man and the woman have an equal authority to lead each other to fulfill the vocations to which God has called them.



### **Submission of Wives to husbands**

Certain passages of Paul speak about authority and submission. In today's Church, influenced by feminist thinking, these passages are not at all popular. In fact, they are often edited by lectors during Mass so as not to "offend" females in the congregation. The passages are Colossians 3:18-20 and Ephesians 5:22-32.

Both passages start out with the thorny teaching that wives should be submissive to their husbands. The Letter to the Ephesians says:

Wives should be submissive to their husbands as if to the Lord because the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of His body the Church, as well as its savior. As the Church submits to Christ, so wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the Church. He gave Himself up for her to make her holy, purifying her in the bath of water by the power of the word to present to Himself a glorious Church, holy and immaculate, without stain or wrinkle or anything of that sort.

Husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. Observe that no one ever hates his own flesh; no, he nourishes it and takes care of it as Christ cares for the Church — for we are members of His body. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife, and the two shall be made into one.' This is a great foreshadowing; I mean that it refers to Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:22-32).

No one likes the idea of submission. Pride rebels against it, and it is possible that being submissive could lead to exploitation. In our day it is believed that one who is submissive lacks dignity. Such a person is giving up his rights and permitting himself to be oppressed. Submission is for slaves, not free people. It is to be avoided at all costs.

Yet, women are told that they are the ones who are supposed to be submissive — and to their husbands, no less! Many modern exegetes simply dismiss these Pauline verses as historically conditioned. They argue that, at the time Paul was writing, submissiveness was a woman's lot, and the apostle was merely articulating this outdated ethic. Since women had no authority, the only thing they could do was be submissive. Authority was solely in the hands of men. Thus male authority is equated with power — the evil power of patriarchy.

It is a mistake to believe that these Pauline passages are theologically outdated, fit only for cutting with the feminist razor. Rather they should be understood in light of the real meaning of authority. Not only are we in desperate need of a good theology of submission, but we are in need of a good theology of male authority based on the teaching of Ephesians 5. Yes, wives are instructed to be submissive to their husbands, because the husband is the head of his wife as Christ is head of the Church, but the husband is also instructed to love his wife.

What does love mean but to give oneself over to another? The husband is to give himself up for his wife as Christ gave Himself up for the Church. This is a form of submission — a form as deep and as serious as the submission of wives. The husband's reciprocal submission to his wife is the only way her submission could make any sense. In the Christian religion, obedience and submission to another's authority is never due to tyranny or despotism, but to love and a covenant between persons that respects the freedom of each.

If these Pauline passages are historically conditioned, they are so only in that their author bluntly states the duty of the wife. According to that culture, female submission was nothing new. What is new (and entirely changes the meaning of feminine submission) is Paul's instruction to husbands.

John Paul called the teaching of Ephesians the "Gospel Innovation" because for the first time the truth about men and women is revealed. A mutual submission exists between spouses. (20) The wife is not to submit to a spouse who lords his authority over her. Not at all! He is instructed to give himself up for her. In the Christian dispensation, husbands are expected to do something entirely new based on the example of Christ and the sacramental role of the husband in making Christ real in the world: fully to serve their wives — instead of wives simply serving and obeying them.

The most profound form of submission is to die for another. When a person dies for another, he has truly submitted himself to that other person. He has spent himself for the good of the other.

It is important to notice that the instruction to wives on being submissive to their husbands is not unqualified. They should be submissive to them "as if to the Lord." Submission is based on the one-flesh nature of Christian marriage, in which it is presupposed that husbands will love their wives as Christ loves His Church. The wife also has authority. She is the body of her husband, as verses 28-29 state. As the body is in a one-flesh unity with the head, she can and must call her husband to do what the head is supposed to do in the fulfillment of this living sacrament of Christ and the Church.

Husbands and wives do not have authority for the sake of exercising power over each other. If this were the case their relation would be one of constant tension and disharmony. Authority and submission exist to create a one-flesh unity. Authority exists to serve the bond. It is exercised for the good of the bond, so that the marriage will be a good marriage, so that the spouses can do what is good for their marriage together. The person who exercises authority does not do so for the sake of being served. It is exercised so that his marriage may be served.

What does all this authority and submission mean in practical terms? Let me give some examples. If the wife is in the habit of spending money in a manner detrimental to the family budget, her husband can require that she cease doing so — and she should obey. If a husband does not want to work and so is neglecting his duty towards his wife and children, his wife can require that he go out and get a job, and he should obey.

If the husband or wife is becoming an alcoholic or a drug addict, the spouse should require that he or she get proper treatment, and the impaired spouse should obey. If a spouse is doing something immoral, such as using contraception or cheating on the income tax, the other spouse can and should exercise authority and require that this immoral behavior be stopped.



### **Liturgists' political knee-jerkism**

It is quite wrong to edit the unpopular passages in Colossians and Ephesians that speak of submission. First of all, the teaching on women's submission is the word of God. Today the verses are censored because they are interpreted negatively, according to the dictates of feminist ideology. Instead, they should be interpreted positively from the perspective of faith and an insightful theology. Priests and teachers should articulate the full dimensions of submission, including that of the husband whose love is placed at the service of his wife and children.

Many liturgists would rather respond to this Scripture according to a political knee-jerkism that is utterly unable to see its theological importance for marriage and its enduring moral value. Its value ought not be suppressed according to whatever political viewpoint is in vogue.

Some liturgists probably think they are setting the Holy Spirit free from the bonds of patriarchy when they excise passages on women's submission, but they are really stifling the Holy Spirit. Upon hearing these words a wife may realize that in some specific matter that affects her husband she has been acting selfishly or pridefully. She may also need to hear that her husband is exhorted to give himself up for her — a love which makes her submission possible. A husband may need to hear that he is to love his wife. Marital love is submission to another.



Caesarius of Arles upheld the moral equality of Christian men and women, who are redeemed equally by Christ's blood, so a double standard cannot exist. (21) In contrast to the Gnostics' beliefs, in Christian thought female sexuality is not at all a hindrance to salvation. This patristic teaching alone makes the Fathers revolutionary for their time. In contrast to the conventional wisdom of the age, men have no privileged spiritual position. They do not have any greater capacity for salvation than women.

John Chrysostom taught that women had authority to instruct, advise, and admonish their husbands in the moral life. Consider the following quotation from one of his homilies:

Indeed nothing — nothing, I repeat — is more potent than a good and prudent woman in molding a man and his soul in whatever way she desires. He will not bear with friends, or teachers, or magistrates in the same way as with his wife, when she admonishes and advises him...She is devoted to him in all things and is closely bound to him as the body is fastened to the head...

Therefore, I beseech women to carry this out in practice and to give their husbands only the proper advice. Just as a woman has great power for good, so also she has it for evil. A woman destroyed Absalom; a woman destroyed Amnon; a woman would have destroyed Job; a woman saved Nabel from being murdered; a woman saved an entire nation. Deborah and Judith and innumerable other women directed the success of men who were generals.

And that is why Paul said: 'For how dost thou know, O wife, whether thou wilt save thy husband?' In this way too we see Persis, Mary, and Priscilla sharing in the apostles' difficult trials. You also ought to imitate these women and mold the character of your husbands, not only by your words but also by your example...But when you provide him with instruction, not only by your words but also by your example, then he will both show approval of you and be the more effectively convinced. (22)

The passage is full of statements that speak of feminine authority. We are told that women are to "mold" men and shape their "souls." Wives are to "admonish" and "advise" their husbands. They have authority to mold the character of their husbands and give them instruction. When John Chrysostom talks of Deborah and Judith, we see that women have the power to direct the destiny of men. Men who are in positions of authority are directed to success or failure by women. A wife even has the power to save her husband from damnation. Apparently, if wives can instruct their husbands, the husbands have a duty to obey.

John Chrysostom does not fail to indicate the marital base of male and female authority: A wife can and should teach her husband because she is bound to him as the body to the head. This is the basis for the proper exercise of authority and obedience. The authority of husbands and wives is moral and sacramental and therefore has as its aim the spouse's salvation. It is a moral authority based on a bond of love.

According to Paulinus of Nola, a wife's moral leadership is to be understood as a sign of God's marriage with the Church: "Your wife, who does not lead her husband to effeminacy or greed, but brings you back

to self discipline and courage to become the bones of her husband, is worthy of admiration because of her great emulation of God's marriage with the Church." (23)

Taking his cues from Genesis 2, Paulinus refers to a wife as the very bones of her husband. Bones give shape and structure to bodies which would otherwise collapse. Adam declares that Eve is "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." Paulinus uses the verse to describe what a good wife does for her husband. In building up his moral life, she builds him up as husband.

The Church Fathers constantly praise women for their superior practice of Christian virtue. Female sexuality is not at all a barrier to holiness, and in many cases, it is a positive aid. Augustine, in his treatise *On Virginity*, taught that Thecla and Crispina were models of discipleship. Matthew 20:22, addressed to male disciples, connects discipleship with the ability to drink from the cup of Christ's passion.

Augustine believes women have equal strength to drink from this cup. (24) Cyprian taught that women martyrs were stronger than their male torturers. (25) Ambrose praises a female martyr for having kept her chastity from abuse by men. (26) Eusebius records the martyrdom of Blandina, who, before her own death, gives encouragement to the men who are to follow her. (27) The Fathers consider Mary Magdalene the preeminent model of penitence for men as well as women. (28)



### **Women and the consecrated life**

The Fathers are unanimous in their respect for women who choose a life of consecrated virginity. Jerome exalts women because they are favored with this vocation more frequently than men. (29) The early Fathers taught that female virginity was a unique charism with a special significance that male virginity lacked. The female virgin was a living sign of the Church. Jerome states:

Assuredly no gold or silver vessel was ever so dear to God as is the temple of a virgin's body. The shadow went before, but now the reality has come. A consecrated virgin makes the maritally-based redemption of Christ real in the world.

Jerome called the consecrated virgin a bride.

A consecrated virgin is also another Mary. Virgins give birth to the spirit of Christ's salvation, which they "have wrought upon the earth". (30)

It is not hard to see women's great dignity and place in the Church. A virgin, precisely because of the nuptial meaning of her body, causes the salvation of Christ to be present. The presence of Christ's redemption is "wrought" by these women. It is their work. (31)

Augustine taught that virgins exemplify the Church. Virgins deserve great honor because they preserve in their flesh what the whole Church preserves by her faith. The Church, imitating Mary, is a bride and mother. The Church is both virgin and mother.

The Church is a virgin because she keeps the faith intact; she is a mother because she gives birth in the Spirit to the children of Christ. The Church's holiness exists in those female members who make real in themselves the Church's physical and spiritual holiness. (32) Consecrated virgins preserve in their own flesh the espousal of the Church to Christ. In this way, woman — indeed the female body — is a sign of redemption.

Ambrose compared the consecrated virgin with the Church, emphasizing the symbolic value of the virgin as a sign of the Church's motherhood. The Church, while remaining a virgin, gives birth to many offspring. Like Mary, the Church bears children, not by the power of men but by the power of the Spirit. (33)



### **Learning from the past**

The Church today could benefit greatly by returning to these insights of the Fathers regarding the symbolic role of women. It is thought, even among those who cannot identify with the feminist point of view, that priestly authority is the only authority, priestly office the only office. It is mistakenly believed that, unless women become priests, they are doomed by “patriarchy” to remain invisible. How wrong this is! Such a conclusion about women in the Church is the fruit of a monist philosophy about power.

The Fathers of the Church, despite all their Neoplatonism, escaped this deadly perspective. Authority is exercised maritally. The authority of man and woman, if it is real, shares in and makes present the authority of the one-flesh love of Christ and the Church. If we keep this in mind, we will come to understand that the authority of the male priest, because it is first Eucharistic, is authority put to the service of the female Church — the Body of Christ whose only true and appropriate sign is woman.



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