

Response

Adrian Edwards on sacrifice and gender

Trying, in his article 'Gender and Sacrifice' (September issue, pp. 372–377), to make the link between masculinity and priesthood more intelligible, Adrian Edwards suggests that we think of the violence directed against Christ during his passion. He considers that it is fair to link violence with masculinity.

The particular violence perpetrated against Christ was the outward manifestation of sin itself and represents sin in its entirety. In effect what this argument does is to link sin with masculinity. One must question whether this is fair, bearing in mind that if the violence of the crucifixion does not contain woman's sin, then neither is her sin overcome in the Resurrection.

Adrian Edwards' view of the sexes is typical of much male Catholic thinking, in that it seems better able to appreciate the positive qualities associated with women, than to take women seriously as sinners. This only increases woman's difficulty in believing that Christ Himself takes her plight seriously, that His obedience unto death was for her and that she can pass through death to life with Him.

If the crucifixion is somehow too physical for woman, so that she must be distanced from it, if femininity is indeed incompatible with sacrifice, then women are without hope of salvation.

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While Adrian Edwards sets out to examine implicit assumptions in the debate over the ordination of women, he seems to me to have further confused rather than clarified the issues. He has a set of implicit assumptions of his own which he does not acknowledge. He further practices a sweeping reductionism. Since my own studies in symbolism and anthropology have led me to find variety, polyvalence and nuance, I was surprised that Edwards claims the same sources for his simplifications.

To deal with all the issues raised would be too lengthy. What seems worth pointing out is that his arguments for the incongruity of women and the eucharist fail on his own grounds. The mass, he says, is a re-presenting of 'a series of events where violence first achieved its greatest triumph in killing the man who was also God and is then turned around to be a source of new life.' Masculinity, in his symbolism, is tied to violence and destruction, while femininity stands for 'life-giving and nurture.' If the mass

is violence turned into life-giving, how can a male alone show forth the life when he represents destruction? Rather, *both* a woman and a man would be necessary to symbolize such a dual nature in the ritual.

One could go further in exploring the relation of the eucharist to violent sacrifice. What Jesus says in the Synoptic tradition of the Last Supper is that his death is to be remembered not as a replay of sacrificial death, but as a feast. He creates not a re-presenting of violence, as in a blood sacrifice, but refuses all of the physical details of his death and replaces them with nurturance (bread) and celebration (wine). Women, if one accepts Edwards' symbolism, would then be the only appropriate presiders.

I have no desire, however, to use either of the arguments to support a change in our ministerial rules. For me, the over-simplification of male and female symbolism not only lacks the richness of polyvalent symbolic patterns, in this use it also turns upside-down the relationship of life, ritual and symbol. We are, in Edwards' view, to have our actions controlled by symbolic constructs. Rather, humans have always sought to create, adapt, or reject symbolic systems to express their ideas, feelings, beliefs.

Most important is the real danger in maintaining dualistic gender symbols which, of course, have figured large in our history. It is only too true that masculinity has been equated with power, oppression, destruction and violence and that turning this violence on others and on the very fabric of our planet has been held to be 'man's nature'. Centuries of this, now allied with an increasingly powerful technology, has brought us face to face with nuclear and environmental annihilation. Surely our need is not to perpetuate violence even symbolically, but to emphasize masculine symbols that are congruent with conservation and nurturance. These are already available in our Judeo-Christian tradition, and it is such symbols of man as father = provider, caretaker, righteous ruler, good Samaritan, that offer us a hopeful alternative to destruction and death.

The symbol of woman as nurturer would be a necessary balance if women were seen as socially and symbolically equal to men. In the present state of the world, for women to be restricted to one symbolic role, such as 'Platonic femininity', is a further danger. It blinds us to the fact that women can be active and powerful in the world, that they, too, have a responsibility and a capacity to search out peaceful, ecological solutions to our problems.

If the Church is to serve us in the great crisis we face, it can hardly help by insisting on division and continuing the stereotypes that have contributed to opposition. Our tradition has much to say about unity and working together. This it seems to me is what we should seek to symbolize in our rituals.

Perhaps the fruitful use of Edwards' article is to take it, not as an answer, but as an opening to a discussion. Part of our task as believers is to search for congruent, creative and powerful ways to express in symbol and ritual the dynamism of the Christian hope

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