

The Future of Men in the Church

MEN DO NOT GO TO CHURCH. They regard involvement in religion as unmasculine, and almost more than anything they want to be masculine. The basic ideology of masculinity is a given as long as men are born of women and societies face challenges. Even if it wanted men to abandon masculinity, the Church has no way to reach them to persuade them to do so. Nor should men abandon masculinity. For all its faults, it is a basic natural religion, a yearning for transcendence, a proto-evangelium built into the structure of human society. Since men continue to want to be masculine, they will continue (unless there are major changes in the Church) to put a greater or lesser distance between themselves and the Church. Is there anyway that Christianity can reach men in a long-lasting and effective manner?

The churches should follow the medical motto, *primum non nocere*, first of all, do not make matters worse. Feminism and homosexual propaganda dominate the liberal churches, and both drive men even further away.¹ Apart from some groups of evangelical Protestants, whose commitment to Scripture has made them aware of the lack of men and led them to use tactics which have had at least initial effectiveness, all other varieties of Western Christianity are totally bent on expanding the role of women in the Church and

choose to ignore the absence of the male laity. Homosexuals who want to change are welcome even (perhaps especially) in evangelical and revivalist churches, but Catholic and mainline Protestant churches that cultivate a gay atmosphere (Archdiocesan Gay and Lesbian Outreach, gay choirs, gay tolerance talks in schools) will keep heterosexual men away. Fear of effeminacy is one of the strongest motivations in men who will sometimes die rather than appear effeminate.

Christianity has within it the resources that allow it to appeal to men, to show that not only will Christianity not undermine their masculinity, but it will also fulfill and perfect it. James Ditties, a professor of pastoral theology at Yale, holds up the image of the Son, in all the charm of eternal youth, truly eternal, from a beginning without beginning to an end without end, as a model for all men. Adam seized at the possibility of being self-originate, of being father and nothing but father, but in Christ we are shown that even God is Son. Ditties is a rare writer who takes a positive approach to masculinity: “Authenticity for men—feeling ‘saved’ (in language that once meant more than it usually does now)—is to be found within those modes of living that appear most characteristic of men, not in being shamed or coached out of those modes.”² Three masculine modes of living which can be studied to develop the practices and approaches that the Church needs are initiation, the struggle, and brotherly love.

INITIATION

In almost all societies, learning to be masculine also means being initiated into the religion of that society, since religion teaches the meaning of the mysteries of life and death. The holy is a masculine category: men develop their masculine identity by a pattern of separation, both biological and cultural, and to be holy means to be separated. The more transcendent God is, the holier he is and the more masculine he is. Judaism is a transcendent religion, as is Christianity, although especially in Christianity there are anticipations of the return to the feminine, of the wedding feast of the Lamb, which is

the culmination of the masculine trajectory. Judaism was a masculine religion, and has remained so. The majority of the practitioners of Judaism in America are men, and there is no sense that the study of Torah is effeminate.

Christianity revealed that the masculine identity was open to all: in Christ there was no longer male or female all could become sons of the Father by the grace of adoption. In the first millennium the masculine character of Christianity was clear. The church of the martyrs gave way to the church of the monks, but it remained clear that to be Christian involved a profound and heroic struggle, which was perhaps more natural to men, but which was also opened up to women.

Men have a natural understanding of the process of and the need for conversion. They know from their childhood experiences and their inculcation in the ideology of masculinity the importance of dying to the old self and being reborn as a new self. All scholars who have compared the lives of men and women saints remark on the importance of conversion in men's lives and the relative lack of it in women's. St. Paul stands in contrast to Mary, St. Augustine to Monica. Revivalism bears out this hypothesis: it increases the percentage of men active in the Church, but it is not successful over the long run because the churches into which men are led by revival are still so feminized that the processes of gender identification take over, and converted men (and even more their sons) start putting distance between themselves and church life. Conversion can lead men into the Church, but the Church they enter must also have a spirituality that allows them to be both men and Christians—they cannot be real Christians unless they become real men. But at the heart of the Gospel is the call to become sons in the Son by entering into the life of the Trinity.

Gordon Dalbey, a United Church of Christ minister, observed Nigerian rituals in which boys are taken from the world of women and inducted into the world of men and the sacred realities of their tribe. He has formulated a Christian puberty ritual for boys to counteract the lack of male participation on the Church.

His suggestion for the ritual is this: The father, pretending to go

somewhere else, goes to church to prepare to induct his son into manhood. With the pastor and other men, he arrives unannounced back at his house. His mother (uninformed about the event, which is for men only) is hesitant, but as the men outside sing *Rise Up O Men of God*, the boy breaks from his mother and joins his father and the men of the church. As he joins them, the men sing *A Mighty Fortress*. The men and boys then go to a campground for discipline and instruction which would include:

- An opening worship in which each boy is taught to memorize Romans 12:1-2, offering himself to God's service and opening himself to let God transform him inwardly during the initiation period;
- Time to remember the men from whom the boy comes: stories of his father and grandfather and American history;
- Time to remember the God from whom all men come: Bible stories and biblical standards of behavior;
- Learning to pray, both alone and with others;
- A time of fasting during which the boy is taught its biblical purpose;
- Teaching the nature of sexuality and how to relate to women with both compassion and strength;
- Aptitude testing for professional skills, followed by a general session in which the men sit as a panel and share frankly their jobs, inviting questions afterward;
- Rigorous physical exercise;
- Daily individual prayer, Bible reading, and journal keeping;
- Prayer and counseling for each boy to heal inner emotional wounds;
- Talks by much older, godly men about what life was like when they were boys, and what their faith has meant to them;
- A closing worship service in which the men call each boy

forward, lay hands upon him and pray for him to receive the Holy Spirit as in the traditional rite of confirmation.³

The Boy Scouts have many initiatory motifs drawn from outdoorsmen, Indians, and the military, and many churches sponsor scout troops. An intensive scout program closely integrated with instruction in religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices, such as Dalbey suggests, can provide an initiatory experience for boys that is not bizarre, but which achieves a real change in personality.

James E. Ditties is unusual among theologians in that he has a sympathetic understanding of masculinity. In *Driven by Hope: Men and Meaning*, he examines the masculine drive to transcendence—what I have called the thirst for initiation. Because of the physical and psychological development of the male, every “man experiences life as given to him as incomplete.”⁴ This emptiness produces a desire for self-transcendence through death and rebirth. Men are always looking for this, upsetting the settled routines of life, going on pilgrimages and adventures, changing careers, committing themselves obsessively to work or play or sex in a hope of finding the beyond there. Men seek power because they love: “We men are gripped with a passion to control because we are gripped with a passion to save.”⁵ Because he is a man, he knows that life is full of sorrow and wants to protect those he loves from that sorrow. Every man is a soldier and a priest. He wants to bring salvation, “to save life from its sorrow by summoning the transcendent.”⁶ It is from these deeply good roots that even male faults arise.

An understanding of masculine personality patterns can help preachers and counselors develop a rapport with men. Explicit references to the difficulties that men face will help men realize that the Church is not just for women. I remember a remark in a sermon I heard years ago. The preacher spoke briefly of those who worked long years in jobs they disliked so that they could support their families, and how this was a type of martyrdom, harder to bear because it was hidden and unrecognized. Most men face this situation sometime during their lives, and it helps to have someone offer a sympa-

thetic understanding, and to place this experience within the context of Christian life.

THE STRUGGLE

A truly masculine spirituality must include struggle. Jesus struggled throughout his life, struggles that culminated in the agony, that is, in the struggle in the garden. In another garden sinful man had fled from the holiness of God and refused to struggle with the mystery of outraged holiness and love. In this garden, the Son confronted the Father and wrestled with his will. He ultimately submitted, as Mary did, but he submitted after a question, a plea: *Let this cup pass from me*. The Trinitarian space between the Father and the Son allows there to be a potential space between the will of the father and the will of the son. This space, reflected in the distance of creation from the creator, could become a sinful space of rebellion and alienation leading down to hell. But it could also become a space in which the Other is confronted as Other, and accepted as Other. God was the God of Jesus Christ; he addressed him as my God (as distinct from your God), and to the Father as to God, the Son submitted in the garden, as he submits from all eternity. What was the cup? The torture and death of the cross? Yes, but in that torture and death all godforsakenness was tasted, all guilt, all suffering, all pain of the entire creation.

Insofar as men are Christian, they must be agonistic, that is, they must participate in the struggle against evil. This struggle is close to the heart of Christianity, although it is not the very heart. Moreover, the struggle has been too often with merely external enemies. Many readers may agree with my description of the situation in which men are alienated from Christianity but fear that any attempt to reconnect masculinity and spirituality would lead to the corruption of Christianity. In a century of murderous violence in which even the pope wonders if God would send anyone to hell because men have already gone through hell on earth, the last thing we need is a religious war. Previous attempts to combine masculinity and Christian-

ity sometimes ended in disaster. Bernard, in addition to preaching bridal mysticism, also preached the Crusade. Violence is always with us, but it is somehow worse when supposedly consecrated to the service to God. Luther, too, in his attempt to reform the church, unleashed murderous passions against the Jews. Although religious conflicts in our century have a strong sociological and political basis, it is difficult to deny the religious element in the Lebanese civil war, or the long agony of Ireland, or the bitter fighting and massacres in Bosnia.

The true struggle is not with flesh and blood. Christianity is indeed a great war and a great struggle with Satan, with ourselves, and also with God. Paul became the greatest apostle because he had kicked against the goads, because he had struggled with the Lord. He understood better than those who regarded the growing Nazarene movement with indifference what the claims of the new sect were, and he hated it. His soul was outraged at the blasphemy that a mere man claimed to be God, the totally Other, the Holy One. He was outraged because he realized the force of the claim. He was able to consent with his whole being because he came to know exactly what that claim meant, that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel, of all humanity, of the whole cosmos, and the expounding of this mystery had been entrusted to him in a special way.

Submissive obedience is held up as the model of the perfect Christian response. Mary's *Let it be* is seen as the model for all Christians; but her questioning of the angel before her concurrence is forgotten: *How can this be?* This questioning, this struggle with God is even more characteristic of men: Abraham bargained with God over the fate of Sodom; Jacob wrestled with God; Moses, the meekest of men, struggled with God over the fate of idolatrous Israel. When God wanted to destroy the people who had worshipped the Golden Calf and raise up a new people from Moses, Moses, instead of humbly submitting, told God to destroy him instead of destroying Israel. Much of the Old Testament is a wrestling with God, a struggle to understand how such things could be. How could God have ruled Israel through the often imperfect instruments of the Judges? How was David, an adulterer and a murderer, yet a man after

God's own heart? How did Solomon, the wisest of men, fall into idolatry? Why was Israel, God's chosen, torn up from the land promised to it and sent into exile? The prophets wrestled with God, knowing that they would be called to proclaim a message that the Lord would then not fulfill, leaving them open to the charge of being a false prophet. Jonah complained against God, voicing the frustrations of all the prophets.

This wrestling with God continued in St. Paul. Men often begin a friendship with a fight. Soldiers, in reflection on war, realize that they were closest to those with whom they were fighting. *To fight with* in English has a fruitfully ambiguous meaning. It can mean either to fight against someone or to fight at his side as a comrade. But the important thing is that, with a comrade and with an enemy, one has shared the struggle, one has tasted the perils of loss and death, and that taste binds friend and enemy together in a closer bond than the soldier with the civilians on his own side.

The interior life is the primary, although not the only, arena of struggle. The interior life has been largely seen as the province of the feminized spirituality that began in the Middle Ages. If the interior life seemed inescapably feminine, men who wished to be both Christian and masculine turned to the external struggle against evil. Spiritual warfare is a dangerous concept, but the most consistent promoters of it realize that the enemy is not human being, but is a spirit. The pacifist branch of the Reformation was dominated by the metaphor of spiritual warfare, as has been monasticism, which has been largely a pacific force. The front in spiritual warfare, the no man's land where the Kingdom of God confronts the Kingdom of Satan, runs through every human heart. Conversion is a summons to fight on this battlefield.

For all human beings, life is a struggle, but men know that it is their duty in a special way to be in the thick of that struggle, to confront the hard places in life and strive to know, in the fullest sense, what the mysteries of life and death are all about. Protestant Christianity in the historic churches has largely forgotten this. The tone of contemporary Catholicism, especially in America, too often is an irritating official optimism, in which administrative triumphs are

trumpeted as if they were the Second Coming. In a recent celebration of Rome's honoring of a major ecclesiastic, the secular reporter was somewhat bemused by the self-congratulatory tone of the proceedings. The tone was hardly based on reality: the local church entrusted to this ecclesiastic had suffered a massive decline in church attendance, confirmation, and general infidelity to Catholic teaching, as well as more than the usual share of scandals. Narcissism is a major vice of the Church and is even held up as an ideal: the community comes together to worship itself. Venus's sign is a mirror. There has been little honest confrontation with the mystery of evil, and this lack of confrontation has led to a trivialization of Christianity that makes it especially unappealing to men who want to spend their lives not on verbal games and pleasant rituals, but on the serious matters that can yield an insight into the meaning of existence. The work of God in the world is the most serious business that a man can devote himself to, because eternal matters of salvation and damnation hang upon it. But sin and damnation have disappeared in an ecclesiastical atmosphere of universalism and self-fulfillment.

Churches that can preach the Gospel without the modifications that make it easy and bourgeois have a great advantage in reaching men. The rawer fundamentalist churches and the more traditional revivalist churches reach more men than liberal or latitudinarian churches. Unless the Church takes its own message seriously, as indeed a matter of the uttermost importance, it cannot expect men to take it seriously either.

BROTHERLY LOVE

What is the Gospel but a revelation of the mysteries of life and death? We learn that we can reach life only through death. Much of the effort of the Church seems to be in obscuring the Gospel, into distracting Christians into secondary and derivative matters, while losing sight of the *unum necessarium*. What has been missing in the preaching of the Church, although it is prominent in the canonical Gospels, is the element of brotherly love, but brotherhood understood not as vague affection, but as blood-brotherhood and comrade-

ship. This self-sacrificial masculine love is deeply desired by men and is one of the things that makes war tolerable or even desirable. However, earthly wars are but a result of a far deeper conflict, the war in heaven in which we are called to participate.

Beyond the struggle, and already accompanying it and preventing it from becoming bitter and nihilistic, is the love that is at the heart of the Trinity, the Spirit of Sonship. The Spirit descends upon believers to make them sons, brothers of the Lord, whom he addresses as his friends. This intimate love bears some of the marks of eros, but not the eros of the Bridegroom. At the sight of beauty, according to Plato, the heart grows wings. The beauty that draws us upward is the glory of God shining on the face of Christ and that is a masculine beauty, one that has the color of the blood that is shed by men.

Eros and *Agape*, concupiscible love that seeks to fill an emptiness and the love of friendship that wills only the good of the beloved, are not incompatible. *Eros* can be a step toward *agape*. We love God because he is lovable, we desire Him because he is desirable. The pagans knew this, and this natural love for the good is sharpened by the self-revelation of God in Christ. The problem is that the Church in the West has expressed this eros in the language appropriate to the eros felt by women, whether it is the eros of the bride for the bridegroom or of the mother for the child. Such language is inescapably physical, because we are bodily beings, and even our abstractions are but bloodless metaphors drawn from our bodily experience. There is, I believe, a love between men that can be called eros (and which has nothing to do with homosexuality). It is found most clearly in the experience of comradeship, in which shared danger and the willingness of each to die for the other reveals the infinite preciousness of both body and soul. The love of Christians for Christ in the New Testament is this type of love. It is based on the sharing of danger and hardship, and makes men blood-brothers with Christ.

At the end of John's Gospel Jesus asks Peter three questions, questions whose significance is obscured by the usual English translation. Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Peter responds three times, "You know that I love you." But the Greek makes

a distinction. Jesus first asks Peter, “Do you love me (*agapas me*)?” Peter responds, “Lord, I love you (*philo su*).” Jesus repeats the question again, and Peter responds the same way. The third time, Jesus asks, “Peter, do you love me (*philas me*),” and Peter responds exasperatedly, “Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you (*philo su*).”⁷ After each question Jesus commands, “Feed my lambs,” and after the third question foretells Peter’s martyrdom in imitation of Jesus, when Peter would have to go where he would rather not go, that is, to the cross.

Agape and its related forms are the common words for love in the New Testament, and few distinctions are drawn, except in this one passage. To have *agape* for someone is in this passage of John contrasted with to have *philia* for someone, and *philia* seems to be the higher type of love. Jesus asks Peter if Peter loves him. It would make little sense for Peter to respond by using a weaker word, “Lord, you know that I have some regard for you.” Peter uses a more intensive word, and it is this more intensive word that Jesus uses in the third question.

Philia in the New Testament means the type of love that brothers have for each other. If this is the connotation that *philo* has in this passage from John, a possible translation of the first two questions might be: “*Jesus*. Peter, do you love me? *Peter*. Lord, I love you as a brother, and of the third question, *Jesus*: Peter, do you really love me as a brother? *Peter*: Lord, I really love you as a brother (which is the highest possible love I can give you).” Peter loves Jesus as a brother not because they are both men or are both descendants of Abraham, but because they have the same Father, God. Christians are brothers, not because they are male human beings, but because they are sons of God, begotten of water and the Spirit, reborn, having received a new nature, participating in the nature of the Son of God, being conformed to him in his death and resurrection. Jesus predicts that Peter will fulfill his brotherly love by dying in the same way that his Lord and brother has died. This death is a reflection of the eternal distinction of the Father and the Son, a distinction that allows the Son to offer himself as a sacrifice to the Father. Because Peter is the brother of Jesus he shares in the same nature as Jesus and can die the

same death as Jesus. Because he will do this, he can feed the flock of the Lord with the Eucharist, the body given and the blood shed.

Men are made for brotherly love. It is the escape from the prison of self in which all human beings are locked, but which afflicts men even more deeply because they flee from the connectedness of the feminine world precisely to live and die for others, including women. Men seek brotherly love at the workplace, in gangs, in fraternal organizations, in war, but rarely in church or anything to do with church. Although the New Testament is permeated by the brotherly love which men desire, a barrier prevents men from seeing it, and from seeing in Christ the Brother the meaning and fulfillment of the sacrifices that men make in order to become men. Unlike sexual love, brotherly love is not distorted or made perverse by suffering. Indeed the deepest brotherhood, as all men suspect, is not based on common natural birth but on shared suffering. Those who suffer together become brothers. The love that men show for each other on battlefields is heartrending. A man will fall on an exploding grenade almost without thinking to save his comrades. A man who has suffered with Christ becomes his brother.

THE CRISIS OF THE CHURCH in every age is a crisis of saints. There is no modern, accessible model of saintly lay masculinity in Western culture.⁸ A man can be holy, or he can be masculine, but he cannot be both. Studies (such as this one) can only point out a problem and perhaps make the Church aware of its needs. It can correct wrong concepts, because misguided preaching and spiritual advice only makes the problem worse. But studies alone, commissions and articles and programs, will not themselves create the masculine saints, who alone can show to men that holiness is not the negation, but the fulfillment of masculinity. That can only be done by saints who are both dedicated to holiness, not by their own work, but by the work of the Holy Spirit, and who are fully masculine. These saints will be ordinary Christians, who come into contact with other men in sports, business, or the military.

The restoration of a balance in the Church between the sexes

cannot be accomplished by public relations campaigns or revivals to attract men. Even if men are attracted, they will not long stay in a feminized church whether in its “conservative” or “liberal” forms. The current campaign to establish feminism and the toleration of homosexuality as the new orthodoxies can only drive men even further from the Church, as indeed seems to have happened in the past decade. The Church must develop a right understanding of the meanings of masculinity and femininity, an understanding that is consistent with human realities and with the data of Scripture. The Church must also find a way of evaluating the development of metaphor so that a change does not distort the message of the Gospel. Only then can it appreciate and preach the metaphors of Son, Bride, spiritual warfare, and the friendship with God that are intrinsic to the Gospel. Only then will men return to the Church, and the harmony of Adam and Eve in the new creation be at least in part restored. Then the Church will have a foretaste of the time when the Bridegroom will unite finally with the Bride, the Church, that uniting of all the sons of God in the communion of sacrificial love which shows to the world the inner life of the Trinity.