

Complementarity: Understanding the Pitfalls, Tracing the History

Throughout the greater part of Christianity and up until this day under Pope Francis, the Church has taught that women and men have distinct but complementary roles. Women are ultimately valued for their roles as wives and mothers in the home and men are valued for their intellect and leadership in the world.

Up until the mid 20th century, popes, bishops, priests and theologians used language that explicitly demeaned women calling them, “the devil’s gateway” (Tertullian), “defective” and “misbegotten males” (Aquinas). Women were substandard in imaging God and a species suspect whose sexuality had to be controlled.

Yet, from the latter part of the nineteenth century on, changes in Western society created new pressures on the Church forcing it to reformulate its language of subordination in a way that appealed to the new realities posed by women’s suffrage movements, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Rights of Women in Politics (1952). Sojourner Truth famously challenged patriarchal Christianity in her 1851 speech on the floor of the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio later titled, “Ain’t I a Woman?” and in 1898, Elizabeth Cady Stanton published “The Woman’s Bible” a feminist commentary critiquing the patriarchal framework of the Bible.

At first, as social science and newly emerging feminism(s) called traditional male and female roles into question, the Magisterium reacted with distrust and fear. In *Casti Connubii*, Pius XI reprimanded women for stepping out of their roles and warned them their fight for equality would lead to their demise and the demise of the family. But that language began to change with Pius XII. He incorporated the language of equality into his writings as the term complementarity first emerged into the magisterial lexicon.

So we have an absolute equality in personal and fundamental values, but different functions, which are complementary and superbly equivalent, and from them arise the various rights and duties of the one and the other. (The dignity of women (speech), 1957)

This re-write of the language of subordination allowed Pius to incorporate new realities rooted in human/women’s rights while succeeding in leaving the essential assumptions about the hierarchy of male/female roles unscathed.

Later the “equal but separate” framework was used by Paul VI in *Inter Insigniores* and perfected by John Paul II in his *Theology of the Body* and in later writings from *Mulieris Dignitatem* to *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* to his *Letter to Women*. Here he birthed phrases exultations for women such as “the feminine genius” and offered Catholics a “new feminism.” As such, he vigorously defended the hierarchy against what he considered to be the excesses of feminism creating a “carrot and stick” strategy that exalted women but also punished their dissent and the dissent of male allies in defense of the male only priesthood. Benedict the XVI, who helped develop these teachings as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, would take them to their dark logical conclusion calling the act of seeking ordination by women a “grave crime” with automatic excommunication coupling those acts with clergy sex abuse, a callous distortion of the actions of those seeking equality and justice within the Church. He also instigated two separate investigations of women religious (2009 and 2012) in the United States, the latter based on accusations that women religious were stepping out of their Vatican defined roles and undermining church moral teaching by promoting “radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith.”

Yet, it is the rise of women’s voices within the Church since Vatican II that offers the most reliable path for uncovering the deficiencies found in complementarity and charting a path for true equality and justice. As feminist, womanist and *mujerista* theologians and scholars began to populate universities and ultimately the landscape where Catholic teaching is disseminated, they have expertly illuminated the errors found in official magisterial formulations including those connected to the Theology of the Body

and complementarity. They critiqued the modern day re-write of patriarchal subordination found in complementarity's framework. Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, in response to one of complementarity's biggest defenders, Sara Butler, provides important illustrations of how and why complementarity fails to create real equality for women in the Church.

A side-by-side analysis of the differences between Butler's defense and Johnson's critique show the underlying and faulty assumptions that serve as the foundation for complementarity.

1. Sara Butler begins with the traditional source of authority – magisterial teaching. Johnson, on the other hand, roots her critique of complementarity in human experience – women's experience and God's work in the world as a sure "sign of the times".

2. Butler celebrates the John Paul's affirmation of the body recognizing we are "embodied spirits". Still human nature exists only in one or the other sex and there are two ways of being a body, two incarnations of human nature. She contends that man and woman are equal in humanity, but not identical. Given the "equal but different" framework developed by John Paul II, male and female are two different bodily ways of being human, ordered to one another, that is ordered to communion. Giftedness follows according to this order.

Johnson, on the other hand, contends that the distribution of gifts found in papal formulations is based on a romanticized notion of feminism that carefully keeps women at arms length by putting them safely on a pedestal at a side altar, far from the danger they pose to the male only priesthood and the male dominated enterprises of the Church where teaching, ecclesiology, liturgy and canon law are largely shaped without the benefit of women's intellect, experience, faith and gifts.

3. Biblical accounts are used in two very different ways. Butler relies on Genesis 1:26-28 to stake out her Trinitarian imagery for complementarity, Butler believes that the ultimate nature of humanity, created male and female in the image of God, can only be illuminated by divine revelation (as understand through the magisterium).

Johnson includes Galatians 3:27-28 to critique magisterial formulas that do not adequately embrace this foundational notion of equality at the heart of Christianity. While women are no longer understood to be defective as in the case of Aquinas, and while complementarity understands that women fully image God, they still do not adequately image Christ because Jesus was male.

Sara Butler, M.S.B.T., Defending Complementarity	Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ, Critiquing Complementarity
--	---

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source of authority – magisterial teaching • Gen. 1:26-28 – claims that there is a basic unity in human nature that is shared fully by both, BUT is not identical. She uses Trinitarian imagery to convey her concept that three persons in one God have different, but equally important functions. • Complementarity is rooted in God-ordained dualism. There are only two sexes, only two ways of being (sexual difference elevated to ontology), only two incarnations, and only two sets of corresponding roles. • The distinctive gifts are not associated with one sex or the other in a mutually exclusive way, but are aptitudes that are assigned according to biological sex. A woman is made to be a mother, a nurturer and this is ultimately her most important role. Men, on the other hand, are made for leadership. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source of authority – experience, God in the world • Gen 1:26-28, Gal 3:27-28 – Johnson recognizes the original claim that human beings together are relationally equal and created in the image and likeness of God is tainted by the pervasive influence of Classical Greek philosophy where male images are privileged over female leading to gender dualism, dualistic anthropology and papal claims for a theology of woman that ultimately subordinates them in a “God given schema.” • With modern notions of the “image of God” , the dignity of women is granted in theory, but the Church has held that women cannot image Christ because Christ was male. This contradicts the central teaching of the Church since being in the image of Christ does not entail being a Xerox copy of Jesus’ sexual self, but rather consists of sharing in the life of Christ’s love of God and love of neighbor. • Papal feminism relies on a romanticized notion of feminism that exults in order to control. and where the idealized women needs to be protected from the messiness of the public realm and according to Pope Francis, the dangers of clericalism.
---	---

In conclusion, over the past several decades, John Paul’s Theology of the Bod has been as promoted more and more widely as the “new Catholic feminism” in Catholic circles, in religious education classes and in adult formation. Throughout Pope Francis’ most recent apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, John Paul’s notions of complementarity still ride front and center, although there are signs of a struggle. In paragraph 54, there is some evidence of progress in terms of Francis’ understanding and respect for feminism’s gains and goals. Chapter 4 includes a solid critique of the way sexism and male domination function in marriage and in the world calling it sinful. But in Chapter 5, Francis’ love affair with the foundational framework that is complementarity overtakes his struggle to find modern roles for women and men inside the family, Church and world. He does not yet know how to reconcile modern women and men and his traditional notions of family and female/male roles.

More than ever, we need to present the ways in which the *Theology of the Body* and complementarity fail in their stated desire to produce real equality between women and men. Men and women of faith can contribute to this ongoing dialogue by sharing their experiences and reflections what it means to be female, male or family in today's world.

Sources

Elizabeth A. Johnson, editor, **The Church Women Want**, 2002, Crossroad publishing.

Gina Messina Dysert, *Pope Francis, Complementarity, and US Politics, Feb 17, 2016 in Feminism and Religion*
<https://feminismandreligion.com/2016/02/17/pope-francis-complementarity-and-us-politics-by-gina-messina-dysert/>

Susan Ross, *Male and Female, God created them :Rethinking John Paul II's theology of the body* (2012) in U.S. Catholic
<http://www.uscatholic.org/church/2008/06/male-and-female-god-created-them>

Gina Messina Dysert, An Open Letter to Pope Francis, September 22, 2015 in the Huffington Post at
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gina-messinadysert/an-open-letter-to-pope-fr_b_8180466.html

Luke Johnson, *A Disembodied 'Theology of the Body':John Paul II on love, sex & pleasure in Commonweal* (2004) <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/disembodied-theology-body-0>

M. Cathleen Kaveny, *Can the Church and World Agree on the Role of Women?* in America Magazine, February 28, 2011 <http://americamagazine.org/issue/766/article/defining-feminism>

Michelle Gonzales, *Hans urs von Balthazar and Contemporary Feminist Theology, Theological Studies*, 65 (2004) Vol.65, no.3, Sept.2004 at <http://www.womenpriests.org/theology/gonzal.asp>

Edward Collins Vacek, S.J., *Feminism and the Vatican* <http://cdn.theologicalstudies.net/66/66.1/66.1.8.pdf>

Interview with Michele Schumacher <http://cantate-domino.blogspot.com.au/2007/03/interview-with-michele-schumacher.html>

Tina Beattie, *Sex, Death and Melodrama: A Feminist Critique of Hans Urs von Balthasar*
<http://www.theway.org.uk/Back/444Beattie.pdf>

Maureen Fiedler ,*Complmentarity: A Trap, November 14, 2014, National Catholic Reporter*
<http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/complmentarity-sexes-trap>

