

FutureChurch

Teleconference with Natalia Imperatori-Lee

[27:00]

Thank you so much, Rita, and thank you to Deb and to Russ, and really, to everyone on FutureChurch. Is it an honor to be on the board and really a pleasure to be with you all this evening. I'm sort of humbled that there are so many of you on this teleconference and I thank you for taking time to share with us.

So my goal today is to cover essentially five points on complementarity with some bullets under each of them. First, I want to ask what complementarity is; so what do we mean complementarity when we're talking about gender. Then I'm going to move to some of the strengths and weaknesses of this paradigm or ideology. I want to talk briefly about where this is rooted in Christianity and also how it informs Church teaching in the present. Lastly, I want to talk about some alternatives to this line of thinking and what can be done to maybe not work against it, but to maybe mitigate its impact on the Church today.

So, let's get started. First, what is complementarity when we're talking about gender? Complementarity is the notion that we can extrapolate or deduce ideas about men's and women's lives about their biological—essentially, their sexual—complementarity. In other words, because men and women's primary sex organs fit together in a particular way, their roles in the world also fit together in particular ways that do not overlap but rather complement or complete each other. That's where we get this word 'complementarity.'

Just as men and women in the actual sexual intercourse fit together to form one flesh, so, according to the theory of complementarity, the masculine and feminine realm of the world fit, and they don't overlap with each other. So they complete what the other lacks.

So, just to give you some examples of this, and we see this everywhere in the world, men are more rational and women are more emotional. Men are more just and women are more merciful. Jesus is just, but Mary is merciful. Men are more disciplined and women are more nurturing. Men are more heady, right? They live in their head. But women are more about the heart or about feeling.

Complementarity stresses that sexual difference is THE fundamental difference in humanity. It makes that difference the bedrock that determines a person's strengths and weaknesses, their aptitude, and their deficiencies. God's intent in this vision of humanity, God's intent in creating us, was revealed in sexual difference. And so we should assume that the bodily difference between men and women is a prescription—in other words, a how-to—for how God wants the world to be organized.

Now, this theory did not begin with Christianity or Judao-Christianity. It's present in Plato; it's present in Aristotle. And it has undergirded sexism, but also some strains of feminism, especially what we used to call—I don't know, fifteen or twenty years ago there was this notion of romantic feminism, the idea that women are fundamentally different from men in the way that they think, feel, and exist in the world. I call this 'girl power feminism.' We had this for a long time. This is also rooted in a sense of gender complementarity.

Now, in Catholic circles, complementarity was brought to the fore in a particular way in the pontificate of John Paul II, whose theology of the body can be read as an extended meditation on sexual complementarity in marriage.

So that's essentially, if I was going to talk about defining complementarity, that's what it is—our bodies dictate our roles in the world.

What are some of the strengths of this ideology? I can think of three, and there may be more. The first: Proponents of this paradigm claim that it elevates the status of women. It gives women a function that is crucial in society. It gives us a sphere of influence in which only women can be useful without interference from men. And therefore, it gives women a particular dignity, or what John Paul would call a 'special nature.'

A second strength of this ideology is that it enhances or praises the difference in humanity rather than reducing everyone to sameness. This has long been a critique of feminism, of mainstream or contemporary feminism—that everyone is supposed to be the same and that we're not [the same? 00:05:57]. So complementarity says that we're not the same.

A third strength, I think, is that it mitigates against people's anxiety, particularly an anxiety that is borne of what some people perceive as relativism in contemporary talk of gender as a performance or a construct. When we start talking about gender as a performance or as a social construct, some people get nervous that we are removing people's gender identities from their biology, and that seems like anything goes. That makes people genuinely nervous, authentically nervous, and gender complementarity works against that nervousness. And I think that that is a strength, an interesting strength.

So those are my strengths. What are the weaknesses? I have a couple more weaknesses than strengths, I have to confess, and I apologize for that. The first is that it's rooted in essentialism. What I mean by that is almost a biological determinism—the notion that biology is destiny, that the body you are born into pretty much sets the stage for the rest of your life. Men get to be rational; women get to be emotional.

A second weakness that flows from this first is that it leads to a truncated and sort of limited understanding of sex and gender from both a scientific and a psychological perspective. Our understanding of what makes someone a man or what makes someone a woman has deepened significantly from the days in which a woman would give birth and the doctor would sort of look at the baby and say, "Ah, it's a boy!" or "Ah, it's a girl!" Things are a lot more complicated than that.

So this is a second problem with gender complementarity, in being grounded in what theorists call the dimorphic paradigm—there are men and there are women and that's it. It is a limited or limiting understanding of sex and gender,

A third problem that flows from this is the issue of homosexual persons and the way in which gender complementarity mythologizes homosexuality. Also, and relatedly, how do we classify those who are biologically intersex, which means someone who has both male and female genetic or hormonal characteristics? This is a not insignificant proportion of the population of the Earth.

Gender complementarity also reduces the body to sexual function, but as we know, those of us who have bodies—which I assume is everyone on this call—it ignores all the other things that our bodies do that are not sexual, like eating or working or playing. Those things are bodily experiences as well and they are not part of the equation of gender complementarity.

Lastly, and I think this is probably the most pervasive and I think the most dangerous of the problems that come out of gender complementarity, is that it doesn't allow for me to excel in what we call the feminine sphere of, for example, nurturing children, and it doesn't allow women who excel in the so-called mascu-

line sphere, like business or sports, to express themselves as such. They are viewed as somehow non-masculine or un-feminine, or neglectful of their proper place.

To give you just a brief example, I was watching ESPN with my son and they said something about Serena Williams in the Australian Open. And the first thing that was mentioned when talking about Serena Williams was, "I don't know how she's going to handle all of this and plan a wedding." And I thought, wow, what does that have to do with winning the Australian Open? This is the pervasiveness of gender complementarity.

In truth, there is nothing about feeding a three-year-old that requires woman-ness or man-ness, there's nothing about selling insurance that requires woman-ness or maleness, and there's nothing about winning the Australian Open that requires woman-ness or man-ness. It reduces all men to one kind of masculinity and it reduces all woman to one expression of femininity.

And this discards out of hand the experience of a wide variety of people and wide swath of cultures in the world. Remember, what we understand to be masculine and feminine has not held true for every culture in the history of the world, and we need to be aware of this.

So, so far I have defined complementarity and I've highlighted what I think are some of the strengths and some of the weaknesses. Now let's turn to Christianity, especially Catholic Christianity, and ask, what does gender complementarity have to do with the Church. Well, first of all, even though this exists in great philosophy and Hellenistic thought, it is also rooted in the Judao-Christian tradition.

Gender complementarity is seen as early in the Bible as the second creation story in Genesis, where Eve is created from Adam. And Eve is created for the purpose of being the helpmate, right? This, [that one is] in the bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. In her, I have found a suitable helper. The whole idea is that Even is made for Adam.

Further, there is talk throughout Scripture of the relationship, first, between God and Israel as one of bridegroom and bride, and again in the New Testament in the spousal imagery, where the Church is the bride of Christ. Both of these reinforce the notion of complementarity—that bridegrooms and brides are fundamentally different from one another. But bridegrooms are the same as all other bridegrooms, and brides the same as all other brides.

It's important that we note that especially in the Christian case, the spousal metaphor is based on the inequality between the bridegroom and the bride that existed in the first, second, and third centuries. Jesus, or Christ, and the Church are not equal. We do not teach that. And therefore, the spousal metaphor makes sense. It makes sense because it highlights the intimacy between Christ and the Church, but also, the inequality between Christ and the Church. Both of those are pillars of [incomprehensible 00:13:15] metaphor.

This threshes out, I think, in important ways in Church teaching in the present. I'll mention two. One is more moral theology, and a second is more ecclesiology. So, first, the moral theology.

So, first, the moral theology. Gender complementarity is a big part of sexual teaching in the Church. This is problematic because sexual morality in the Church remains act based, even though everything else, all the other explorations of morality in the Church, are attitude or disposition based, relationship based. In other words, I can still claim that I am a good mother—I think—if I lose my temper one time. There's something about my attitudinal disposition to my children that determines whether or not I'm a good mother. The same thing with being a good teacher: If I have to cancel class, am I a good teacher or

a bad teacher? Well, how am I doing in the rest of my classes? [See? 00:14:30] that it's attitudinal, it's over a length of time.

Sexuality is not taught this way, and I know this because I teach undergraduates for whom the extent of Catholic morality that they have learned is sexual. Am I a good spouse if I participate in a sexual act that is not open to life with my partner? The answer in the theology of the body is no. It invalidates all of the goodness that I did in all of the other ways. When we use gender complementarity to ground this idea of what a good marriage looks like, then we are functioning in an act based instead of an attitudinal-, pattern-, or relationship-based notion of morality.

So it's a problem for sexual teaching. But in terms of what bothers me as an ecclesiologist, gender complementarity is a big part of questions around ministry and ordination. This is where Future Church is a good audience for this: the idea that a woman's role in the Church cannot be ministerial, but rather, that women have a difference—you hear a lot of people say, "No, no, no, women have a different role," and sometimes even Pope Francis says this, "a more important role." But that role is never defined.

Women have a different role, a more important role, to play in the Church, but we can't quite tell you what it is. "We shouldn't sully women or dirty them or burden them" with clericalism is another expression of gender complementarity. Women are too pure or too good or too nurturing to be wrapped up in the gross world, or the dirty world, of clericalism. That is for men to contend with. Women are not seen as leaders in the sense of having power or authority, and women who highlight power differentials are seen as transgressing somehow, as violating the complementary nature of humanity.

So gender complementarity undergirds this idea that there's a masculine sphere in the Church and a feminine sphere in the Church, and that these cannot overlap but only can complement each other, can complete what the other one lacks. This is profoundly problematic. What can we do, then? How are we supposed to move forward to provide alternative to this line of thinking? I have one, two, three, four, maybe five ways to do this.

The first, and I think the most important one, is to list up the genuine, actual diversity of human experience. Not everyone has the same deficiencies. I'm sure that the hundred or so of you who are on this call realize this in your interactions with other human beings. These deficiencies in our human nature are not based on our outward sex characteristics. Some women are absent-minded; some men are absent-minded. Some women are aggressive; some men are aggressive. Many differences make up the human family.

If we recognize this—that there are some differences, for instance, race, language, culture, generational cohort, all of these things are differences in the human family. Why do we prioritize one over the others? I don't know. We see relationships between parents and children all over the Bible. One of the injunctions in Genesis is to multiply, so parenthood and generational difference seems to be a fundamental difference as well. And yet, we're stuck on sex difference. This is problematic.

So Elizabeth Johnson has this note, I think in *She Who Is*, where she says that we're made up of a constellation of factors—race, age, language, culture, religion, sexuality, gender, sexual attraction, etc. And some of these are more important than others at a given time, but we cannot say when, nor can we make blanket prescriptions for how people should live their lives based on choosing only one.

So the most important way that we combat the line of thinking is to just take a hard look at reality and speak honestly about our reality, right? My husband does all of the cooking; my wife went to work and my husband stayed home. Blah blah blah blah blah. The ways in which we make visible this varied experience of human life really works against this idealizing notion of complementarity.

Another thing that we can highlight is that ways in which complementarity is limiting, not only for women, which is obvious, but also for men. Complementarity prevents men from participating in equal parenting. It prevents men from emotional maturity or emotional awareness. It inhibits emotional expression in men because that is viewed as femininity.

This is profoundly problematic to me as a mother of two sons, who wants to raise whole human beings. If we're constantly hampering children with the idea that men are strong and women are emotional, then when children do not feel strong, they also feel like they are failing on this sort of grand level. And this is not the way to good emotional health.

We are part of a tradition, Catholicism, that teaches the inherent dignity of all human persons, even those who do not conform to our ideas of manliness or womanliness. And for a tradition that preaches so vehemently the value of all human life, we discard a significant percentage of homosexuals, intersex, and otherwise differently sexed lives as faulty or defective or somehow outside the paradigm of God's plan.

Now, what am I talking about here? Well, the notion of complementarity is based in an Aristotelian theory of reproduction; in other words, it's as old as Aristotle. And Aristotle believed that the way you made babies is that women were the fertile soil in which the seed that belonged to the man was planted. Therefore, the only active agent in procreation was the man. The man planted the seed that contains the little, tiny human being, and the woman nurtured it.

The man, in Aristotelian reproduction, is generative—active and generative—and the female is passive and nurturing, allowing the child to grow but not contributing anything to the child. So women were allowing the children to grow within them but not in any way participating. We don't believe this anymore because of science. Science has shown that it's not true, that 23 chromosomes come from the male and 23 chromosomes come from the female.

As it turns out, science has continued to teach us about the way in which human beings are made, and one of the things that it tells us is that we used to think that it was only XX, which made a woman, or a female, and XY, which made a male. As it turns out, there are a wide swath of variations in this chromosomal makeup. There are people with XXX, which is Klinefelter Syndrome, or XO, which is just one chromosome, which is Turner Syndrome.

And it used to be that we thought, well, this is just a mistake or an aberration. But as it turns out, there are about 5.5 million people who have some sort of the most prevalent chromosomal variation when it comes to their sex chromosomes—5.5 million people is the population of Finland or El Salvador. Is it an aberration, then, or is it an alternate expression of humanity?

Why do we stop listening to science once we realize that women contribute to procreation? Why shouldn't we continue to allow science to guide us here? And in fact, I'm only talking here about genetic components of sexuality or sexual identity. If we add to this hormonal components, psychological components, internal versus external sex organs, it gets infinitely more complicated as science unravels how it is that human beings come to be what they are.

So a key thing is, if we were willing to listen to science to inform our theory of reproduction and reform it from Aristotle's theory of activity versus passivity, gender complementarity has not gotten that memo. And much of the talk in Church circles about gender complementarity is about the activity of masculinity, whether that be the priest versus the laity, in the thought of von Balthasar, or whether that be the Pope versus the people of God—whatever you want to call it.

There's a sense in which there's activity—the active principle that belongs to God, thereby making God masculine—and the process principle that belongs to humanity, thereby [tasking> 00:24:52] humanity in the feminine role. That's very Aristotelian, and we no longer believe this scientifically. So why do we still talk about this philosophically? Whose end is it serving?

The last thing I want to mention, now that we've talked a little bit about science, is the Second Vatican Council. Particularly, [guardian mis-pess? 00:25:13] reminds us—and also Dave [Verbum? 00:25:15], the document on Revelation. So the document on the Church in the world and also the document on Revelations remind us that all human experience is potentially revelatory; in other words, that revelation is not over, but rather, the Catholics believe that revelation is ongoing in human history.

If we put a limit on our understanding of God's plan for humanity and say, this is what God wants, or if we say, this is the understanding of sexuality that is ordained by God and this understanding doesn't take genetic variation into account, or naturally appearing hormonal differences into account, or other factors that we don't have time to talk about into account, doesn't this close us off from genuine human experience, and isn't that a place where God is revealed?

So to commit ourselves to gender complementarity as the only way that we can talk about men and women in the Church, or men and women in society, or the role that men and women can fulfill in the Church, is problematic because it truncates women. It prevents women from living out their full humanity. It prevents men from living out their full humanity. And most dangerous for the Church, it prevents us from seeing God's work in the world as a continuing process.

I think that that's where I'm going to stop and ask for questions.

[*End.*]