

FutureChurch

Teleconference with Susan Ross, Ph.D.

[36:49]

Moderator

Dr. Susan Ross is a professor of theology and a faculty scholar at Loyola University in Chicago. She received her B.A. from Manhattanville College in New York, and her M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. Prior to joining the faculty at Loyola, she taught at St. Norbert College and Duquesne University. From 2006 to 2008, she served as the director of the Ann Ida Gannon BVM Center for Women and Leadership at Loyola.

Dr. Ross is a past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America. She is vice president and a member of the Board of Editors of *Concilium*, the international theological journal, and has co-edited three of its recent issues. She has also written numerous journal articles and book chapters.

She is the recipient of the Louisville Institute Sabbatical Grant, the Book of the Year Award from the College Theological Society in 1999, an honorable mention for Best Gender Issues Award from the Catholic Press Association in 2007, and the Ann O'Hara Graff Award from the Catholic Theological Society of America.

Professor Ross's program areas include systematic, feminist, and sacramental theology and ethics. Her research interests include feminist theology and ethics and theological anthropology. Some of Professor Ross's publications include *Anthropology: Seeking Light and Beauty*, published by Liturgical Press in 2012; *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology*, published by Continuum in 1998; *For the Beauty of the Earth: Women's Sacramentality and Justice*, published by Paulist Press in 2006. She also co-edited, with Maureen Tilley, *Broken in Whole: Essays on Religion and the Body*, published by University Press of America in 1995.

We are honored to have Professor Susan Ross with us tonight. Susan?

Susan Ross

Well, thank you very much for that very generous introduction. And just as you mentioned the name of Maureen Tilley, I want to say that she passed away last April, very sadly, and so that was a poignant reminder.

So I just want to say that my voice is a little off tonight, so if there is any difficulty in hearing me, I'm going to try to speak as clearly as I can. Please do whatever you have to do to let anyone know, or the organizers can probably say something. But I think I'll be able to get through everything.

So, first of all, good evening, everyone, and thank you for being a part of this, and I'm very, very happy to be with you tonight. And I want to say, before I begin my own remarks, I did get a hold of Natalia Imperatori-Lee presentation from a couple of weeks ago. And I know Natalia; she's just a wonderful person. And it's great. So if you didn't hear that, it's worth hearing. And I think she summarized very

well the basics of the whole idea of complementarity, its strengths and weaknesses, and its implications for the Church.

So what I'd like to do tonight is expand on some of her points and also take the discussion in some different directions as well. So I first want to offer some historical perspective on complementarity. I am very reliant on the legal and theological scholar Mary Anne Case, who teaches at the University of Chicago Law School. And in fact, we've been in touch. I've read drafts of her work. And the particular article that I'm referring to is actually available online if you Google her. And her work sheds some very, very interesting light on the whole topic of complementarity and how it has developed, especially in the twentieth century.

The second thing I want to do is relate complementarity to sacramentality to see how they have been connected, I think, in the last twenty or three years, particularly by the Vatican.

And third, I want to talk about this whole metaphor, this spousal or the nuptial metaphor which is the basic way that complementarity gets talked about. I think we all have to practice that word three times. And I want to relate that to some central Christian teachings.

Lastly, I want to ask how we might move beyond on the one hand what we'll call essentialist or dualist ideas of person—that is, that men and women are basically essentially masculine and feminine and that they complement each other, they complete each other. And so I want to move away from that. And I also want to move away from a kind of relativistic idea of human embodiment and sexuality by turning to another model of human relationship.

So I know my voice doesn't sound great. I have this voice condition, and I thought I would be in better shape tonight, but we have to deal with how it is. So is that okay? [Moderator: Absolutely. It's great.]

Great. So, first, let me give you a little historical background on how this idea has developed. And then this article is called the Role of the Popes in the Invention of Complementary and the Anathematization of Gender. It's a great title—Mary Case's article. She points out some very interesting things. So, one is that before the twentieth century there was virtually no mention of complementarity in Church teaching. So this is actually something relatively new. It's a new way of talking about relationships between men and women.

And of course, we know that there always has been this spousal metaphor. It goes back to even before biblical times. It was part of ancient Near Eastern religions. Judaism picks it up; Paul picks it up; it develops in the medieval Church. But this was never, before the mid-twentieth century, understood in what the Church now calls an egalitarian way.

God, as the husband, was always superior to humanity and to the wife. So that is an important thing to keep in mind. We've also had the spousal metaphor, but it was always a hierarchical relationship. And this is also very much true in the biblical use of the spousal metaphor. So complementarity is really an invention of the twentieth century Church. It's a way of dealing with the movement for human equality and women's equality without changing anything in terms of male power. So that, I think, is a key point.

So, equality had always meant sameness, and difference always involved subordination. So, seeing difference in egalitarian terms is what is new. So, for example, if you take a look at *Casti Connubii*, which was the encyclical of Pius XI in 1930, which was issued just after the Anglican Church approved the use of contraception, there is this spousal understanding of the relationship between men and women, but it is completely subordinationist. So women are on pedestals but still "subject," in that language, so subjection is used in terms of women's relationship to men.

So what happens is that towards the middle of the twentieth century, with the movement for women's equality, there needed to develop a way of seeing a quality and difference together or else the Church would look like it was against equality, and that would not have looked so good. And Case points out that particularly with the UN Declaration on Human Rights that followed World War II, when rights for women were included, the Church needed to acknowledge equality without saying it meant sameness.

So, say, in the mid-Forties and through the Fifties, Pius X gives these addresses to midwives, and in one address in 1945, he says, "Motherhood is what defines women." Have we heard this before? Yes. "And motherhood is just as worthy as fatherhood, but it is different." So this language of subordination gets dropped right around these post-War years. And so even for the Catholic Church, it's no longer acceptable.

And so it's a kind of interesting way of saying, oh, yes, we're all for women's equality, but [inaudible] equality does not mean sameness; it means difference. This is what [it knew.]

Now, as [Peckenpoint?] that Case brings up—and this is part of her title; she calls it *The Anathematization of Gender*—she talks about how gender has become a bad word for the Vatican. And if you've heard some of the language from the Vatican where there's a condemnation of what's called gender ideology, this is what it's all about.

And so her point is that, at first, gender was just another way of talking about sex. Gender sounds less sexy than 'sex,' so it seems to be a more neutral term. But you have, then, the movements beginning in the 1980s that make the distinction between sex and gender—that sex is biological and gender is sociocultural. And then the other modern—or I should say post-modern movement that sees gender as something that is, quote, "performed" in that nothing is really stable.

And so these are two movements, one that separates gender into the sociocultural dimension of human sexuality, and this understanding of gender being something that is very fluid. So if anyone on the phone is that familiar with the ideas of Judith Butler, she is a contemporary post-modern philosopher. She is probably the best-known proponent of this view, although I would say her perspective has sometimes been exaggerated.

So the idea that we can simply say, "Oh, I think I'll be a man today," or "Oh, I think I'll be a woman today" is a kind of gross generalization of her ideas. But she has had an effect on the understanding that sex and gender are distinct.

So Cardinal Ratzinger, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith when he was then [known?] as Pope Benedict XVI, under him, gender becomes a catch-all phrase that includes feminism, gay rights, abortion, reproductive rights, new forms of family, and transgender people. So all of these are things that thread traditional Catholic teaching about sex, and this has continued with Pope Francis.

So, in other words, for official Catholic teaching, the distinction that is often made in contemporary time between sex as biological and gender as sociocultural has basically been rejected. Sex and gender are really the same, but in a different way than gender, being a more acceptable word than sex. And it's a version of what I would say is a kind of biology equals destiny. So there is a rejection of gender as sociocultural and gender as something that is distinct from sexuality.

So, again, this distinction has been very important for contemporary feminism: that gender is something, say, that we learn feminine ways or masculine ways, or that gender is something that in fact, historically,

we know, is much more fluid than these sort of ideas of women having certain basic qualities that we're basically born with.

So those are the two points I wanted to make from Case's research. And so I'll talk a little bit about John Paul II's theology of the body in a minute. But what happens, then, is the need for the Vatican to argue both for equality between men and women while at the same time arguing for essential differences that especially rule out women moving into what they call the "masculine sphere." So any time there's this language from the Vatican about, "we must be very careful about women moving into masculinizing ways," this is what they are afraid of.

So it's a very interesting kind of way. This is a political argument for equality, yet it's also alongside the need to maintain male power. So it's just very interesting how, okay, we're going to be for equality, BUT there's a difference here.

Now, the theology of the body also condemns what the Church would call alternative forms of sexuality such as gay marriage, reproductive rights, the idea that gender is not the same is how one is born. And Case also notes how the Vatican has developed a very common cause with conservative Muslims, Orthodox Jewish, and even Evangelical Protestant views on gender, since they all agree that men are men and women are women and that's all there should be.

Now, the Evangelical Protestants, many of you may be aware, do still maintain the subordination of women, and especially the Southern Baptist Convention. So, so much for the idea of complementarity being a traditional teaching of the Catholic Church. In fact, it's maybe sixty or seventy years old and there is a political reason for its current popularity at the Vatican.

So my point here is to say that this teaching about how men and women are understood in relationship to each other has a history. And I have to say, too, that the Catholic Church is not always a friend of history because history challenges the kind of permanent, dogmatic surety that some of these teachings tend to carry with themselves. So it's a history that needs to be seen in relationship to the sociopolitical context in the world and in reaction to the sexual revolution and movements for women's equality and for gay rights.

So that was really my first point, which is, let's take a look at the history of complementarity. For my second point, I want to talk about complementarity sacramentality. sacramentality, of course, is basic to the Catholic tradition. It says basically that on account of the incarnation, all of material reality, all of created reality, has the potential to become the place where we encounter God.

And so unlike the Protestant tradition, which emphasizes the word of God as the privileged place of the encounter between human beings and God, the sacramental principle, which I'm sure everyone is familiar with, holds that all of creation and all of human embodied experience, this is where we meet God. We don't meet God just in our souls; we don't meet God by totally denying our body. So there's a very positive evaluation of the embodiment of sexuality and also of nature, which, by the way, is what Catholic tradition has always emphasized in the sacredness of creation, and as we see in *Laudato Si*, which is nicely connected to all of that.

So the sacredness of creation and our obligation to care for the earth are really a dimension of this whole sacramental principle. So when God takes on humanity, humanity is elevated. And to use Irenaeus's famous phrase, the glory of God is the human being fully alive. And so that fully alive dimension includes our minds, our souls, and our bodies.

So in a way, I would say the Catholic tradition has a kind of glass-half-full understanding of humanity in comparison to what might be called the glass-half-empty understanding of the Protestant tradition, because it always sees sin as one of the things that prevents us from being close to God.

But I want to say very clearly that the Protestant tradition is not wrong; it needs the Catholic tradition, and the Catholic tradition needs the Protestant tradition, for a full understanding of the human condition. That is, our bodies are ways in which we encounter God, but they're also the ways in which we fall away. So we have the potential for divinity, as the orthodox tradition would say, but also the inevitable failures of our sinful human nature.

So with sacramentality being so important, sexuality, as one significant dimension of our humanity, is also very important. And remember that for Catholics, marriage is a sacrament. Now, I have to say that what the Protestants are very helpful in doing is basically saying, marriage is a vocation, and that took the Catholics a long time to say, basically, until Vatican II.

But in the very physical and spiritual encounter of the couple, God is present. And couples and anyone who is married knows that this is so central to the Catholic theology of marriage. The couples are a means of grace to each other, and in fact, the couples are the ones who marry each other. The priest is there to be a witness for the Church and to bless the marriage.

So this is part of what is at stake in complementarity. It's a positive evaluation of sexuality in its potential for sexuality to lead us to God. And it's interesting to note that it was somewhat controversial in the Middle Ages to propose marriage as a sacrament. Marriage becomes a sacrament only in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council, since there was a very good argument that could be made for monastic vows as being sacramental.

And there was kind of a debate in the Middle Ages about this, because Jesus was, as far as we know, celibate. So given the Church's nervousness about sex, and I don't think I need to tell anyone about that as something new, it's significant, I think, that marriage, in a sense, won the sacramental competition. Like, who's going to win? Is it going to be monastic vows or is it going to be marriage? Well, it was marriage.

So what's implicated in sacramentality is the sacredness of our embodied human nature, including our sexuality. And this is what the theology of the body picks up on. And anyone who knows marriage theology knows that marriage is a sacramental marriage when there's full consent of both couples and when the marriage is consummated.

So one of the constant references that is used in discussions of complementarity is the Genesis II narrative—that's the Adam and Eve narrative—in which the man (at this point, Ha'adam, which is the Hebrew term for 'the man') comes to realize that his loneliness can only be met by someone like himself. So God takes a rib and creates a woman.

And the creation story is central to the idea of complementarity, which you might observe if you're a read of John Paul II, that he is always referring to the Adam and Eve story. And it was also significant for marriage being a sacrament because it was seen to be the first one established by God in creation. And you see this in some textbooks on sacramentality, where sacraments are marriage, the marriage is, although it was the last one to be officially declared—in fact, sort of in the mind of God it was the first sacrament.

So, here, then, this brings us to the spousal metaphor, the nuptial metaphor. And I tend to prefer to call it nuptial more than spousal, because 'nuptial' refers to weddings. And I would say that so many of the

flowery descriptions of the male-female relationship that we find in the literature of complementarity—and this is to borrow the words of the great Protestant theologian, Carl Bart—they seem to begin and end with the wedding night—the wedding and the wedding night.

So there's this beautiful coming together; there's this total self-gift of one to the other; the first sexual experience is wonderful. But I always want to ask, where is the day-to-day routine of the couple, the occasional annoyances or arguments, the socks on the floor or farting in bed? Sorry to be so crude. But the need to persist and endure once the original romantic flame is diminished.

So I think the unreality of the picture of Mary's life that we see in so many of these spousal images is one [inaudible] problem with this metaphor. But there are more serious ones, I think, having to do with how we see God, what language we use for Christ and the Trinity, and how the Church is seen in relationship to God. So we're just sort of moving into the third point here, which is how the sacramentality and the understanding of this metaphor leads to theological doctrinal implications.

So I call it a kind of cosmic complementarity that uses the spousal metaphor for all of these relationships. So it's not just husband and wife, but it's also God in relation to humanity, God in relation to creation, God the Father in relationship to God the Son, Jesus in relationship to the Church, Jesus in relationship to Mary, where it gets a little strange.

So what I would say is that there's a kind of metaphorical, theological creep that takes this one metaphor for relationships and extends it to all relationships, and it's also the only metaphor that we see. And it results in some very troubling conclusions, at least as I see it. So among them, you can draw the conclusion that the men are really more like God than women; so that anyone who represents Christ has to represent Christ in his maleness.

Now, of course, the official Church argues that men and women have equal dignity in the eye of God. But remember, God is always male, God is always the bridegroom, and so is his Son. So to be created in the image of God, for women, is always in some ways secondary. And I think what this does is result in idolatry, and the attempt, then, to maintain difference in equality together falls apart.

So if women are as fully in the image of God as are men, then you can say, what is the problem with female god language? And it also goes without saying that this kind of cosmic complementarity means that same-sex relationships are completely out of the question because they violate this cosmic theological relationship. So how can the priest be a woman if she is married to the Church?

And so I would say that this is what a metaphor—and it's a beautiful metaphor meant to convey intimacy—is taken to its literal extreme, and also to the exclusion of all the other metaphors for the Church that we find in all the Church documents. Especially, take a look at the first chapter of *Lumen Gentium* from Vatican II and you see all of these metaphors—the sheepful, people of God, all of these things, but they tend to fall by the wayside for this spousal metaphor.

Mary Anne argues that what we find in the emphasis on the Genesis narrative to [grown?] complementarity is what she calls a very strange kind of biblical fundamentalism, which is very out of place for the Catholic tradition, which has always emphasized Scripture and tradition, as well as reason.

And another point for further development, then, would be the biblical hermeneutics of complementarity. And there's some really excellent work by feminist theologians on the kind of implications for relationship of using the spousal metaphor that you find, say, in the prophetic literature, where it becomes really a kind of language of domestic violence.

So my experience twenty years ago of interviewing women for my book, *Extravagant Affection*, who are involved in sacramentality work—children's religious education or CIA, chaplaincy, leading worship services, spiritual direction—it taught me, really, in a very, very profound way how the openness to material reality in its capacity to reveal God had very, very concrete implications. And so I wrote about some of their stories in my book. But the point that these women made to me was that sacramentality could not be just kept in a box. The idea that meanings could only work one way and that women couldn't be sacramental ministers because this would not be hetero-normative, to use that kind of post-modern term.

So I think all of this stuff kind of comes together. The sacramentality of the goodness of creation gets put into these stereotypical, essentialist categories.

Okay. Now, I would say that Natalia Lee the other week did a wonderful job of describing why essentialism is so problematic; that is, that one's essential being is fundamentally rooted in one's sexual identity, with a specific set of qualities. But the way in which sexual identity is understood is, and no surprise here, based in a particular understanding of what being a family is and what being masculine or feminine really means, sort of late nineteenth-century bourgeois culture.

And I think there's a whole lot more variety in human relationship, as anthropologists will tell us, than the kind of, you would say, masculine—leading, authority, power—and then in relationship to feminine—following, delicacy, nurturing. And I have to say that it drives me nuts every time I hear some Vatican official talk about women's delicacy. And I want to say, you know, you ask men to go through child birth and see whether they'll say this is a delicate sort of identity.

So, as I described in an article, something I wrote some years back, about whether God could be imagined as a bride, my own experience of marriage has shown me that our gifts are not just tied to our sexuality, but to a much deeper understanding of the whole complex human person. And one example I used was that I tend to do the finances in our household. So I pay the bills, I do the taxes. And my husband is the one who decides where the pictures go. He's got the artistic eye.

Now, one of my students here at Loyola is writing a dissertation that draws on interviews with young Catholic women and the messages that they have received from their Catholic upbringing. And some of these young women have been part of these theology of the body groups. And I don't know if some of you are familiar with those or perhaps have them in your parishes.

And sometimes these students have talked to my graduate student about [inaudible] adjusting their relationships to this norm, that the man must always lead and the women must always respond. And so in the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, whose writings were so influential to John Paul II, woman is the answer to the question posed by the man. I mean, just think about that. Women do not ask the question; they are the answer. That always makes me think of, don't speak unless spoken to, and that's a subordinate role.

So one of the quotes that really illustrates this, both in terms of human relationship and the divine human relationship, is the quote from Balthasar that John Paul II picks up: the man loves and the woman responds in turn. So just think about that for a second. The man loves, and the woman responds in turn.

Now, John Paul II's theology of the body is probably the best-known development of complementarity in the Catholic tradition. And as you probably know, the theology of the body was [inaudible] developed in a series of talks that John Paul gave early in his papacy. So there are very positive dimensions to the theology of the body, and I've talked about this in a piece that you can actually get online from U.S. Catholic.

And as I point out there, the theology of the body puts sex into a very positive light, and encounters much of the anti-body emphasis that I think we live with in the Catholic tradition and in some ways in other places, too. But in the present context, in our world today, when sex is used to sell things, all you have to do is turn on the television and you see this, has been cheapened in so many ways by a very casual attitude about sex and is often seen as something—especially I see this with my college students—"Well, sex? Yeah. You know, if you say yes and I say yes, yeah, that's great. So it's like sort of having a nice meal together."

Well, I think the theology of body, seeing sexual expression as a beautiful thing, is a very positive move, but I would also say that the way it sees every sexual act between husband and wife has to fulfill certain conditions or it becomes, according to John Paul, simply an act of selfish gratification. So that's contraceptive sex.

And I think this is a very unreal picture of marriage [inaudible] spirituality and sexuality. And anyone who has been married knows that sex, particularly in an enduring marriage, can fulfill a number of different purposes—the excitement of trying to conceive, soothing each other. It can be sort of like, okay, I don't really feel like it, but you want it, so that's okay. All right, we'll just go ahead. Or, it's not satisfying. And sometimes, it *is* the Fourth of July and New Year's Eve all rolled into one.

So my point is that the way in which we experience our sexuality is not always the same. There's a variety to that, and that depending on where we are in our lives, our moods, whatever, that it's not always this one perfect encounter. Now, I have found in 25 years of marriage it just gets better, and I hope that's true for all the married people out there. But I think the way that it's understood in the theology of the body suggests that it is or should be always the pinnacle of marriage. And I think it puts way too much emphasis on the perfect, beautiful sexual experience in a marriage and not enough on the ways that couples should honor their own and their partners' bodies in multiple ways.

And I have a very good friend who has written about how, if she and her husband were to live out this sexual complementary of the theology of the body, she said they would have been divorced years ago. It would have just been too much. [*Laughs.*]

So the last part here and then we can move into the questions. I want to talk about moving beyond dualism and essentialism in thinking about relationships. And so in my book, *Extravagant Affections*, I talk about the family as an embodied context for sacramentality. So I'll say how this relates to complementarity.

Now, when I wrote this book about twenty years ago, I took some heat from some feminist colleagues for using family as a way of bringing together the sociocultural in the physical dimension of our bodies. And they were nervous about the use of family because the way it's used in this tradition to sort of give you a very one-dimensional or two-dimensional of what it means to live in relationship.

But I have to say, I sort of want to hang on to this idea, so I used family for three reasons. One is that it honors the physical embodied dimension of who we are. We all are born of mothers and fathers. Second, it makes relationship central to understanding of people—that we will not live if we don't live in relationship. And third is that it recognizes the social and cultural context in which we live out our relationships.

And so in terms of the embodied context, we can't pretend that we're not physical, that our brains and all of our systems play a huge role in making us who we are. And so that, I think, needs—and this is my critique of some of the post-modern ideas of sexuality and embodiment—that there's a limit to which you can say we can construct ourselves. That's a huge topic, but I'm not going to get into the rest of it here.

In terms of relationship, whether we come from an intact family or one bound by affinity rather than biology, we all need relationships to live and thrive, and we know that babies who are not given close touch in their early life fail to thrive and can even die. So this significance of relationality, which I think is one of the things that the theology of the body and complementarity want to emphasize, gives honor to that.

And I think, finally, that families are all shaped by social and cultural contexts. And if anyone has traveled around the world, especially in the global south—I spent some time in Africa—it gives you very different pictures of how families operate. And so there's more than one way of doing this, and they're always related to a context, where, for example, in Africa, marriage is a communal relationship; it's not simply the two people.

So I think it we're going to valorize the sacramentality of our embodied lives in the family, with all of its various forms, its complexities, its relationship to community, I think it does a better job of giving us a model for how we're able to relate to each other than the model of these virginial spouses, these two people sort of locked in a gaze together, where I always want to ask, well, where's the dog, where's the crying child, where are the neighbors, where are all these other people that are part of families? And the theology of the body and complementarity tend not to see those as, I think, as adequately as they can.

So, just to conclude, then, these are my thoughts about complementarity and sacramentality, that the concept itself has a very recent history, that differences in sex have been, in a sense, sacramentalized by the Church, that the spousal metaphor has been subject to a kind of theological creep into doctrines, and that there are alternative metaphors for valuing our embodiment that don't tie us to a biology-equals-destiny understanding.

And so this is in a time of flux. Finding recourse in sacramental essentialism offers a comfort that I think in the long run is false and misleading.

So, thank you very much for listening, for your attention, and I await your questions eagerly.

[*End.*]