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# Sexual complementarity – Pope Francis, sex and gender

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Paul Haring/CNS

**The idea that biological differences show that God intends different roles and purposes for the sexes is a novel idea with little support in Catholic history and tradition.**

In his recent interview with *America* magazine, Pope Francis responded to a question about why women cannot be ordained with an explanation that he repeats every time this question is asked. Invoking Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological principles of the Marian and Petrine Church to distinguish between the masculine role of the ministerial priesthood and the feminine character of the Church, he referred to "the Marian principle, which is that of the spousal Church, the Church as spouse, the Church as woman".

The idea of sexual complementarity that underlies such claims is an innovation associated with the "theology of the body" that was formulated by Karol Wojtyla in the 1960s before he became pope. This sought to offer a response to feminism by abandoning the traditional hierarchical distinction between the sexes based on masculine authority and feminine submission, replacing it with the teaching that the sexes are equal but different.

According to the theology of the body, women's qualities of "feminine genius" and maternal wisdom offer a necessary complement to men's gifts, which, beyond the requirement for priests to be anatomical males, seem rather lacking

in content. Complementarity between the sexes finds little support in Catholic history and tradition. The Church's teaching affirms the full personhood of every human made in the image of God. To suggest that the sexes are complementary is to imply that someone of either sex is not, alone, a complete person, which, if taken too far, would have dire implications for celibacy and the single life.

Most medieval theology and science viewed men and women as superior and inferior versions of the same sex, with women being subordinate because they were less rational. These gendered roles were seen as necessary for the good ordering of society, but they had no eschatological significance. The devotions of mystics of both sexes are redolent with the language of erotic love between Christ the Bridegroom and the soul as Bride. The idea of the Church as Mother is rooted in Scripture and in the belief that Christ nurtures the faithful with his body and blood through the maternal body of his Bride, the Church, personified in Mary.

All this entails considerable gender fluidity, and it sets many Freudians aflutter. Today, theories of sex and gender are highly contested and politicised. The term "gender ideology" has been used by Church leaders and the far Right to condemn all who argue for a more inclusive approach to sexual identities and rights, including feminists and those campaigning for LGBT+ rights. More recently, "gender ideology" has been used by trans activists against feminists who raise concerns about the ways in which some trans rights conflict with women's rights, in situations where anatomically male trans women claim access to women-only spaces and activities. The Pope's response on women's ordination is in itself a form of gender ideology. There is neither sexual difference nor incarnational reality in this odd juxtaposition of two entirely different categories – the gendered category of the Church as woman, which includes male and female bodies by disembodiment of the female sex, and the sexed category of the priesthood, which is exclusive to male bodies.

Complementarity is unhelpful when understood only in terms of sexual difference, but it is an aspect of any mutually enriching relationship. We are all different, and all our relationships offer opportunities to learn from one another. This is not to deny that there may be innate characteristics that are more common to one sex than another. Sexual difference emerges at the confluence of nature and culture, and it's not possible to make a clear distinction between the two. Some trans activists claim that sex as well as gender is culturally constructed and can be changed. However, most scientists agree that there are only two sexes determined by the biochemical and cellular composition of the human body.

Binary sexual difference in humans is necessary for reproduction and the survival of our species. Intersex conditions are attributable to variations in the development of sexual characteristics, but they do not constitute one or more additional sexes, and most intersex persons have a clear sense of identification with their biological sex. Physiological differences between the sexes inevitably shape cultural attitudes. The fact that reproduction requires minimal involvement by the male and a long period of personal commitment on the part of the female means that women are likely to have certain natural capacities which equip them for these tasks. A man can walk away from a sex act without knowing that a child has been conceived, whereas pregnancy, whether intended or unintended, is a life-changing event in a woman's life. Men are usually physically stronger than women, and testosterone is associated with a higher tendency to aggressive behaviour in males.

All these factors influence cultural attitudes to masculinity and femininity, not always in positive ways. Many women feel burdened by the expectation that they should have a natural capacity to be nurturing and maternal, and we have a long way to go before we resolve the problem of male aggression. Not all men are violent, but for those born female, the greatest threat we face in life is abuse and violence at the hands of men and the misogyny that still pervades all institutions and cultures, including the Catholic Church. But we humans have a high degree of freedom and moral responsibility with regard to our values and behaviour, which are not determined by our biological functions.

Gender fluidity has always been a creative aspect of human identity and relationality. It allows people to develop their potential without having to conform to stereotypes of masculinity and femininity that many experience as restrictive or oppressive, and which feminists argue constitute the scaffolding of patriarchal societies. When Pope Francis explained the Marian principle to the journalist from America, he went on to say: "We have not developed a theology of women that reflects this." The Church does not lack a theology of women. It lacks a theological anthropology, for if half the human race made in the image and likeness of God is waiting for the other half to develop a theology to explain its existence, then all we have is chaff. That is not much to offer to individuals and cultures that are being torn apart by confusion over what it means to be male and female, created in the image and likeness of God.

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