

God in a feminine form

Question: What is your opinion on using feminine pronouns for God? I have found these pronouns used even by relatively conservative Catholic authors. However, I find them distracting and detracting.

– *Name withheld, Milwaukee, Wis.*

Answer: At the outset, it needs to be said that God is beyond gender and is neither male nor female. By the same token, God is not more effectively represented by the male than the female. A fundamental principle of biblical and theological language is that all – men and women – are made in the image of God.

That said, God has chosen to reveal himself primarily in male terms – specifically as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Why is God revealed in the Bible in primarily male terms? We do not know. But it is all that we have to go on. We cannot rewrite biblical revelation. As long as we adhere to the biblical language of God, then the standard pronoun for God is “he.”

May we ever appropriately speak of God as “she”? We may indeed. There are occasions when the Bible itself speaks of God in feminine terms. In the Prophet Isaiah, God is compared to a woman who cannot forget her suckling child: “But Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.’ Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget I will never forget you” (Is 49:14-15).

God is also compared to a comforting mother: “As a mother comforts her son, so will I comfort you” (Is 66:13). In the Psalms also, God is compared to a caring mother: “Like a weaned child on its mother’s lap, so is my soul within me. Israel, hope in the Lord, now and forever” (Ps 131:2-3).

In his 1988 apostolic letter *Mulieres Dignitatem* ("On the Dignity and Vocation of Women"), Pope John Paul II adverts to these passages and he reflects generally upon this theme in the Bible.

The pope wrote: "In various passages the love of God who cares for his people is shown to be like that of a mother: thus, like a mother, God 'has carried' humanity, and in particular, his chosen people, within his own womb; he has given birth to it in travail, has nourished and comforted it. In many passages God's love is presented as the 'masculine' love of the bridegroom and father, but also sometimes as the 'feminine' love of a mother" (No. 8).

The feminine biblical language about God should not be avoided, and it should appear in liturgical preaching when feminine biblical allusions appear in the readings. However, the masculine – Trinitarian – language about God remains standard in preaching and theology.

My criteria

Question: What criteria do you use for choosing which letters to respond to in your column? How many letters do you receive?

– *J.A., by e-mail*

Answer: I try to pick letters that are substantive, avoiding those that might deal with ecclesiastical trivia. I choose questions that I think might be of interest to a large number of people. Naturally, I favor questions to which I know the answers (I am not as smart as some of you might think, so I don't know everything). Sometimes I repeat questions that have come up before, for the reason that they seem to be of perduring interest.

I don't know how many letters I receive, but I figure that I answer about 10 percent of the questions I do receive. If you keep letters brief and to the point, there is a better chance

that they will elicit my attention.

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