

Between Critical Feminist Theology and the New Feminism: Where to from Here?

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Abstract: This article seeks a pathway to ask the question of how the Catholic Church might become more “feminine,” in light of the experience of the author during synodal discussions about the role of women in the Church. These include both the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia and the Synod on Synodality. It argues for a more robust account of the theory of complementarity and the “new feminism” in light of overviews and critiques of that theory from feminist critical theology. The article refers to and draws from specific experiences during the Synod. It closes with recommendations for further inquiry at the theoretical and practical levels.

Sydney in a week of torrential rain. It is the second assembly of the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia. I have an awful cough and need to move back and forth, between the hall and the drafting room. Morning tea has finished, and I move back toward the main hall—only to be blocked at the entryway by a group of angry delegates. The next discernment session cannot begin because the motion to pass “Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men,”¹ with a series of amendments, has passed the consultative, but not the deliberative, vote of the assembly. There is disquiet. Voices are raised during a time for interventions. “How dare you!” a woman screams at the bishops. A break is called, for everyone to regroup, to enter a period of discussion and discernment, while the steering committee meets to decide the best next step. Only a few of us rush instinctively and quickly to the quiet of the chapel to pray first.

After all this, I watch as the table groups re-assemble before the next stage begins. And then, the vice president of the assembly very deliberately weaves his way through the crowd toward me. I say a

¹ See the motion for this decree, with the initial proposed amendments, but which was ultimately set aside, here: “Part 4: Witnessing to the Equal Dignity of Women and Men,” *Framework for Motions*, May 2022. drive.google.com/file/d/1GxQwIb3kNjgKPttwQlufi672hBpBKHCh/view, 19–24. The final decree can be found here: static1.squarespace.com/static/5930ee9129687f4cfdcebf6a/t/62cbbce8cdb16606df493caa/1657519354492/220630+-+MOTIONS+AND+AMENDMENTS+-+Final+PC+Agenda+-+Marked+Up.pdf.

quick prayer of “Oh no Lord,” and then listen. Will I be one of a group of four who will redraft the statement, after a time of more discernment at the tables? I agree.

Four of us sitting in a room. We share thoughts about our own discernment, having looked already at suggested amendments to the motion. Committed to the synodal process, we deliberately hold in tension the different aspects of a particularly fraught area of discernment. Each is disposed to listen, to cede minor points where necessary in order to come to agreement that is faithful to Christ’s teachings, while considering the needs of those who have voiced concerns touching them in their daily contemporary lives. A leitmotif now runs throughout the final decree: “There is still much to be done.” It passes both votes.

Well before beginning my synodal work with the Plenary Council of Australia, I had engaged with some of the philosophical approaches to what it means to be a woman. This is almost inevitable for any Catholic woman engaged in philosophical or theological work. One might even say that the imperative to do this continues to increase. In the past few years, those on various sides of the debate about what it means to be a Catholic woman have asked: “Can I be both Catholic and Feminist?” The ineluctability of the question is fundamentally entwined with the Catholic philosopher’s focus on personhood. Humans are made in the image and likeness of God, so that to understand the person brings one closer to knowledge of God. The mystery of humanity made in that image and likeness as “male and female” is crucial in an age where masculinity and femininity have become open questions—fluid domains where physiology is often inconvenient, or irrelevant. The theory of complementarity is grounded in a metaphysics where body and soul are unified in the one reality, the human person, who develops with and in response to the surrounding environs. In comparison, the critical feminist theorists with which I engage here begin and end with the concept of social construction.

Throughout the Plenary Council and the Synod on Synodality, I became even more aware of how urgent the need is to find a common language to speak about all of this. On the one hand, mere mention of the word “complementarity” can touch a very raw nerve. For others, “feminism” is a word so tainted that no Catholic should ever even utter it. Certain Scriptural terms have likewise become difficult to use. *Helpmate. Handmaid. Head. Body.* I even heard *daughter, wife, sister* spoken with dismay and hurt, singled out as the only terms that the Church uses for women, such that women could only ever be considered for their standing in relationship to men. Men, in this construct, are the individuals, with women as auxiliaries. A more

balanced perspective would emphasise that women and men are always in relationship to each other; where femininity and masculinity are valued equally, the closer we can come to the fullness of humanity that “male and female he created them” inscribes. One of the major obstacles that arises for the theory of complementarity is that it depends upon being able to describe what femininity and masculinity are, on the basis of how they are known in everyday life. Along with the metaphysics of the individual person, the “new feminism” takes a phenomenological approach, so that the lived, sexed body reveals a psychosomatic unity that in turn reveals feminine and masculine dimensions of the image of God. At least in part due to some of the reasons that critical feminist theology gives, what the feminine looks like in action is not as readily recognizable within the Church today.

In what follows, I would like to examine several sides of this issue and suggest some future directions. I should note from the outset that my main approach will be that of a philosopher, even as I am drawing upon and analysing texts both from theology and from philosophy. The predominant perspectives will come from that of critical feminist theology and from the theory of complementarity. Critical feminist theology here means that category of feminist thought that explores what it means to be a woman, female, or feminine, through the lens of the need to establish justice both in the Church and in society, in light of the Gospel as well as implicit and explicit societal power structures. It tends to operate through the framework of the Frankfurt School of thought which employs the tools of analysis of alienation, reification, ideology, and emancipation.² I have chosen this kind of feminist theology because it comes closest to the arguments that I heard for the ordination of women during the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia as well as the Synod on Synodality. I am very much aware of the dangers of treating feminist theology as something “monolithic.”³

The theory of complementarity will need to be unpacked throughout what follows, because it has several interpretations. Unfortunately, complementarity lends itself too easily to parody. It can be read as arguing that men and women are so different and so needful of each other for fullness that it is as though they are two different species. Secondly, it can be too easily reduced to the biological, as though it is simply a naturalist position based on reproductive organs. I think another main drawback of the theory is that it is incomplete. When Pope John Paul II called for a “new

² Robert Celikates and Jeffrey Flynn, “Critical Theory (Frankfurt School),” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, December 12, 2023, plato.stanford.edu/archive/s/win2023/entries/critical-theory/.

³ Natalia Imperatori-Lee, *Women and the Church: From Devil’s Gateway to Discipleship* (Paulist Press, 2024), 25.

feminism” in *Evangelium Vitae* (no. 99), he offered some initial guidelines but then asked that women establish what complementarity can and should mean. Over time, some have responded to this call and have compiled their thoughts where possible. Helen Alvaré, one of the main proponents of the “new feminism,” has recently recognized its drawbacks, calling for something more. I will address her thoughts toward the end of this article. Now, prior to addressing some of the main critiques of complementarity from a critical feminist perspective, I will outline briefly here what I will argue the theory of complementarity is (and what it is not).

Eventually, I propose to re-situate our understanding of what it means to be a “helpmate” and a “handmaiden.” In Scripture, helpmate (*‘ezer kenegdo*) is not a subservient term. *‘ezer kenegdo* has the connotations of a military commander who puts into action the leader’s direction.⁴ “Handmaiden” is more difficult, referring to the status of a servant. However, read together with Mary’s *Magnificat*, one can identify the possibility of overturning the secular understanding that power necessarily entails a subservient other. God magnifies the God-bearer, foreshadowing how Christian power overturns the secular understanding that there is no power without the subservient other. As will finally be discussed, Mary shows how Christians can, together, find different ways to be co-responsible, rather than vying for power. When Christians pray and work together with Christ, oppositions and power structures should become increasingly insignificant.

Faux complementarity offers trite evaluations of Mary, the Mother of God, with the interpretation that feminine receptivity is purely passive. It is, of course, unhelpful that Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, among others, characterize women as passive, based on a flawed understanding of biology.⁵ Little wonder that complementarity receives a bad name when its proponents utter such things as “In order to imitate Mary one must renounce all forms of ambition and self-dramatization. Self-realization comes from forgetting oneself and turning to others so that one may become their refuge by exercising patience, goodness, and forbearance. Characteristic of the maternal

⁴ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (W.W. Norton, 2019), 14.

⁵ Even so, Prudence Allen argues that St. Thomas Aquinas is more open than Aristotle to a fuller sense of complementarity. See Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, vol. 2: *The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250–1500* (Eerdmans, 2002), 127–133. See also Renée Köhler-Ryan, “Trees in the Garden: Thomas Aquinas, Catherine of Siena, and the Order of Justice,” Special Issue: “Gardens of Justice,” in *The Australian Feminist Law Journal: A Critical Legal Journal* 39 (2013): 3–20.

woman is the ability to wait and be silent.”⁶ There is nothing quite so demeaning as telling a woman that she is at her best when suffering in silence. No wonder at all that women turn to critical theories of power when told by the local priest, who is alarmed at any woman studying the topic of “Women in the Church”: “God made Mary the most holy person ever placed on the earth, but he put Joseph in charge of her.”⁷ The better approach is far more nuanced, with the faithful woman or man at the source of revelation of what it means to be human, feminine, and masculine.

An analysis of power from a political theorist may be useful here. Jean Bethke Elshtain explains that a theory of complementarity of the sexes analyzes “powers as plural, *potentia* rather than *potestas*. *Potestas* is a political construal of power as rule or dominion: power over others. *Potentia* points us toward something more open, less codified, from which our notion of potential is derived.”⁸ In this assessment, critical feminist theology uses a hermeneutic of *potestas*; an interpretation whereby power belongs to a few, when it should belong to all. Accordingly, patriarchal culture places *potestas* in the hands and institutions of men, alienating others who should at least share in this same power. Complementarity becomes an ideological weapon; emancipation is possible when this fact is revealed. Natalia Imperatori-Lee, for instance, argues that the “new feminism” promoted by Pope John Paul II is “in fact a complementarian gender ideology”; only when this is demonstrated can patriarchal systems be overthrown and power equally distributed.⁹ Similarly, Brianne Bell Jacobs speaks in terms of alienation and ideology: “Defining people ontologically as male and female is . . . a biologically and historically incorrect narrative that empowers those who fit the definition of masculinity by enabling them to violently disempower and ‘feminize’ those who do not.”¹⁰

On the other hand, complementarity employs a language aligned with *potentia*, which is “less codified” than *potestas* and at the same time less dependent on thinking in terms of power structures. The source of *potestas* is sexed human individuality, which provides a

⁶ Jutta Burggraf, “The Mother of the Church and the Woman in the Church: A Correction of Feminist Theology Gone Astray,” *The Church and Women: A Compendium*, ed. Helmut Moll, trans. Maria Shrady (Ignatius, 1988), 255.

⁷ Tracy McEwan, *Women and the Catholic Church: Negotiating Identity and Agency* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025), 1.

⁸ Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Women and the Dilemma of Equality,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 6, no. 4 (2003): 41.

⁹ Natalia Imperatori-Lee, *Women and the Church: From Devil’s Gateway to Discipleship* (Paulist Press, 2024), 95.

¹⁰ Brianne Bell Jacobs, *Holy Body: Gender and Sexual Difference in Theological Anthropology and Ecclesiology* (Bloomsbury, 2024), 2.

range of expressions that are equivocal, rather than univocal. That is, masculinity and femininity expand in range wherever a man or a woman acts in accord with his or her metaphysical givenness. Wherever articulations of complementarity lean too heavily on a binary between the masculine and the feminine, they tend to sell the framework short. For every person is called to incorporate a range of capacities that can be called masculine or feminine, based on where these virtues, or actualized potentialities, tend to appear. Arguably, the complementarian should be more open to acknowledging a shift between the ranges of masculine and feminine based on new revelations, as women enter more into public life and the professions.

As might be seen already, the theory of complementarity that I will depend upon here veers away from rigid binaries. It is mainly grounded in Hildegard of Bingen's and Edith Stein's elaboration of how every human person is called to be an ever-clearer image of God, as "male and female." Women and men are primarily persons; they are individual, sexed living bodies, with psychological, spiritual, and social dimensions that depend upon the biological, while at the same time transcending the merely physical. Stein's theory of complementarity in particular emphasizes that social conditions can either nurture or jeopardize the full flourishing of one's personal identity, of which a fundamental dimension is one's gender. Nancy Dallavalle's concept of "Critical Essentialism" provides another vantage point toward complementarity by asserting with Catholic magisterial teaching that "biological sexuality is not merely anthropologically, but theologically, significant"; and with critical feminist theology that "we have no access to uninterpreted biological sexuality, the division of humanity into male-and-female is itself a patriarchal social construction with only incidental biological moorings."¹¹ The physical—what Stein speaks of as the *Leib*, or the lived and experienced body—is fundamental. However, that lived body with the entire entailed person, depends upon the social conditions in which the individual person lives. Stein was invested in establishing who women are and what they need. She was also aware that she could not ever fully know the answers to these questions without having experienced what it looks like to be a woman undertaking new opportunities theretofore unavailable to them. We can ask what this might mean, too, for the life of the Church.

Melbourne in January. A group of us are gathered to discern and write the Continental submission for Oceania. As we introduce ourselves, we find that all the men in the group are ordained, and all the women

¹¹ Nancy A. Dallavalle, "Neither Idolatry nor Iconoclasm: A Critical Essentialism for Catholic Feminist Theology," *Horizons* 25, no. 1 (1998): 30.

are laity. There are no laymen and there are no religious, women or men. The convenor celebrates that two of us have left behind two-year-old children to participate in this prayer and work. But what strikes me more is a phrase that Grace, from Papua New Guinea, uses when she introduces herself. "I do not work for the La Salle Fathers," she says. "I work with them." This simple but effective phrase is one I will recall many times as I explain what synodality is to others, and as I think about what it means to be a synodal Church where women and men, lay, consecrated, religious and ordained, work together to find what God wants of the Church in the contemporary world.

During the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia and the Synod on Synodality, the role of women in the Church was a major theme of discussion, including the demand for women's ordination, if not to the priesthood, then at least to the diaconate.

At moments during both the Plenary Council and the Synod, it was evident that complementarity was considered only in its "fractional" and not in its "integral" mode—terms to be explained shortly. When an intervention argued that women bring a lived dimension of mercy to Church life—that women can be better at being merciful, as it were—I heard one member say under their breath, "That's terrible; men can be merciful too!" One of the cruder interpretations of complementarity reduces humans to their reproductive organs, and not even to the fullness of their lived bodies. It is as though the "new feminism" is a kind of physicalism, or naturalism, with "penises and vaginas"¹² determining every other dimension of who a person is—this is the way that Imperatori-Lee at least interprets it. In a way, this is understandable, given the difficulty of explaining that masculine and feminine strengths of character—or virtues—are first of all human virtues, distinctively revealed through the actions of individual men and women. One must fall neither into universalism nor away from the reality of the sexed body. A full theory of complementarity does not say that biology determines every way that a person exists and acts as human. However, it takes seriously that males and females are disposed toward life—biologically, socially, and otherwise—in different ways. For the complementary philosopher-theologian, this means that an individual man or woman is not to be reduced to the biological, but instead that the physiological is integrated into an entire individual reality that signifies how God and creation can be revealed through differentiated gender. Complementarians walk a fine line. Insisting on the shared humanity, irreducible to male *or* female, they avoid Rosemary Radford Ruether's recommendation that we avoid

¹² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Beacon, 1983), 92, 94.

altogether the idea that “certain psychic attributes are to be labeled masculine and others are to be labeled feminine.”¹³ At the same time, Hildegard of Bingen and Edith Stein propose that every human person needs to foster a range of both masculine and feminine virtues, without falling into the trap of thinking that every person can do everything possible for every human.¹⁴ There are still some vocations that are masculine or feminine—most notably fatherhood and motherhood—and this plays out too in the order of salvation history, which includes a male priesthood but which today *seems* to lack the female complement. This, precisely, is where more work is needed.

When my fellow Synod member Grace described synodality, it helped me to see this theory of complementarity between women and men, in all walks of life, in greater perspective. At its best, synodality is a form of encounter that can enrich and give shape to otherwise abstract ideas. Listening and conversing with those who have a very different understanding of the role of women in the Church has helped me to know better their motivations. This, in turn, has facilitated a deeper understanding of a philosophical argument or framework. While I still see great merit in the theory of complementarity, I think it needs to provide a deeper response to the proposal that only when women can become priests will the Church acknowledge their dignity. Complementarity at its best is akin to the Pauline sense whereby all Christians make up one body, each bringing different gifts that are attuned to personal attributes that will ultimately be “neither male nor female” (Gal 3:28) and instead radiate divine glory through individuality that is sexed and at the same time open to the full range of spiritual, human, virtues.

Sister Prudence Allen, RSM, has provided the most systematic philosophical account of the concept of complementarity in her three-volume *The Concept of Woman*.¹⁵ Allen articulates the approaches taken to what it means to be a woman across the history of Western thought, from the Presocratics through to thinkers in the twentieth century. As she says succinctly in the third volume, “Complementarity theories defend the simultaneous equal dignity and philosophically significant differences of women and men.”¹⁶ In the period covered in

¹³ Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk*, 133.

¹⁴ Prudence Allen, “Sex and Gender Differentiation in Hildegard of Bingen and Edith Stein,” *Communio* 20, no. 2 (1993): 392.

¹⁵ Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, vol. 1: *The Aristotelian Revolution, 750BC–AD1250* (Eerdmans, 1985); Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, vol. 2, part 1: *The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250–1500* (Eerdmans, 2006); Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, vol. 2, part 2: *The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250–1500* (Eerdmans, 2006); Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, vol. 3: *The Search for Communion of Persons, 1500–2015* (Eerdmans, 2016).

¹⁶ Allen, *Concept of Woman*, 3:8.

the third volume, which is closest to our own time, Allen locates “two versions of complementarity: *fractional complementarity* and *integral complementarity*.”¹⁷ Allen points out that etymologically “gender” has its direct correlate in sex. “Gender,” that is, refers to how a human engenders life, as either a male or a female. Thus gender relates directly to the sexed body of the human person. That sexed body, due to the psychosomatic unity that is the human person, entails that all dimensions of the psyche are conditioned according to whether a person is male or female.¹⁸

In *fractional complementarity*, a woman and a man are described as contributing fractional portions to a relation that together add up to one whole. In *integral complementarity*, a woman and a man are each considered whole persons, and together they “synergetically generate something or someone more.”¹⁹ Fractional complementarity is certainly simpler, easier to grasp, and is often set forth as the Church’s view. It tends to split human qualities into two parts—as though only men can be active, just, strong, courageous, reasonable, while women are passive, merciful, delicate, empathetic, and sympathetic. Unfortunately, this fractional approach is what people often think of when they hear “complementarity.”

Integral complementarity is founded on a metaphysics of the human person where male and female are different, equal, and called toward a community where together they can develop the range of human virtues available to all persons. That metaphysics of personhood has hylomorphic, psychosomatic roots. That is to say, it presupposes the fundamental inseparability between body and soul, which is the source of personal identity and human fulfilment. A female body, with its capacity to conceive, bear, and nurture life, is inseparable from the woman’s attitude toward the world, her capacities, and her spirituality. One could as justifiably begin by describing a woman’s soul in order to explain her body, but the phenomenologist begins with the experience of the lived body in the first instance. The point is that soul and body reciprocally shape (or even co-condition) one another. The soul influences the body, necessarily, just as much as the body necessarily influences the soul. Of course, every human person can deny this interrelationship, to impose mind over matter, will over integration.

It is difficult to find critical feminist theologians who engage with integral complementarity rather than fractional complementarity. Ruether and Imperatori-Lee, for instance, interpret complementarity

¹⁷ Allen, *Concept of Woman*, 3:31.

¹⁸ Allen, *Concept of Woman*, 3:9–10.

¹⁹ Allen, *Concept of Woman*, 3:8.

only as fractional.²⁰ Brianne Bell Jacobs, referring to the theory as “complimentarity” throughout her article on “An Alternative to Gender Complementarity,” again reduces the theory to one about biological sexual organs, even if more recently she has attempted a more sympathetic engagement with the tradition of Thomistic thought.²¹ Margaret Farley argues against an “uncritical notion” of complementarity, to say that women and men should never be reduced to “social and cultural stereotypes that promote hierarchical relations.”²² Proponents of integral complementarity might well agree.

One might say that the reduction of a person to reproductive organs is so crude a capitulation of complementarity that it may not be complementarianism at all. It does not help matters that Hans Urs von Balthasar, who has in some ways influenced the ideas of “new feminism” of John Paul II, comes uncomfortably close to the fractional complementarity that Allen identifies and that is highly sexualized. The language that Balthasar uses when describing the relationship between Christ and the Church is so much so that it contradicts the integral complementarian’s goal of identifying femininity grounded in but not confined by sexual acts.²³

Another point to consider is that there is a tendency amongst critical feminist theologians to reduce the theory of complementarity to a tenet of what they call “natural law,” which they interpret as a form of naturalism commensurate with biological determinism. In this area, they rightly cite Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas as reducing women to lesser humans based on a flawed biological reading.²⁴ Again, the integral complementarian would agree that sexed biology does not dictate everything about the individual human person. The problem here is in misunderstanding natural law, which seeks to comprehend the flourishing life through examining human experiences in light of human nature and human *telos*.

The integral complementarian examines human nature as the unity of sexed human body together with living soul. As each individual

²⁰ Imperatori-Lee, *Women and the Church*, 92; Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk*, 133.

²¹ Brianne Bell Jacobs, “An Alternative to Gender Complementarity: The Body as an Existential Category in the Catholic Tradition,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2019): 328–345; *Holy Body: Gender and Sexual Difference in Theological Anthropology and Ecclesiology* (Bloomsbury, 2024).

²² Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (Continuum: 2006), 123.

²³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “A Word on *Humanae Vitae*,” *Communio* 20 no. 2 (1993): 437–450; Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Eerdmans 2012), 129; Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (Routledge, 2006), 95–98.

²⁴ See, for instance, Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk*, 119–120; Imperatori-Lee, *Women and the Church*, 97; Jacobs, “An Alternative to Gender Complementarity,” 330, 332; Jacobs, *Holy Body*, 11.

discovers their personal gifts, and acts upon these in the world, possibilities for interrelationships open up that are deeply human. Increased ranges of action for women as well as for men should reveal more human potentialities. This then prompts the question as to why one would stop short of saying that women should do everything that men can (including becoming priests or deacons), thereby revealing more of who women are and what the priesthood is. The response is in appreciating that some actions, some roles, are so intrinsic to what it means to be a man or a woman that fluidity is excluded. Christ's incarnate body, *qua* male, is theologically significant, and this has implications for both men and women in the life of the Church.

Rome. Several days into the First Assembly and the inability of the participants to address the role of women with anything other than the issue of ordination is evident. The atmosphere is oppressive and it becomes increasingly difficult to voice another view. The synodal process should give voice to the voiceless. I think of all those Catholic women for whom ordination is the least thing on their minds, contrary to their lived reality. At the Plenary Council in Australia, a friend was accused of being a "crumb maiden," not a woman at all, because she did not advocate for ordination. Those of us who express something else in Christ's plan for women are dismissed. I return to my residence, disturbed. Over the weekend, I write an intervention, in case there is a moment when it might assist communal discernment.

The next meeting of the assembly. The pressure is building again in interventions. I pray, press the button on my screen to ask for three minutes to speak. When my name appears and my turn arrives, I speak about Mary, the mother of God, and the maternity of all women—biological, but also spiritual. For days afterwards, women come to me with tears in their eyes, of recognition. Others glare. Still others obviously disagree, but want to understand, and so we discuss.

Over a series of days, I strike up an ongoing conversation with Cardinal Ouellet, who says that "of course the Church needs to become more feminine." But we struggle to find those who have adequately articulated this in terms that might be helpful at this Synod. I say that I think von Balthasar had something to say about this but I have not read him. He responds that of course this is one place to look, but with some hesitation. I am not sure how to read this and then we are interrupted. It is a conversation to be picked up later—in the margins of the assembly a year later. I continue to think that having women take on the vocation Christ has given to men is not the answer.

Critical feminist theology interrogates power structures as they relate to the subjugation of women. By focusing on women, feminist theology uncovers a different dimension to the inner workings of

power. Danielle Nussberger explains that “No matter what form patriarchy has taken, feminist theology cries out against it, because it contradicts Christianity’s belief in Christ’s redemption of humanity that includes liberation from the sins of structural violence and injustice. The Christ-event calls for the conversion of power relations to reflect the Pauline message of unity in Christ that eradicates the humanly erected barriers between races, classes, and genders.”²⁵

Aligned with this approach, participants in the Synod more than once heard the argument that seeing only men in the sanctuary during Mass is a major sign of oppression in today’s Church. The visibility of the male hierarchy was given as another sign. In other words, male action, voice, and physicality are at the centre of the Church’s power, and this flows into every other dimension of the Church, with an all-male leadership as the paradigm. Accordingly, the Church’s gendered power structure is inequitable and unjust, and so must be overturned, in particular by opening up female ordination. In a world where every other domain of public life has become accessible to women—at least in principle and more often in practice—so that they can work alongside men, the Church that claims to promote social justice refuses to change. How can the Church claim to uphold and support women on the one hand and deny them the equal rights of men on the other?

Women during the Plenary and the Synod would often remark on how the very language of the Church makes them feel excluded. For years, they claim, they have not been heard or seen, and this has made them feel less than human within the Church. Consultation leading up to both events yielded these findings, including one of the most comprehensive, the *International Survey of Catholic Women*.²⁶ It would follow then that the Church could perform one swift move, in her quest to lead the way in establishing the equal dignity of all persons, by ordaining women. Would this, though, really address the needs of those Catholic women who have named the injustice of an all-male ordained ministry? Even if as a matter of faith one does not accept Paul VI’s declaration “that the Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination” (*Inter Insigniores*, Introduction), or John Paul II’s that “the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful” (*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*,

²⁵ Danielle Nussberger, “Catholic Feminist Theology,” *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 833–834.

²⁶ Tracy McEwan, Kathleen McPhillips, and Miriam Pepper, *International Survey of Catholic Women: Analysis and Report of Findings* (University of Newcastle, 2025).

no. 4), might not another approach still be possible?²⁷ Or, could the Catholic philosopher of complementarity offer further grounds for women to look elsewhere than the priesthood for affirmation of their authentic dignity?

After all, there is a long way to go in offering preferential options for women to thrive in all their life-giving capacities in the workplace. The demand that women have the same rights as men is, when granted, in some respects a poisoned chalice, because it stops short of recognizing important differences. This is something that Christine Firer Hinze has worked through from a Catholic theological perspective, arguing for a society that supports whole families.²⁸ Examples of injustice toward both women and men can be found readily. Even in some developed Western countries, the lack of provision for women to access sufficient maternity leave for their health and well-being is striking. From a philosophical standpoint, Erika Bachiochi's work *The Rights of Women: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* demonstrates how much ground feminism has lost in the US since the days when Mary Wollstonecraft promoted both women's right to work and adequate provisions at the same time to bear children and raise families.²⁹ The pursuit of fulfilment should take into account the differences between the sexes, rather than forcing all women into a male paradigm that seems to forget about family life. However, over time, such a balance has been lost. As Bachiochi notes, Mary Ann Glendon would find by the 1980s that "nearly at the same moment in history when the law was beginning to protect women's *abstract rights* and to promote their opportunities to engage in professional work as never before, it was simultaneously devaluing the *concrete caregiving work* women had provided in the home, gratis, throughout the centuries."³⁰ A more just society, and a more just Church, would not only *see*, but also promote the contributions of women, and the life of the family that revolves around bearing and nurturing vulnerable human persons

A more authentic, more feminine way to witness to the equal

²⁷ Paul VI, "Inter Insigniores: Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood," October 15, 1976, vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html; John Paul II, "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis: Apostolic Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone," May 22, 1994, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html.

²⁸ Christine Firer Hinze, *Radical Sufficiency: Work, Livelihood and a US Catholic Economic Ethic* (Georgetown University Press, 2021), 326–328.

²⁹ Erika Bachiochi, *The Rights of Women: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2021).

³⁰ Bachiochi, *Rights of Women*, 247.

dignity of men and women may be simpler than we think, taking fully into account that the work of caring is intrinsic to human society.

Rome. The Final Assembly. The final text is in front of us. We vote paragraph by paragraph. Paragraph 60 and I pause. "There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church: what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped. Additionally, the question of women's access to diaconal ministry remains open." These few lines cause me to vote against the paragraph. For everything good above that line, I cannot support it. Ordination to the diaconate has taken the place of arguing for ordination to the priesthood in this Synod. But focus on the diaconate causes the same problems. Women need to be themselves . . . and we have not yet worked through what this means. These lines stop me, but the following provides hope. "This discernment needs to continue." I recall the theme of the Plenary Council document earlier: "There is still much to be done." There is consolation even if we are not there yet, so long as this discernment continues.

In 1975, Pope Paul VI addressed the Committee for International Women's Year, reminding those present to study how the dignity and responsibility of women could be properly promoted. This work, he said, "requires a gradual maturation that does not cut corners." Its approach needs to be "discerning with wisdom." This is a "delicate" terrain, for "to speak of the equalization of rights does not solve the problem, which is much deeper: it is necessary to aim for effective complementarity, so that men and women may contribute their own richness and dynamism to the construction of a world, not levelled and uniform, but harmonious and unified, according to the Creator's plan." Such work cannot be for the elite. It needs to address the plight of those "millions of women who do not enjoy basic rights and basic considerations."³¹ This task, to address all women where they are, realistically, and according to the Creator's plan for creativity, has still not been realized. The task is given based on a theory of complementarity. This, though, constitutes a problem, because complementarity is too easily reduced, abused, and in these cases rightfully soundly rejected.

By referring to the roles of men and women respectively, Paul VI can sound like he is slipping into the essentialism that second-wave feminism countered so successfully at the theoretical level. When

³¹ Paul VI, *Discours du Pape Paul VI à la Commission d'étude sur la Femme dans la Société et dans l'église et au Comité Pour L'Année Internationale de la Femme*, 18 April 1975, trans. author, vatican.va/content/paul-vi/fr/speeches/1975/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19750418_anno-internazionale-donna.html.

carrying through the theory of complementarity, it is important to keep this in mind. Those of us with young families who participated in the Synod experienced firsthand the way that the Church's operations seem to forget the realities of family life. That focus on the concrete human person is, Edith Stein would argue, a feminine human potentiality. An emphasis on abstract structures and processes is more masculine.

It is a mistake to say that Stein thinks that men and women are two separate species.³² First and foremost, every man or woman is an individual human person, and together male and female comprise humanity. To be a woman or a man, female or male, is for each of these thinkers to be human and in relationship with others. As Allen states elsewhere, "Both Hildegard and Stein are in agreement on the key aspect of a typology of masculine and feminine, namely that a man has both masculine and feminine characteristics and a woman has both masculine and feminine characteristics, although the relation of men and women to these characteristics is gender determined. If a person is male, then a more natural relation to the masculine and a more socialised aspect to the feminine characteristics is exhibited; while if a person is female, there is a more natural relation to feminine and a more socialised aspect to masculine characteristics."³³

The interplay between "natural relation" and "socialized" is crucial here. Hildegard observed the differences between men and women when working as a medical practitioner in the infirmary of the double monastery where she was an abbess. In that hospital, both men and women were cared for, and Hildegard developed a theory that took into account the similarities and differences that she saw before her. This included an awareness that the physiology of a human person conditions their disposition toward reality—their innermost character—as well as how that inner person could be shaped for better or worse by relationships with other women and men. According to nature, men and women are oriented differently toward God, creation, and each other. Through their interactions with one another, they learn other ways of knowing, acting, and being. Thus, Hildegard will say that men and women "co-create" one another; they need each other in order to learn and practice the full range of virtues.³⁴

In the twentieth century, Edith Stein, who became St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, developed a similar theory, asserting that everything that we find out and theorize about experience and consciousness is grounded in the concrete reality of the individual

³² Renée Köhler-Ryan, "'The Hour of Woman' and Edith Stein: Catholic New Feminist Responses to Essentialism," *Religions* 11, no. 6 (2020): 271, doi.org/10.3390/rel11060271.

³³ Prudence Allen, "Sex and Gender Differentiation," 392.

³⁴ Allen, *Concept of Woman*, 2:15–16.

human person developing across the course of their life.³⁵ At the same time, Stein draws on Scripture to make sense of her observations; she develops a tradition in which faith and reason can be present from the beginning in seeking to understand the world in which we live.³⁶ The human person is a unity of body and soul, such that every spiritual dimension is pre-conditioned by body, and at the same time every physical aspect is formed by the soul.³⁷ Femininity and masculinity are inherent within the individual human person in his or her dimensions.³⁸ Human fulfilment, for Stein, means realising the capacities intrinsic to the person, through agency that freely responds to God, to other persons, and to the world and thereby fosters the full range of human virtues.³⁹

Such engagement in the world, as it were, activates the potencies that are within the human person, and these include femininity and masculinity. Like Hildegard, Stein thinks that women and men need one another to develop. With the feminist theologians briefly discussed above, she thinks that social forces can either enable or disable one's ability to thrive as a woman. Both internal characteristics and external factors are needed. However, the external is always secondary to who a person is, at their core (*kern*), and at that core, one is either female or male.⁴⁰ Concretely, this means that women and men are differently oriented toward human life. These comparisons, when they come together, magnify each other, and the confluence of different approaches to reality brings about greater possibilities for human freedom and the formation of community.

To focus on the differences that women bring into the world, Stein argues that we can find the main characteristics of a woman by seeing how her body and soul form a unified disposition toward life. A woman, without necessarily ever becoming a biological mother, is fundamentally oriented toward conceiving, bearing, and nurturing life. Stein identifies this through observation, through philosophy, and through considering the book of Genesis, where we find Eve, the mother of all the living. Stein states that "Woman naturally seeks to embrace that which is *living, personal, and whole*. To cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth is her natural, maternal yearning. Lifeless matter, the *fact* can hold primary interest for her only insofar

³⁵ Edith Stein, *An Investigation Concerning the State* (ICS Publications, 2006), xviii.

³⁶ Edith Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman According to Nature and Grace," in *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, vol. 2: *Essays on Woman*, ed. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, trans. Freda Mary Oben (ICS Publications, 2017), 60–70.

³⁷ Edith Stein, "Spirituality of the Christian Woman," in *Essays on Woman*, 94.

³⁸ Stein, "Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," 70–75.

³⁹ Stein, "Spirituality of the Christian Woman," 101.

⁴⁰ Peter Tyler, *The Living Philosophy of Edith Stein* (Bloomsbury, 2023), 105–109.

as it serves the living and the personal, not the ordinarily[sic.] for its own sake.”⁴¹ A woman wants what is whole and living, and concrete, and so she is, “directed intuitively and emotionally to the concrete.”⁴² This makes her ready to teach her children, but more importantly, to bring this disposition toward reality into the greater world. In other words, women more naturally bring to the professions something that might otherwise be missing, and the depth of their natural predisposition toward the personal in everyday life is something that they can share with their male colleagues. This “something,” if it could be qualified, would, I think, bring us closer to understanding the feminine dimension into which the Church could more fully grow.

The complementarity proposed by Hildegard and Stein is also developed by others. As a theory, it has been referred to (as seen above) by Paul VI. John Paul II, with the same phenomenological, metaphysical foundations as Stein, develops the ideas of the “new feminism” as well as the “feminine genius.” This in turn has led to a development in thought that is actively, concretely lived by women striving to live out their vocation as Christian, Catholic women, both in public life as well as in the home. Those working to theorize and concretize what the “new feminism” means are responding to John Paul II’s call. In 1988, in his Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, he used the term “feminine genius.”⁴³ Paragraph 99 of *Evangelium Vitae* more explicitly calls upon women to respond to twentieth-century feminism with what he called a “new feminism.” He stated that:

In transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a ‘new feminism’ which rejects the temptation of imitating models of ‘male domination,’ in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation. (no. 99)⁴⁴

The theory of complementarity has enabled some progress toward reaching this goal. However, this same approach brings with it significant challenges, not least of which is a tendency to speak about men and women as so different that their shared human purposes and the virtues that they hold in common can be overlooked. An overemphasis on difference can entail an unliveable sense of

⁴¹ Edith Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” in *Essays on Woman*, 45.

⁴² Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” 45.

⁴³ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, August 15, 1988, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html.

⁴⁴ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, March 25, 1995, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.

masculinity or femininity, and the enforcement of stereotypes. At the same time, the picture that is put forward can sound and seem unachievable and idealistic. The real issue I find now, though, is that the theory does not really go far enough. In practice, complementarity has focused on what women bring to public life, to the professions. This has brought with it benefits, but also pressures, because women still, for the most part, are expected in their professional lives to take up the responsibilities of a workforce defined for so long by men. One occasionally finds clues about how we can make this different—but at a theoretical level this will only be possible when complementarity takes another step, toward a heightened sense of difference that is at the same time an expression of the fullness of humanity. That is, we are still finding our way toward how Christian women can be fully feminine in the way that Christ wants, so that the Church can find a greater balance in its approach.

Ignoring differences drives women into the space of male domination, which at least partially explains the clarion call for female ordination as a sign of finally achieving equality with men. Recently, one of the main proponents of John Paul II's "new feminism," Helen Alvaré, reflected that we may need a "New Feminism 2.0," that is less concerned with demonstrating that Catholic women have equality according to the world's standards. At a conference at the University of Notre Dame in the United States, where some of the main speakers had made headlines disputing whether or not John Paul II could be called "feminist"—that being for some of them a very dirty word—Alvaré sought to steer the conversation toward something more.

Alvaré challenges "New Feminism 2.0" by asking what it is that women have to offer that no man can give. She ends her reflection with a challenge:

I think a new Christian feminism has to state clearly that even *its* earlier incarnation set its sights too low. The glass ceiling we need to break is not the floor of the C-suite or even the top floor of the Chancery, but the ceiling of every building in the world, the ceiling that separates the visible from the invisible, the ceiling that obfuscates the *divine sphere*—which is to say God's will that *every* woman in the world is called to reveal to the world things about God that *only* . . . *she* . . . *can*."⁴⁵

In other words, we need to discover what, in our own age, only women can do, as women, for the kingdom of God. In what follows, I will

⁴⁵ Helen Alvaré, "The New Feminism, Then and Now," *Church Life Journal*, June 5, 2025, churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/new-feminism-then-and-now/. One of Alvaré's main contributions to the New Feminism is her edited work, *Breaking Through: Catholic Women Speak for Themselves*, ed. Helen Alvaré (Our Sunday Visitor, 2012).

offer several suggestions for thinking through what this might mean. The ideas are sketches, rather than fully fleshed out, and they are offered as potential opportunities for direction. Now, I ask, what can women reveal to the world about God, specifically as women, that no one else can?

Sydney. The Summer before the work of the Plenary Council has really begun. A day of retreat for the participants. We are given a long time for prayer and reflection. I move toward the chapel on the retreat grounds, and meet two other women outside. We reflect together on what we have heard from the retreat master, what we are thinking, and our hopes for the work ahead. Christ is inside the chapel and we are about to go in to find him. I am reminded of the women who went to find Christ's body, early in the morning, in the tomb. In this feminine moment, this time of hope, I catch a glimpse of how Christ unites us, calls us, differently, but for all. There is still much to be done.

Proposed Direction 1. Can we reclaim the words of helpmate and handmaid?: “Helpmate” and “handmaid” cause such consternation that they rarely appear in the current discourse. In Genesis 2:18, God declares that Adam should not be alone, and that he should have what is usually translated as a “help-mate.” However, Robert Alter deliberately chooses a different translation of *‘ezer kenegdo*, noting that it is “notoriously difficult to translate.” “‘Help’,” he says, “is too weak [a translation] because it suggests a merely auxiliary function, whereas *‘ezer* elsewhere connotes active intervention on behalf of someone, especially in military contexts, as often in Psalms.”⁴⁶ And so, Alter translates the phrase as “It is not good for the human to be alone, I shall make him a sustainer beside him.” Alter also notes that the “beside” means “alongside him” or “opposite him,” “a counterpart to him.”⁴⁷ From the beginning then, man and woman are equals, beside each other. As Stein observes, it is as though they are mirror images.⁴⁸ The woman does not simply “help” the man—without her he could not live. And, one must not forget that Eve is the “mother of all that lives.” Women bring life into the world, not passively and as mere appendages to men. Instead, they are called to go into battle, precisely for life in all its dimensions. Women, then, should be at the front line wherever life is to be nurtured, but also defended. That front line might be one’s home, the domestic Church, too much idealized or

⁴⁶ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary: The Five Books of Moses* (W.W. Norton, 2019), 14n18.

⁴⁷ Alter, *Hebrew Bible*, 14n18.

⁴⁸ Stein, “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman,” 61.

denigrated. It might also be in the areas of bioethics, law, and policy. Certainly, it is in the school, the university, the hospital, and the medical clinic. Mary is the handmaid for whom God casts the mighty from their thrones, so that she can be called blessed. This is no human slavery but reframed freedom. What can we learn from this?

Proposed Direction 2. Mutual service, not mutual power: St. Paul's much deprecated analogy in the Letter to Ephesians touches on this. It is so challenging, this notion of "subservience." But surely all humans are called to be subservient, not as slaves, but like Mary—to Christ and to each other. Stein gives a tantalizing glimpse of what this might mean. Woman, the mirror image of man in the garden, is essential to his flourishing. At the same time, though, man is the "helper" to woman in service of the life that she brings into the world and the personal relationship that she fosters to all humans and in particular to her children. Stein states: "Woman is bound more intensely to a child both physically and spiritually, and the entire arrangement of her life is committed to this union; she finds in this her first duty. Man is placed by her side as helper and protector."⁴⁹ The political implications of this are compelling. If man is also the helper, at the service of woman's relationship to new life, then Christian society should orient itself differently. The Church could be even better with workplace practices that foster family life. Every parish would have ways to welcome children and to recognize the joys and sorrows of parents, supporting them spiritually, emotionally, spiritually as families. This might open up ways in parish life to be more feminine, which could have a ripple effect in our institutions.

Proposed Direction 3. Less talk of governance and structures: So much conversation about how we can be a better Church ends up talking about structures and governance. This takes us right into the realm of *potestas*, depending on something objective and external, rather than personal and relational. Femininity is the domain of relationships. Instead of asking first about how we should organize ourselves, a way to find our feminine side as Church may well be to ask how we can be better persons for each other.

St. Peter's Basilica. The final mass. I look over and see that the sandal of one of the facilitators is broken. A missionary, she has given up any form of income to be here, for this work. I think of the Indian sister who relates that religious sisters are very often given only menial tasks—cleaning, cooking—no matter how capable and well-educated they might be. And the Japanese consecrated woman, hurt that a cardinal had remarked that so many in the assembly were there being

⁴⁹ Edith Stein, "Problems of Women's Education," in *Essays on Woman*, 177–178.

paid. Nothing was further from the truth, and again, she was giving up her income to do this work for two months across two years. I miss my husband and my children and am relieved that this time I have made sure to book the first flight home that I can take. **M**

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