

AlbertMohler.com

Courage and Controversy: The Vatican Takes on Feminism

The Vatican has launched a major salvo in the culture war by releasing an important statement which opposes ideological feminism and affirms the integrity of marriage and the natural family. Hitting the scene just as the U.S. presidential campaign goes into high gear, the statement is certain to have an impact. Some feminists are already hitting the panic button.

Wednesday, August 4, 2004

The Vatican has launched a major salvo in the culture war by releasing an important statement which opposes ideological feminism and affirms the integrity of marriage and the natural family. Hitting the scene just as the U.S. presidential campaign goes into high gear, the statement is certain to have an impact. Some feminists are already hitting the panic button.

The magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church, its central governing authority, issued the document on July 31. The Vatican's statement is entitled "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World." The document was approved by Pope John Paul II, officially released by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and is intended to instruct the Church's bishops on the issues of women, feminism, and gender roles.

The document presents a devastating critique of ideological feminism, with particular attention to radical strains that have been highly influential in the United States and other Western nations.

Ideological feminism, the statement argues, "leads to opposition between men and women, in which the identity and role of one are emphasized to the disadvantage of the other, leading to harmful confusion regarding the human person, which has its most immediate and lethal effects in the structure of the family." Faced with mistreatment and subordination, women have improperly responded with an ideology that makes them "the adversaries of men," the statement explains.

Addressing more contemporary forms of feminist ideology, the letter to the bishops also condemns postmodernist attempts to deconstruct gender. Differences between the sexes are not "mere effects of historical and cultural conditioning," the Church emphasizes. "The obscuring of the difference or duality of the sexes has enormous consequences on a variety of levels," the statement insists. These consequences include the weakening of the family, damage to marriage, and confusion over the very nature of sexuality. As the statement instructs, these feminist ideologies have "in reality inspired ideologies which, for example, call into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality."

This last concern suggests a possible rationale for the timing and structure of the Vatican's letter. With the homosexual movement pushing the agenda of same-sex marriage, and with Western courts and governmental structures moving towards its acceptance, the Catholic Church has responded with a clear statement of opposition to the "polymorphous sexuality" that is the inevitable result of feminist ideology and the denial of God-ordained differences between the sexes. This "polymorphous sexuality" now marks the public culture of the United States and many other nations, devastating families and undermining the moral integrity of civilization itself.

What gives birth to these feminist ideologies? The Vatican explains that, though political and sociological factors have some impact, the "deeper motivation" is found "in the human attempt to be freed from one's biological conditioning." In other words, these postmodern ideologies promote the idea that human beings are not bound by any biological conditioning or physical structure. Accordingly, human beings have attempted to remake themselves in terms of whatever

gender or sex roles they might choose.

Arguing from Scripture, the Vatican letter returns to the first two chapters of Genesis, affirming, "From the very beginning therefore, humanity is described as articulated in the male-female relationship. This is the humanity, sexually differentiated, which is explicitly declared 'the image of God'." According to Genesis 2:4-25, the woman is created as a helpmate and life partner for Adam. "The term here does not refer to an inferior, but to a vital helper. This is so that Adam's life does not sink into a sterile and, in the end, baneful encounter with himself. It is necessary that he enter into relationship with another being on his own level. Only the woman, created from the same 'flesh' and cloaked in the same mystery, can give a future to the life of man."

Differences between the sexes reflect God's glory and also serve to instruct humanity concerning the essential goodness of marriage and the calling to procreation. The 'one flesh' union of the man and the woman, within the covenant of marriage, fulfills the meaning of both man and woman, and in this covenant there is no shame.

Interestingly, the Vatican explicitly pushes its argument beyond the physical dimension to the psychological and spiritual constitution of both men and women. In particular, the document argues that "sexual difference" includes psychological distinctions between men and women, as well as physical differences. This means that women have a particular role, a unique psychological and spiritual giftedness, as well as a different physical constitution. "It is women, in the end, who even in very desperate situations, as attested by history past and present, possess a singular capacity to persevere in adversity, to keep life going even in extreme situations, to hold tenaciously to the future, and finally to remember with tears the value of every human life."

In the face of political correctness and modern confusion, the Vatican argues that women are first and foremost "significantly and actively present in the family." This unembarrassed emphasis of the woman's domestic role is balanced by the letter's affirmation of the important role of women in the community and the church. Nevertheless, the "genius of women" in the family is one of the central aspects of this Catholic statement.

In a novel approach, the letter calls for the work of women within the family to be valued, even as work outside the home is valued by the society. "In this way, women who freely desire will be able to devote the totality of their time to the work of the household without being stigmatized by society or penalized financially, while those who wish also to engage in other work may be able to do so with an appropriate work-schedule, and not have to choose between relinquishing their family life or enduring continual stress, with negative consequences for one's own equilibrium and the harmony of the family."

The Vatican offered no suggestions as to how its proposal could be transformed into workable policy, but the letter should be respected for its clear affirmation of the invaluable role of women as wives and mothers.

Liberal Catholics were quick to respond with criticism and outrage. "The demonization of feminism is most disturbing," declared Frances Kissling, president of Catholics for a Free Choice, an abortion-rights advocacy group. She told *The Washington Post* that her blood pressure "shot up 20 points" when she read the statement. Kissling told Reuters that the document represents something of "a time warp." As she explained, "I thought for sure I was in the 1960s and Archie Bunker had been appointed theologian to the Pope."

The letter's rejection of women as priests outraged Regina Schulte, a feminist theologian who told the *National Catholic Reporter* that the statement's argument that the relationship between Christ and the church should be seen in terms of bride and bridegroom "places women in a headlock as far as church leadership and ultimately ordination go." Of course, the Bride and Bridegroom image is drawn directly from Scripture.

In one of the most important, though brief, sections of the letter, the Vatican condemns liberal methods of biblical interpretation that deconstruct the Scriptural text by arguing that the Bible presents a "patriarchal conception of God nourished by an essentially male-dominated culture." This critique has become the norm in liberal seminaries and divinity schools, where feminists have largely won the debate, condemning the Bible as a warped and corrupted text that must be corrected by modern feminist sensitivities.

Evangelicals should welcome this statement and the debate that is certain to ensue. While evangelicals will differ with some aspects of the Catholic argument—especially a concluding section dealing with Mary—the letter itself should be

welcomed as a serious and responsible argument against ideological feminism. With confusion over gender and sexuality threatening the very foundations of civilization itself, the Vatican's statement is well-timed and courageous. In the midst of our present conflict, Evangelicals must respond to the challenge of ideological feminism with equal clarity and equal courage.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.