



Theology Corner

Vol. 30 – February 11th, 2018

Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“Should We Refer to God as He, She, or It?”

The topic of gender pronouns has been somewhat of a hot topic lately, and I think this needs to be addressed from a Catholic perspective. It begins from a discussion about men preferring to be referred to as “she” or women preferring to be referred to as “he”, so that they can be addressed based on the gender that they identify with. This, in itself, is problematic on many levels as a Catholic due to rejection of objective reality, but it has now gone further in saying that we should be open to calling God either He, She, or It. So, the question becomes, “Can we call God ‘She’ or ‘It?’” Can we pray, “Our Mother who art in Heaven”? No, and here’s why: First off, we must understand that God himself is not a body, but a spirit. St. Thomas Aquinas points out that God cannot be a body since a body is dependent on a Creator and God is an uncreated and unmoved being.

If God is not a body, then calling him male or female are simply analogical. Does that open up the possibility to call God whatever we want? The answer is still, “no.” When we speak in analogy about the gender of God, we are basing it on some similarity between our human gender and God’s attributes. It is true to say that God has both masculine and feminine qualities as we are all made in his image (intellect, will, and other qualities), but again, since these pronouns are only analogical, we are obliged to use God’s preferred pronoun. Note that this is very different from the argument from human beings wanting to be referred to as something that they are not, because we are objectively either male or female according to our biology. Since God is not biologically male or female, we must take his word for what he prefers to be called, and it is undeniably clear in scripture that he wants us to refer to him in the masculine form. Jesus himself asks us to refer to God as “Father” in Matthew 6:9-13. He continues to refer to God as Father throughout the Gospels as well as referring to himself as the bridegroom. We have the fatherhood of God in the Trinity, God incarnate came in the form of a man in Jesus Christ. Even before Christ, the Jews would have been astounded to hear of someone referring to God as mother. It can be argued that this was some form of patriarchal bias, but if it was, wouldn’t Jesus have put an end to it, considering that he violated many cultural norms in favor of the truth?

Why does God prefer to be referred to as male? This has not been directly revealed to us by God, but many theologians throughout the ages have mentioned that it is most likely due to the fact that masculine characteristics tend to closely identify with God’s nature in the sense that he is the Source of creation as opposed to its bearer and nurturer. The feminine role is then taken up by the Church who is of course referred to as the Bride of Christ, who nurtures God’s children into right relationship with God. Being that God refers to himself as such, and the fact that God the Father is not definitively a natural man, we ought to truly address him by his preferred pronoun which is very clearly, “Him/He.” What about referring to God as an “It”? It would not be proper to call God an “It” because this would strip him of all personhood. This very personhood is one which we profess him to have as the First Person of the Holy Trinity. While this is a question that deserves a lengthy response, I just wanted to touch briefly on this in light of recent news both in secular society and in some non-Catholic Christian denominations.