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There Is No Ideal Woman

09.30.2009 | Culture and Society  The theologian who received the University of Dayton's 2009 Marianist Award this month says the portrayal of Mary as the ideal woman and the maternal face of God may be a disservice to both men and women.

"An adequate theology of Mary must be clear on this point: There is no such thing as the eternal feminine; there is no essential feminine nature; there is no ideal woman," said Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., distinguished professor of theology at Fordham University and past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America and the ecumenical American Theological Society.

Over the centuries, Johnson said, theologians have described Mary as a perfect woman and therefore the model for all other women: her receptivity to God's will, her self-giving love, her ability to bear suffering and her tireless devotion to her son and to all her children in need.

These are all good qualities, Johnson said, but it's nonetheless a dualistic anthropology that divides men and women into two types of human nature: The masculine nature, marked by intelligence, assertiveness, independence and the ability to make decisions, thus fitting them for the public realm; and the feminine nature, based on emotion, gentleness and receptive responsiveness, thus fitting women for the private domain — mainly childbearing and care of the vulnerable and the elderly.

"Femininity defined this way functions as an obstacle to maturity," she said. "It prevents the development of critical intellect, of the capacity for righteous anger and other characteristics of an adult personality."

It blocks women from functioning in the public order, she said, because it assumes that by nature, women are fit for domestic, auxiliary roles. That is limiting to both women and men, she said.

"The facts on the ground in our day show that men can be sensitive and nurturing, and women can be smart and lead, and both women and men can do both," she said.

Johnson proposes that instead of employing a dualistic anthropology that separates the heart and the mind, Marian theology should grow out of an egalitarian anthropology of partnership that respects male and female differences but refuses to stereotype "gifts of character which are freely given across genders."

It's controversial, Johnson admits, but it bears study and discussion.

Johnson, the author of seven books on theology and the editor of an eighth, said she relates to Mary not simply as an intercessor before the throne of God, but as a companion in the struggle of history, inspired by the Holy Spirit. She described a tradition in the villages of El Salvador: When Catholics recite the traditional litany of the saints, they add the names of their own contemporary models for the cause of justice. After each name, the people respond in their native Spanish, "Presente," translated, "Be present with us."

- Oscar Romero. "Presente."
- Ignacio Ellacuria. "Presente."
- Celina Ramos. "Presente."
- Young catechists, community workers and religious leaders of the pueblos. "Presente."

"If you take the communion of saints and place within this great cloud of witnesses Miriam of Nazareth ... we can see she walks with us today," Johnson said.

In that light, Mary is "truly our sister," she said, quoting Pope Paul VI. Johnson returned to the Salvadoran litany.

"Miriam of Nazareth," Johnson said. The crowd responded, "Presente."
About the Marianist Award and Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J.

Since 1986, the University of Dayton's annual Marianist Award has honored a Roman Catholic whose work has made a major contribution to the intellectual life. It includes an original work of Marian art and a stipend of $5,000.

Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., has served the church as a theologian on the national Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, a consultant to the Catholic Bishops' Committee on Women in Church and Society, and a theologian on the Vatican-sponsored dialogues between science and religion and on Christ and world religions. She is now a member of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, started by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin to reconcile polarized groups in the Catholic Church.