

The New Theologians Series
Second of Three
God as Mother, Lover and Friend
July 10, 2011

Today we'll be looking at the second part of my three-part series on the new theologians who began writing during the 1970's, a time of questioning by people seeking expressions of their own unique identities. During the first part of the series, I provided a brief description of the historical foundations of systematic theology and the problems that some modern theologians have surfaced regarding their universal applicability.

Let's start by restating the problem as seen by the theologians of the 70's. How can the Bible truly reflect the experience of those who are oppressed, namely women, racial minorities and the poor, when it was written in a cultural context that was patriarchal and androcentric?

How we think and speak about God influences how we act as individuals as well as interact with others in the world. When we perceive God as having male characteristics we experience our lives through that lens. As Mary Daly, one of the first of these new theologians pointed out, "if God is male, then the male is God." To look at this in a different way, a chosen symbol might have the ability to point to the mystery of God, but that finite symbol is elevated of its own accord. The symbol develops its own sacramentality.

Today we'll be looking at three alternative symbols for God that have been proposed by Sallie McFague, who is the former dean of the Vanderbilt Divinity School. Much of what I'll be saying comes from her 1987 book *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. As a means of comparison, I want to first describe one of the many images of God that we see quite frequently in the Scriptures, and that is God as king, or the monarchial model of God. Many of the images in Handel's *Messiah*, for example, are monarchial. God is all powerful and in charge and he will reign forever and ever. This image of God is frankly comforting to us; God is the one who will take care of us. It implies that the crucial divine activity is the redemption of rebellious humanity, which is loved in spite of its unlovableness. The dangerous side of this image, though, is that God rules from on high, apart from the world, either through divine intervention or controlling the wills of his subjects. God controls the world through domination and benevolence. Godly domination in turn spawns images of the sovereign king who encourages militarism and destruction, while those of a benevolent king encourage passivity and escape from responsibility. This model is so common that it's rarely perceived as being oppressive, and it has been a dominant image in the Western Church for millennia.

Last Sunday I suggested that there are four different ways to look at changing some of the patriarchal and androcentric images that have been part of the Church from its inception. These are reverse sexism, androgyny, complementarity, and mutuality. It is to mutuality, which wants to accept and affirm differences in a context of absolute equality that McFague has turned. She proposes three alternative models of God, namely God as Mother, God as Lover, and God as Friend. I won't be able to do her thesis justice in the short time allotted, but I want to propose these as food for thought that will hopefully provoke further discussion.

While God the Monarch implies the crucial divine activity as the redemption of rebellious humanity, God the Mother implies the crucial divine activity is the creation and nurturing of the world, a world that is loved to the limit of God's very being. We all have an image of our mothers. Admittedly, these may have changed over the years as we discovered

their short comings, but at least in the beginning, most maternal images were favorable. Mothers are characterized by gestation, birthing, and lactation, and what can better describe God's role in the creation of the world and universe? They express the interdependence and interrelatedness of all life. There is a certain physicality involved in creation, and this physicality is echoed in mothers giving birth.

The type of love characterized by God the Mother is divine agapic love. This is the type of love that is totally giving of itself and feeding is one of its primary metaphors, one that's pervasive throughout the Bible. The Eucharistic meal and Jesus feeding the people are but two examples. This nurturing is more than just physical nourishment, though. It also includes a spiritual dimension of well-being. From an ecological point of view, agapic love is all inclusive, so the maternal model is one of impartial justice. God is the parent of all species, not just the human one.

The next model that McFague proposes, God as Lover, might be a difficult one for most of us to accept. That is because we generally recoil at the associations of sexuality and erotic love in connection with God, but let's stick with it a bit to see what we can glean from this model.

The word "passion" has different meanings, both of which are part of our understanding of Jesus. Passion means suffering, and it is this sense we think of in the Passion of Jesus leading up to his crucifixion. But passion can mean a deep feeling of any sort, such as hope, fear, love, joy, grief, desire, and yes, sex. Jesus suffered his passion for us because of the great love toward those who need love the most: the last and the least.

We seem to think God's love should contain no desire, need or interest. This model, though, brings out God's passion and intimacy. It is the erotic love of a lover to a beloved. So why this image? This is why; we never feel better than when we are in love, when we love, and when we are loved. The real crux of this type of love, though, is not desire, sex or lust. It is the sense of being valued. God values us in a way that is lacking in the other models of God. Moreover, this love is not only between God and the individual, but between God and the world. All of God's creations are the beloved.

One other very important aspect of this model is its expression of the divine need. God needs humans. Lovers want and need a response, which is lacking in the monarchical and maternal models. This might seem counterintuitive to many of us; why would God need humans? Think for a moment what it would be like if there were no humans, who alone among all of God's creations are able to conceive of God. There would be precious little interaction between God and the world; animals don't worship. What would God do all day long? Human response is what God seeks, but the response is not just with us as individuals but as part of the world, which is God's body. Humans are not only the hands and feet of God, but also the mind. We are the only creations that can consciously return God's love. God is interested in making the world whole, not just rescuing a few individuals. Salvation is the reunification of the beloved world with its lover, God.

Let's turn now to the third model. God as Friend might seem a little trite, which is how I perceived it at first. I used to hold a certain amount of disdain for those who see God or Jesus as their best friend and think only of the immanent quality of God's interaction with individual humans. Friendship takes on very different qualities, though, depending whether you are a man or a woman. Researcher Daniel Levinson wrote, "In our interviews, friendship was largely noticeable by its absence. As a tentative generalization we would say that close friendship with a man or a woman is rarely experienced by American men." Women, on the other hand, tend to

have deep relationships with their friends and have better social support mechanisms. God as Friend adds another dimension to our understanding of God, one that directly relates to the experience of women. Oddly, though, friendship is not necessary in the sense that creation is. It's this lack of necessity that makes it rare; friends are chosen, not provided for us as are mothers.

Philia is the non-sexual, bonding love of friends. We generally don't think of God's love in this way because it connotes a preference and exclusion; agape love, which is inclusive and nonselective, is more in keeping with our image of divine love. There are four aspects associated with philia love, though, that makes it an appropriate model for God.

First, freedom is the basis of friendship. Other relationships consist of duty, utility or desire. Whereas lovers are normally face-to-face, friends are side-by-side, absorbed in some common truth. This sharing of a common truth or caring about a common truth is characteristic of philia.

Secondly, an inclusive element is implied. Friendship can be with anyone. This friend need not only be other humans, but other creations of God, thus emphasizing again the important ecological aspects of God's love.

Thirdly, friendship demands reciprocity and mutuality. One friend can't be dependent on the other or it's not friendship. Our relationship as a child or lover of God is a dependent one, but in the friendship model, we move toward an interdependent status. This is more of an adult relationship with God and it underscores our willingness to grow up and take responsibility for the world. It is this model that most stresses our nature as relational beings.

Lastly, this is the model of hope. We are not on our own, nor do we belong to ourselves, nor are we left to ourselves. We have God, our friend, standing by us.

I know this has been a lot of information, and I've tried to summarize these complex concepts as succinctly as I could. As I did last week, I want to close by saying that I'm not trying to unseat our familiar models of God. Rather, I'm trying to expand how we think of our relationship with God by using models that emphasize different characteristics or aspects of God. We've been talking in depth about these new models only since the 1970's, and they likely come off being disorienting. My hope is that we can engage in a dialogue about these and other models that provide for us right now, illuminating, helpful, and appropriate ways in which to think about the relationship between God and the world. Amen.

by Fr. Kirby M. Smith