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The Totality (Chapter in Into the Deep: An Unlikely Catholic Conversion)

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The Totality

For over a decade, the maleness of the priesthood kept me away from the Catholic Church. By the time I was a junior in college, my feminism was in full swing, and the ordination of women had become my litmus test for whether or not I could be part of a particular church or denomination.

Once, in college, I was chatting with a fellow student about his decision to become Catholic. Listening to him describe the feast he'd found there—sacraments, Eucharist, saints—I sighed with something like despondent resignation, "Oh, I think I'd be Catholic, too, but they don't ordain women." I was sort of wistfully fatalistic about this, as if I wasn't actually making a choice to reject Catholicism; rather, it was Catholicism that had eliminated itself from the menu of legitimate church options. Already, the beauty of Rome was beckoning, but I stood mournfully on a far shore, like a marooned castaway, unaware I'd rowed there with the strength of my own will, stroke by stroke.

It never occurred to me that there might be compelling reasons for a male-only priesthood—how could there be? I took as an unquestioned premise that all forms of ministry should be open to both men and women. I'd adopted the eschatology of the progressive: century after slow century, Christ was leading his mulish, plodding church out of the gloom of patriarchy and into the beige radiance of egalitarianism. The Catholic Church, weighed down by male bureaucracy, was simply having a hard time relenting to the inexorable tides of justice. Even if I could enter the Church myself, as a conscientious objector, how could I justify raising my hypothetical daughters in a tradition that denies them access to the priesthood? So I reasoned, steering clear.

Years later, after I began teaching, one of my students decided to convert to Catholicism. I remember him telling me this in the living room of my small rental house, where I'd been hosting a Christmas gathering. My reaction to his news was unbridled joy; I remember gasping and saying,

"Oh, Stephen, that's so wonderful," and my effusiveness was genuine. I understood, and even felt to a degree, that magnetic pull toward the Catholic Church, and when people around me followed its call, I cheered enthusiastically from the sidelines, as if the presence of those crossing the Tiber was somehow comforting, even though I was unwilling to make the swim myself.

My enthusiasm for Stephen's conversion noticeably chilled, however, when it came to his shifting views on gender and sexuality. Prior to his conversion, Stephen was a devoted evangelical, and he'd embraced progressive views over his first year of college. I saw in him, to use the buzzword, an "ally" like myself, someone who championed the full inclusion of women in the life of the church. So when his perspective on women's ordination began to change, I took this as a personal affront. I was fine with Stephen becoming a Catholic, but not one of *those* Catholics.

I remember one instance when we wrangled over the issue. I was coaching the university debate team at the time, and travel to and from tournaments created ample opportunity for substantive, energetic discussions. The team had stopped to eat at a Red Robin, and before long the conversation turned toward the issue of female ordination. Stephen explained the multiple reasons for a male priesthood, but none of them seemed compelling. Not that I was really listening; my conviction was so deeply held that I did not entertain the possibility that I could be wrong. But even if I *had* been willing to listen, I'm not sure I could have understood, because I was looking at the issue from outside of Catholicism, rather than from within.

To a post-evangelical feminist, appeals to the constant tradition of the Church are easily dismissed. I respected tradition, vaguely construed, but only its endowments, its gifts from which I felt free to glean. A little Mary here, a little sacramental theology there. I did not see tradition as authoritative, as something to which I was accountable. There were parts to be preserved, and parts to be discarded, and I thought myself in a position to discern the difference. And, from my progressive bias, the longevity of a particular teaching might even be a detriment, rather than an indication of truth.

I was similarly dismissive of the apostolic argument—that Jesus chose only men to be his Apostles. Despite my tenure as an Anglican, I never really understood the importance of apostolic succession. When I glanced at Scripture, I did not see a meaningful difference between the role of an apostle and the role of any follower of Jesus. I latched onto the passages that described women's participation in the ministry of Jesus and the early life of the Church, overlooking those that seemed to give the twelve apostles a unique commission and authority, including the power to forgive sins.

"Just look at the many times Jesus empowers women to proclaim the gospel," I argued, "like the Samaritan woman at the well, and Mary Magdalene, who first brings word to the other disciples about the Resurrection." I probably added the counterargument that Jesus was constrained by the patriarchy of the time, and his choice to send out only male apostles was an expedient one, not meant to be a precedent for the Church that they would establish. Of course, these two assertions subtly contradict one another—I was pointing out that Jesus clearly has no qualms about violating social norms, especially when it comes to women, while also appealing to those same social norms as a reason for his selection of only male apostles.

You can imagine how our discussion unfolded, circling around and around, our assertions flying past each other, because we were speaking from different premises. Stephen was working from an understanding of the unique role of the priest, whereas I was thinking of the non-priestly role of the Protestant pastor; Stephen was appealing to the authority of sacred tradition and Scripture, while I was playing an adept feminist game of *sola scriptura* cherry-picking.

Our conversation ended in an aporia of mutual defeat. We were standing in the parking lot of the Red Robin, outside the university van, while the rest of the team loaded up. "You have to understand," I said to him, my voice cracking with emotion, "That for men this is just an intellectual discussion. There is nothing at stake. But for a woman, it's personal. This is my dignity, my value as a person that's being called into question." Stephen looked pained, his face signaling both empathy and frustration. He seemed to understand, in that moment, that there was nothing he could say, no argument he could make, that I would be able to hear. At its core, my resistance to his position, the Catholic position, was an emotional one. It was not my mind that needed to be persuaded, but my heart.

Eventually, several years hence, my desire for Catholicism overwhelmed my feminist resistance. By this time, Stephen was a seminarian, on the road to becoming a priest himself—as it turns out, this question of the priesthood *was* deeply personal for him. He became my primary spiritual advisor when I went through RCIA. Teacher and student swapped places. During that year of discernment, my qualms about the priesthood were still unresolved, but they had receded to the background. Although I was not yet persuaded by the Catholic position, I was willing to suspend my disbelief.

After I became Catholic, I returned to the various arguments given by the Church for the male priesthood. I understood them all, in a rational sense, and was able to accept them in my newfound trust for the Church and her authority. But none of those reasons were able to enter my heart and

alter my sentiments—save one: the argument from sacramental theology, the idea that the priest serves as an icon of Christ during the Mass.

Stephen had tried to explain this all those years ago, but standing as I was outside the sacramental Catholic cosmos, I didn't understand it. "Why essentialize Christ's maleness and not his Jewishness?" I argued. "Saying only men can be priests is like saying only Jewish men can be priests, since Jesus was also Jewish." The argument was unintelligible to me, and remained so, until I had a better understanding of how the Mass differs meaningfully from a Protestant worship service, and a priest from a Protestant pastor.

The Mass, as I've mentioned before, is a liturgical staging of a cosmic drama. All the central mysteries that beat at the heart of Christianity are made present: the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the mystical union of Christ and his Church. The Mass re-presents Christ's sacrifice, his gift of self to humanity, and through that sacrifice, in a literal and symbolic sense, we become one flesh with Christ in communion. If this sounds like conjugal language, it is. The conjugal metaphor is the primary metaphor given to us to understand the relationship between God and humankind, and this metaphor animates the sacred liturgy, because the Mass is also a wedding, a consummation of the marriage between Christ and his Bride—us.

This conjugal language is not a projection from the realm of the human, a convenient illustration gleaned from the reality of human sexual dimorphism. Rather, *sexual difference exists to carry this metaphor*, to reveal this divine reality, as well as to facilitate marital union and the transmission of human existence. The conjugal metaphor is etched into the fabric of our embodiment, and whether we realize it or not, whether we accept it or not, we are living icons of this cosmic marriage between God and his beloved.

This is why priests must be male; not because men are smarter, or better leaders, or more spiritual, or fill-in-the-blank, but because of the iconography of the male body. This is not something earned or chosen but *given*. There is a givenness to our bodies that makes present the realities of God, and the intricate nexus of these images, that sacred web, has become far more precious to me, far more beautiful than a flattened, bland gesture toward earthly equality. Sacrificing the embodiment of these metaphors to satisfy some modern egalitarian sensibility would be, to me, a tragic desecration, a calamitous loss.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to make a comparison between a Catholic Mass and the evangelical church services of my upbringing. Stripped of the Eucharist, there is no divine drama being staged. There is merely the word, and words about the word, but *the* Word never becomes flesh for his people to touch and taste. There is no altar, no one standing

in persona Christi to signify Christ as bridegroom and eternal high priest, offering the only sacrifice that is pleasing to the Father: himself. There is no wedding banquet of the lamb. The preacher is not a direct corollary to a priest, and in Protestant worship, the sacred iconography is not preserved. So when it comes to the debate about women's roles in Protestant circles, the justifications tend to revolve around women's capacities (or lack thereof) for ministry, devolving into cartoonish understandings of the sexes and selective interpretations of Scripture—justifications my younger feminist self was right to find dubious.

As a Catholic, the entire debate has been reframed in a sacramental light. I've come to not merely tolerate the tradition of a male-only priesthood; I have developed a deep gratitude and love for it, and I hope the Church protects this tradition with *matrem ursus* ferocity, especially as it becomes increasingly countercultural. This feature of the Catholic Church that once kept me away from her has become a mark of beauty—a sign not of patriarchy, but of the divine iconography that all sexed bodies carry.

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This newfound understanding of the priesthood became a key for me that opened an entirely new—and thoroughly ancient—way of thinking about manhood and womanhood. In the Protestantism of my youth and the feminism that followed, debates surrounding gender tended to focus more on *doing* than *being*. What differing capacities do men and women have? And how do these translate into roles? The tacit assumption in these debates was that sexual difference and sex-specific roles go hand-in-hand, so a rejection of the latter entailed a suspicion of the former.

What led me to feminism in the first place was an intense need to have my dignity *as a woman* affirmed. I had an intuition that being a woman was meaningful, that it carried some kind of significance—one that had been overlooked, even distorted, in the fundamentalist evangelicalism of my childhood. I seized onto feminism as an affirmation of that intuition, and for a time, it gave me the language I needed to begin to express and understand what I felt to be true.

Quickly, though, as I foraged more deeply into the categories and concepts of contemporary feminism, I also fell prey to its internal contradictions. The central of these is that modern American feminism, at its core, valorizes the masculine, affirming the key virtues of autonomy, success, and power.

In college, when my evangelical feminism was at its height, the question I dreaded most was this: doesn't feminism have an undue emphasis on power, and isn't that antithetical to the gospel? I had an answer to this of course, which I kept ready in the holster, just in case—but the reason I dreaded the question was because I didn't think my answer was a good one. Even then, I saw a tension between the Christian virtues of self-giving love, humility, obedience, and the virtues of feminism, which were preoccupied with power imbalances, with making sure everyone gets an equal slice of the pie. But instead of listening to that tension, my response was to find a way to bury it. This signals to me how, even then, my feminist commitments had subtly supplanted my Christian ones.

Feminism's masculine bias is most evident in its championing of abortion. Rather than seeking to change social structures to accommodate the realities of female biology, the feminist movement, since its second wave, has continually and firmly fought instead for women to alter their biology, even through violence, so that it functions more like a man's. Tellingly, the legal right for a woman to kill a child in her womb was won *before* the legal right for a woman not to be fired for being pregnant. This transmits the message that women must become like men to be free.

There's another central contradiction in contemporary feminism. The movement itself is built upon the premise that women exist, that "womankind" is a meaningful category, and despite vast diversity among women, there is nonetheless a commonality that unites them. Yet feminism, both in its academic and popular forms, is resolutely anti-essentialist: it denies that women are essentially different from men, asserting instead that differences between them are largely or exclusively cultural fictions.

To be sure, essentialism has sometimes been used as a tool of oppression against women throughout history. Simplistic appeals to women's nature and abilities were used to deny women access to education and the right to vote, for example. But in countering the misuse of essentialism, feminism has opted to reject it altogether, which makes "feminism" itself something of an irony.

I have to confess that, even as a feminist, I was a closet essentialist. I would have denied the term, of course, because it violates a central dogma—but I never fully rejected the idea that women are actually and meaningfully different than men. Not in a simplistic way, not in a way that can be expressed by a trite list of attributes or dispositions, but at the level of *being*.

But I was hamstrung as a feminist academic; even if I wanted to appeal to some objective ground for womanhood, I was being trained to think in a strictly secular, postmodern mode—a mode that favors the particular over the universal, that denies the existence of any objective ground from

which to approach this question. In this understanding, all of our conceptual categories, our entire sense of reality, is fundamentally created through language—our words make the world, rather than express it. Any meaning we ascribe to bodily realities is arbitrary and ultimately fictitious.

There is no room in this worldview for a sacramental understanding of maleness and femaleness. The cosmos has been flattened; there are no natural signs of divine realities, because there are no divine realities. There is no *givenness* to our bodily nature at all, no grand order to which we belong and through which we come to understand ourselves. Sexual difference itself is reduced to mere biology, something we can manipulate at will, rather than something that is intrinsic to our being, that concerns the *whole person*, not merely chromosomes or body parts. I turned to feminism to discover the significance of my womanness, and I was initiated into an ideology where womanness itself is ultimately renounced.

What I was unknowingly seeking, and unable to find in either secular or evangelical feminism, was the understanding of woman as a *sign*. It is not merely the priest who serves as an icon during the Mass; every man and every woman is a living icon, carrying in his or her body a divine sign that reveals the sacred bond between God and humankind.

In the midst of my interior conversion, I came across a little book called *The Eternal Woman*, by Gertrud von le Fort, a German writer and Catholic convert who was active in the early twentieth century. In just over a hundred pages, she articulates a Catholic understanding of womanhood that is more beautiful and profound than anything I have ever read on the topic. She describes a vision of womanhood that pulls my gaze upward, away from the endless, banal squabbling over roles and power dynamics that, in comparison, seems hopelessly trivial. She writes from within a world that has been all but forgotten in Protestantism and secularism—two points on a shared trajectory that moves away from a sacramental understanding of the cosmos.

Von le Fort begins by describing what it means to consider *woman* under her symbolic, rather than historical or social, aspect:

> Symbols are signs or images through which ultimate metaphysical realities and modes of being are apprehended, not in an abstract manner but by way of a likeness. Symbols are therefore the language of an invisible reality becoming articulate in the realm of the visible. This concept of the symbol springs from the conviction that in all beings and things there is an intelligent order that, through these very beings and things, reveals itself as a divine order by means of the language of its symbols.[17]

The significance and value of a woman lies not in what she *does*, but in who she *is*. She carries and embodies a metaphor that illuminates the ultimate purpose of the human being: to be fully united to its Creator. This is another reason I choose to wear a veil during Mass. I am calling attention to the sacramental character of my femaleness, which represents the Church as Bride. Woman is an icon of humanity itself, vis-à-vis God. And man is an icon of God vis-à-vis humanity.

One could quickly protest—doesn't this imply a difference in value, if man signifies God and woman signifies humanity? No, because these are not signs that point to humanity and God in isolation, but rather toward the relation between them. Maleness and femaleness represent the same relationship from two different angles. The bodily receptivity and fecundity of the woman is an emblem of humanity's greatest power: the capacity to be receptive to divine love, to assent to that love and invite God into one's inmost being, where divine love flowers into new life.

This symbolic significance is carried, embodied, by every woman—whether or not she is aware of it, regardless of whether she is celibate or married, fertile or barren. The inborn capacity for motherhood is that "essence" that unites all women, even if it is never actualized in a biological way in the life of an individual woman.

The significance of manhood and womanhood is grounded in the objective reality of how human existence is transmitted, and that biological facticity, to which we all owe our existence, points toward a spiritual reality that is even more vital, one that concerns the eternal, and not merely the temporal. This shifts the discussion about sex and gender to another plane entirely, away from *doing* to *being*. Whatever the individual personality of a woman, whatever her sense of vocation or profession, she brings her feminine genius with her, a genius that springs from her connection to the divine order. To quote Von le Fort again: "Be truly a woman, and do what you will."[18]

I hope to live a long life. I hope to grow old, even if that means experiencing the gradual deterioration of my body—the withering of my skin, the gnarling of my bones, the clouding over of my eyes. Even then, as an old, weak woman with sunken breasts and a dormant womb, long past any hope of professional success, fully purged of the fantasy of autonomy—I will be a divine image. Even as it falls apart, my body will remain a sign, pointing upward and outward toward the wedding feast to come.

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Entering into a sacramental understanding of the cosmos likewise resolved another feminist quibble I had with Christianity: the preponderance of masculine language for God. When I was a feminist, this language bothered me, even though my attempts to replace it were less than successful. Either I switched entirely into a feminine mode, calling God "she" and praying to God as mother, or I tried performing the grammatical gymnastics of avoiding pronouns altogether, using only the terms "God" and "Godself." Both of these efforts, however, seemed forced and awkward, and diverted my attention away from God as a person toward God as a concept. I was too preoccupied with linguistic games to enter into an orientation of prayer.

Despite these obstacles at the level of praxis, I remained convinced that the masculine language for God was a distortion of the truth, something from which God needed to be rehabilitated. I scanned the vernacular of evangelical worship and preaching and detected what I saw as hypocrisy, a welcoming of all biblical divine metaphors *except* those that were explicitly feminine. It was fine to talk and sing about God as a rock, or a lamb, or a king, but not as a nursing mother, or a hen sheltering her brood. Or take the set of three interrelated parables from Luke: the faithful shepherd, the woman with the lost coin, and the prodigal son. I regularly heard the first and last metaphors used for God, but not the middle. The image of the searching woman was referenced far less frequently, and even when it was, the woman was sometimes read as the church, rather than God. Even now, I think I was right to be suspicious of this selective use of metaphors that warily avoided anything feminine. I still get a thrill whenever one of those biblical passages cycles through the lectionary during Mass, when I get to hear those beautiful feminine metaphors proclaimed in the assembly.

Wanting to reclaim and embrace all of the rich imagery we are given to describe God is laudable, but my deep-seated feminist suspicion didn't ultimately lead me to a diversity of divine metaphors, both masculine and feminine. It led me to despise the Father metaphor altogether.

Even when I first entered the Catholic Church, I modified my individual responses in the liturgy, putting myself out of step with the gathered body and the language of the Church. I dodged any male pronouns, saying "God" instead, and skipped the word "men" in this line of the Creed: *for us men and for our salvation, he came down from heaven.* This line, I now know, is not making a distinction between men and women, but between humankind and angelic beings; it became part of the creed to combat a heresy that Christ also came to redeem demons. But the *reason* behind such language didn't matter to me at the time. I saw only a word that seemed gender-exclusive and so I stepped over it, displaying by that very movement that I still saw myself as the ultimate authority. It wasn't until my subsequent

internal conversion that I began to purge those feminist suspicions that kept God at a distance, and my Protestant individualism that was holding me apart from the Church.

I was right to conclude as a feminist that God is not *actually* male, that such language is metaphorical—something that, honestly, was not made entirely clear in the churches of my youth. But I was wrong to assume that the masculine language could then be brushed aside, as something archaic and arbitrary. Underneath this angst lurks an instinct I now find troubling: the idea that God should be expressed in language that helps me identify with him, to see God in my image, rather than the other way around. Taken too far, this blurs the distinction between Creator and creature. We are not primarily meant to *identify with* God, but to worship him.

This is precisely why the Father metaphor is meaningful, and why it holds prime of place among the various metaphors given to us in Scripture and tradition. Again, it is not meant to disclose God in himself, but our relationship to him. A human father creates by endowing new life while remaining distinct from it. This differs from the human mother, whose personhood is not initially separate from her child's, but rather envelops it. In this way, fatherhood is *more* analogous to the relationship God has with his creation. We are made in his image, but he remains Other in his nature. This does not mean motherhood is not analogous at all, which is why we do have feminine metaphors for God in both Scripture and sacred tradition, metaphors that typically highlight God's nurturing and protective love for his people.

This insight about the significance of the Father metaphor came to me more recently; it was not the original reason I began to accept, and even appreciate, this language for God. That happened gradually over the first year after I entered the Church. There was no sudden epiphany, no blindfold abruptly whisked away. Rather, I was steadily adjusting to a new way of seeing, as if I'd been living in a dark room, and someone was pulling back the curtains, letting in shafts of light, one by one, until the whole space was illuminated. I was experiencing, for the first time, a full restoration of the Christian cosmos.

When I look back at my birthright evangelicalism, it's as if the feminine aspects of the faith have been lopped off: there's no Mary, no genealogy of heroic female saints, no visible Church as our mother, no Mass with its iconography of the bridegroom and bride, no sacramental understanding of our bodies as sacred signs. I rightly sensed that something was amiss in this version of Christianity, that it was too monolithically masculine, that anything feminine was sidelined and relegated. In that religious context, the masculine metaphors, in isolation from their female counterparts, were

harsh and unremitting, like banging out a melody using only the lower keys on a piano. When I finally encountered the totality of the Christian sacramental cosmos, and pitched my tent under its sacred canopy, my feminist angst faded away—as did my need for feminism itself. The yearning that initially drove me to feminism was fulfilled, at last, in Catholicism.

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Years before I was Catholic, I went on a trip to Ireland with a group of students and two colleagues. While in Dublin, we had the opportunity to attend evening prayer at a Church of Ireland cathedral. Remembering with fondness the Anglican prayer gatherings of my college years, I looked forward to this, assuming it would draw me into a sense of fullness, give me a taste of the transcendent, something I hadn't felt in years. We arrived a little early, filing into pews of dark wood. The first thing I noticed was that the church was empty, except for us, a rag-tag group of American tourists. I glanced around, surprised to see no iconography whatsoever, just a contrasting interplay between light shades and dark, some abstract embellishments here and there.

Then a convoy of men marched up the center aisle, all dressed in black and white, faces grimly set. They processed ahead in silence, carrying a lone metal staff, raised aloft with nothing on it—no crucifix, not even a cross, just a blank, phallic rod.

That image captures the spirit of the prayer service itself: disincarnate, dreary, and resolutely masculine, fully shorn of anything bodily or feminine. Rather than pulled into a sense of God, I was repelled, my feminist suspicions confirmed. I was suddenly hyperaware of my womanhood—not in a positive sense, but as a spiritual defect, an aberration that expelled me from the holy of holies, as if I'd come to pray and been caught trespassing on masculine ground.

Days later, on a Sunday, we are in Galway, attending Mass at the Catholic Cathedral. After my experience in Dublin, I am pessimistic. The Church of Ireland ordains women, after all, yet their Cathedral and prayer service had been dismally masculine—how much worse, then, will a Catholic Mass be?

I enter the Cathedral and immediately feel as though I am no longer inside a building at all. The space is cruciform, like a body itself, and rows of arches draw my eye up and up and up. Stained glass colors the light that funnels in through the many windows; the heart of the space, above the

altar, opens into a basilica overhead that is filled with blue light, as if it's not an additional chamber, but a portal into the sky.

Beyond the altar, I see an icon of the crucified Christ gazing down at his mother, who is staring up at him from the foot of the cross, alongside the apostle whom Jesus loved. Looking at them looking at each other, I am pulled into their tender sorrow.

Alongside me, down the long end of the cruciform, flanking the rows of pews, is a series of archways within archways that evokes a sense of infinity, of doors opening into other doors opening. I am a body, surrounded by other bodies, and together we are within this larger body, which is both a Cathedral in Galway and something else entirely—not that we've been lifted to another realm; instead, that other realm has come to us.

As I sit, transfixed by the space, something wells up behind and above me, so instantly omnipresent that I cannot trace the source. It seems to come from everywhere: music. Music made by voices alone, male and female intertwined, a synergy of harmony made possible only by the different registers, the highs and lows that plow over the earth and curve along the underside of heaven, gathering together all that lies between into a tremulous golden cord.