



Complementarity – what does that look like in practice?

By Hillary Mast

The idea that men and women are different and complementary has been part of the Catholic Church from its beginning.

But what exactly does this mean for the Church today? What does it imply for women serving in the Church – Should they fill the exact same roles as men? Should there be a quota for each sex in service to the Church?

Not at all, according to Mary Hasson, editor of the book, “Promise and Challenge: Catholic Women Reflect on Feminism, Complementarity, and the Church.”

“The point isn’t to tally up how many women are where ... and at this level versus that level, the question is ... have we integrated women fully so that we are living that complementarity in the way that God intends?”

After the Holy Father's call for a deepening of the "theology of women," a group of Catholic women under the leadership of George Mason law professor Helen Alvare gathered to discuss women's role in the Church, with a particular emphasis on the idea of complementarity between the two sexes.

"I think harmony is a great word to describe complementarity, because when you have harmony, you see things blending together in one beautiful whole, as opposed to ... two pieces you're trying to fit together," Hasson told CNA.

The group – made up of attorneys, theologians, philosophers, economists, religious sisters and professors – gathered to form the Catholic Women's Forum at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, where Hasson is a fellow, to discuss what complementarity has to do with the life of the Church today. This book is the result of their presentations at the 2014 Symposium on Women in the Church.

"Complementarity is one of those technical words people sometimes think they know what it means. And yet in discussing and probing deeper ... we realized there's a lot of richness to the idea of complementarity that needs to be not just explained, but lived more fully and put into practice particularly within the Church," Mary Hasson said of the Catholic Women's Forum.

The group is not out to change Church teaching, she emphasized.

"The Church has spoken," Hasson said, especially in explaining why it is impossible to ordain women to the priesthood, which is one of the extremes that people tend to think of when discussing the role of women in the Church.

But the other side of that spectrum, in Hasson's opinion, is the belief that "nothing should ever change."

"When you focus on that one extreme, you miss what we really should be doing as laymen and

laywomen,” she said. “So the interesting distinction in where the development and growth in the Church needs to occur is the fuller understanding of what the clergy are called to do and what the lay people are called to do.”

By looking somewhere between these two extremes, the Catholic Women’s Forum is interested in figuring out practical ways to encourage further collaboration between men and women in the Church.

“When you bring up the idea of women’s roles in the Church, too often people automatically think of polar extremes. You know, we’re talking women priests or we’re talking status quo, we keep things the same and nothing should ever change.”

The group is working to engage more women in the Church through their annual Catholic Women’s Symposium and the Catholic Women’s Leadership Luncheon, where Catholic scholars and leaders working on these topics host leadership events for female professionals in the Washington, D.C. area.

In seeking to better understand a theology of women, Hasson also stressed that it is imperative to explore the theology of men.

To that end, the book includes a chapter by Professor Deborah Savage of St. Paul Seminary at University of St. Thomas called, “The Genius of Man.”

“We live at a time when boys are told over and over again that men are responsible for all the evils in the world,” she wrote. “Fathers, and men in general, are disinvesting in family structures and the persons within them, even though evidence shows that such involvement provides men with a way toward real perfection and happiness.”

What’s needed, she proposed, is a rediscovery of what makes men tick. By revealing that, we can also learn more about women’s unique attributes and how the two can work together to create something new.

“Both the masculine and feminine genius are in fact supernatural realities that, though they can be spoken of on the level of nature, require participation in the life of grace to reach their full expression,” Savage wrote.

Hasson agreed. “The Church has always talked to women about motherhood, but we need to see that the understanding of our motherhood is helped the more we understand fatherhood,” she said.

“It’s that relationship – fatherhood and motherhood, not just a man and a woman – that tells us all sorts of things. Theologically it tells us something about the life of the Trinity.”

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