

Traveling Companion: Good grief, have we lost our soul?

Fr. Michael Tracey

It arrived on Monday morning. I never heard of the person before. Her name sounded like it was Polish or Russian. She sent the email from the Law School at the University of Pennsylvania. How did she get my email address, I wondered.

The email began: "Dear Father, I'm in the midst of reading Leon Podles bk. on the feminization of Christianity. I looked up his name on the Web and your article was listed along with pieces by a few others who also had read his fascinating book. Podles is so timely and so important, yet I, being a woman, feel impotent to change the course of the church, which is so clearly headed in the direction of feminization. That trend, lamentably, seems unstoppable. Respectfully yours...."

She perked up my curiosity. Yes, I read a book by Leon Podles about two years ago. It was called, "The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity." I checked my database of articles and found that I wrote an article titled, "Where have all the men gone?" for Gulf Pine Catholic on October 29, 1999.

Then, my curiosity bone wondered how she found out about that particular article. So I did what she did. I typed "Podles" name into a web search engine and there, on the first page, I noticed one of the results pointing to the particular article I wrote which now resided in my Website. That solved the mystery, for now.

I began to ponder the email I received from the woman and decided to email her in return.

I also continue to reflect on statements and some interesting observations came to mind. I read recently that our church is suffering from "gender alienation." Women seem to focus their anger and bitterness at the "structures" of the church, while they seem more at home in the "soul" of the church. Men, on the other hand, understand the "structures" of the church but grieve because they cannot relate to the "soul" of the church. Today, the "structure" is masculine and the "soul" is feminine.

Why are there more women than men in church? I wonder. On Sundays, when I see people coming into church late, I notice an interesting trend. If it is a man, he usually stands at the back or finds a seat close to the back. If I see a woman or a mother with her family in tow, then she has no hesitation in marching her family up the aisle into a seat that has room for the whole family.

As I reflected more on the email I received, I thought it was ironic that the clergy wore dresses rather than uniforms. I also read recently that, theologically, we cannot imagine God as married. Maybe if we did, we might be better able to integrate both the masculine and feminine in ourselves as well as in our church.

We are all created in the image and likeness of God. We are called to create, nurture, bless and order. Such challenges help to integrate both the masculine and feminine. This means that we have to revisit our understanding of God and how we see both the masculine and feminine side of God.

We belong to a church in a time when there is a heated debate about "inclusive language." Witness the exchanges between Rome and the American bishops and their attempts to make the lectionary readings more "inclusive." On a deeper level, the debate is not so much about semantics or using the correct words but an effort to grapple with, not only the identity of the church but even more so about our own identity and ultimately the identity of God.