

Masculine Spirituality

By Richard Rohr, O.F.M.
September-October 1988
published in Praying – Spirituality for Everyday Living
permission given by National Catholic Reporter
for publication on the M.A.L.Es web site

Masculine spirituality is not just for men, although it is men who are most likely going to have to rediscover and exemplify it.

Masculine spirituality. Perhaps the term sounds new, different, even wrong or unnecessary. Why would we bother speaking of a spirituality that is especially masculine or male? Is there anything to be learned here? Anything that can help both men and women to meet the Christ? I am convinced that there is. Let's see if we can look at it.

First, I want to say that a masculine spirituality is not just for men, although it is men who are most likely going to have to rediscover and exemplify it. Strangely, it is an approach that many women are more in touch with today than men. Women have been encouraged and even forced to work on their inner life more than men in our culture.

In general, they are far ahead of men in integrating the masculine and feminine parts of themselves. Their inner journeys have left many of us men in the dust. Our sisters' pursuit of the authentic feminine has made the brothers aware that there is also an authentic masculine. But what is it?

Quite simply it is the other side of the feminine energy. It is the other pole, the contrary, the balance.

In the Chinese view of the universe, it is the yang, or active masculine principle, that is always the necessary complement to yin, the passive feminine principle. For the Judaeo-Christian tradition it is half of the image of God: "God created humanity as a self-image, male and female God created them" (Genesis 1:27).

I am not saying that males are characterized by exclusively masculine energy and women hold only feminine. Quite the contrary, although there has been a tendency in most cultures to stereotype, classify, and hold the sexes in one predictable type of energy and behavior. Unfortunately, I believe this has kept us immature, unwhole, compulsive and unready for living a life of true love – human or divine.

St. Paul says, "There can be neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). The new humanity that we are pointed toward is not neuter or unisex or oversexed, all of which make love impossible. In Christ we are whole, one, in union, integrated, wholly holy. That is the final product of the Spirit making all things one. It is the consummate achievement of God in Christ who reconciles all things within himself (Colossians 1:20) and invites into the ongoing reconciliation of all things (Ephesians 5:18).

As a celibate male religious I can make little sense of my state, unless I find some way to awaken and love my own inner feminine soul. Without it, I am merely a self-centered bachelor, a would-be creator, a dried-up root. A man without his feminine soul is easily described. His personality will move toward the outer superficial world and his head will be his control tower. He will build, explain, use, fix, manipulate, legislate, order and play with whatever he bothers to touch, but will not really touch it at all. For he does not know the inside of things.

In fact, he is afraid of it and that is why the control tower of reason and pseudo-control works overtime. It is the only way he can give himself a sense of security and significance. He is trapped in part of the picture, which is dangerous precisely because he thinks it is the whole picture. He is trapped inside the false masculine. Corporately, this has become the myth of Western civilization. It is largely written by men who have controlled the power, the money, the corporations, the church, the military, the morality books. What we call reality and are almost totally addicted to is largely a construct of men who have frankly never worked on their inner lives. They have not gone inside, they have not learned trust, vulnerability, prayer or poetry. They, and the civilization we have inherited from them, are in great part unwhole or even sick.

Until males and cooperating females recognize this unwholeness, this anti-Christianity posing as reality, we have no hope of loving the full Christ. We will in fact be threatened by his wholeness and replace (as we generally have) a daring religious faith with little schemes for salvation. Basically, this is a transfer of the business world of win / achieve / prove / success / control to the realm of the Spirit. And it just doesn't work. God knows, we have tried for enough centuries! There must be a better way. And there is. It's called conversion.

Conversion to what? Conversion to what we might call the no-me. By that I mean conversion to the other, the alien, the would-be enemy that we must learn to love. In other words, men must be converted to the feminine, women to the masculine. Maybe that is why God made sexual attraction so compelling. If we are converted to this non-self, everything changes.

Having undergone this conversion, we are whole, centered. From that position, we can see through eyes other than our own half-blinded ones. We see the other side of things. We see that the enemy is not enemy but spiritual helpmate. There is nothing more to defend and nothing more to be afraid of once we have met and accepted our inner opposite.

A masculine spirituality would emphasize action over theory, service to the human community over religious discussions, speaking the truth over social graces, and doing justice over looking nice. Without a complementary masculine, spirituality becomes overly feminine (which is really a false feminine!) and characterized by too much inwardness, preoccupation with relationships, a morass of unclarified feeling, and endless self-protectiveness.

In my humble masculine opinion, I believe much of the modern, sophisticated church is swirling in this false feminine. It is one of the main reasons that doers, movers and shakers and change agents have largely given up on church people and church groups.

As one very effective woman said to me recently, “After a while you get tired of all the in-house jargon that seems to go nowhere.” A false feminine spirituality is the trap of those with lots of leisure, luxury and liberal ideas. They have the option not to do. Their very liberalism becomes an inoculation against the whole and radical gospel.

A masculine spirituality would be one that encourages men to take the radical gospel journey from their unique beginning point, in their own unique style, with their own unique goals – without doubt or apology or imitation of their sisters (or mothers, for that matter). That of itself takes immense courage and self-possession. Such a man has life for others and knows it. He does not need to push, intimidate, or play the power games common to other men because he possesses his power with surety and calm self-confidence. He is not opinionated or arrogant, but he knows. He is not needy or bothered by status symbols because he is. He does not need monogrammed briefcases and underwear, his identity is settled and secure – and within. He possesses his soul and does not give it lightly to corporations, armies, nation-states, or the acceptable collective thinking.

Saints are people who are whole. They trust their masculine soul because they have met the Father. He (*sic!*) taught them about anger, passion, power and clarity. He told them to go all the way through and pay the price for it. He shared with them his own creative seed, his own decisive Word, his own illuminating Spirit. They are comfortable knowing and they are comfortable not knowing. They can care and not care without guilt. They can act without success because they have named their fear of failure. They do not need to affirm or deny, judge or ignore. But they are free to do all of them with impunity. The saints are invincible. They are men!

There are many reasons, I’m sure, why a healthy masculine spirituality has taken so long to emerge. The state needed conformists and unfeeling warriors to go about its business, and “holy Mother Church” seemed to want children more than bridegrooms. But I am convinced there is a more fundamental reason why men and women have failed to love and trust their masculine energy. It is this: The vast majority of people in Western civilization suffer from what I call a father wound. Those who have this father wound have never been touched by their human father. Either he had no time, no freedom, or no need, but the result is children who have no masculine energy. They will lack self-confidence, and the ability to do, to carry through, to trust themselves – because they were never trusted by him.

If there is one very good reason for God to reveal himself as the Father of Jesus, it is because that is where most people are unfeeling, unbelieving and unwhole. With Philip the Apostle, we all join in, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied” (John 14:8). Without facing, feeling and restoring this wound, I am sure that most people will continue to live lives of pseudo-masculinity: business and bravado as usual, dishonest power instead of honest powerlessness. And the sons and daughters of the next generation will repeat the sad process – unfathered.

Is there a way out? There is. But only for “men” – that is, for people, both men and women – who will act. There is no way to masculinity. Masculinity is the way. So, name the wound. Feel and weep over the wound. That is strength, not weakness. Seek the face of the Father. That is action and journey, not passivity. Own and take full

responsibility for your life and behavior. Don't blame, sit in shame, or wait for warm feelings or miracles. Act as if. Do it. Go with it. Risk it.

Call it phallic faith if you will. But do not doubt the seed within you. I have always felt that was the unconscious but real motive for circumcision in the Jewish religion: it is going to hurt to be a man, to give life, to create. There is a price to being a son of the covenant – and you had better be reminded of that right at the beginning and right at the point (yep, I said it!).

Masculine faith does not doubt the seed within. But God's sons are without dignity, self-confidence, true power. We look like the oppressors, dear sisters, but have no doubt we are really the oppressed. We believed the false promises of the system even more than you and now we are trapped at what is supposed to be the top. We need you, we need our feminine souls, we need fathers and brothers, we need an also masculine God to find our way back into the human circle. We need ourselves – from the inside.

The unique character of this male journey is that like no other we must do it alone, apart, trusting that deepest Self, which is silent, unyielding, but utterly alive. By definition, there can be no maps, no certitudes, no short-cuts. It can't just be talked through, imitated or role-played. The male journey must be done – by me.

Afterword with the Author – Finding the Balance

In the following interview with the editors of Praying, Father Rohr elaborates on masculine spirituality.

Question: To clarify masculine and feminine spirituality, could you expand on the characteristics of each?

Answer: To put it simply – and this is my emphasis – when people talk about spirituality, they think of going into their inner selves and reflecting and praying. And they are correct – that is spirituality. In our culture, which is very patriarchal, we need that very much.

But if that is your only understanding of spirituality, you have an imbalance. The picture is incomplete. Masculine spirituality emphasizes that doing, or acting, is the primary way of developing a spirituality – not hearing, not talking, not reflecting. To be sure, reflection is part of a masculine spirituality, but it come later, after the action.

I want to make clear that by reflection I don't mean just thinking. That's not it at all. By reflection I mean the capacity for making connections, for relating, for bonding. It is the capacity for making these connections all the way across the board, both within one's inner life and in relating one's inner life to the people and events of the outer world. In reflecting one is making these connections.

I describe Franciscan spirituality as masculine. Francis just did what he thought the Lord was asking him to do. Then, he would pick up the pieces – that is, reflect. Today, the emphasis in many places is the opposite. You are encouraged to work on your interior first. Then you act. Both are correct. Both are needed.

Feminine spirituality then is one in which we reflect first and the act, correct?

Right. The feminine is more comfortable with the interior, the soul; the masculine is more comfortable with the exterior world.

When you say we need both, do you mean that each person, regardless of gender, needs both?

Yes. That doesn't mean, however, that in certain periods of life, or in certain areas of life, one won't be emphasized. But in the whole tenor of a person's life both the masculine and feminine elements – that is, action and reflection – will have to be emphasized. Otherwise, the person will not be whole. Usually, people are biased toward one because of temperament, training or culture. As a result, most of us need to be pulled or stretched toward the other.

What is the origin of masculine and feminine spirituality? Does it come from modern psychology or does it go further back to things you mention in your article, such as the Chinese ideas of yin and yang and the Genesis account of God creating us male and female?

I believe the primary revelation of God is creation. That's the primary way God has spoken to us, through what God has made. The earth and the human body – these are the primary forms of revelation. Therefore, I believe the origin of this way of thinking is in creation. We get our first glimpse of this in Genesis. It speaks of us being created male and female, in the image of God. Plants are male and female. So are animals. Many of the world's languages have masculine and feminine forms. The polarity of gender is deeply written in everything.

I think Eastern religions have done a better job of maintaining a balance between the two. On the other hand, Western Christianity has been very patriarchal in its structure. At the same time, it has been softly feminine in much of its spirituality. As a result, it hasn't achieved the necessary balance or integration.

In recent times, Carl Jung has given us a language that has brought this to the surface again with his ideas of animus as the inner masculine part of the female and anima as the inner feminine part of the male. But before that, the Western church, for the most part, had lost the notion of harmony and balance between the feminine and masculine. You can see this from the fact that the church was very masculine in its structure and pastoral practice while very feminine in its spirituality. The problem was that the two didn't meet. They weren't integrated.

I don't think that Jung is the origin of this way of thinking. He has just given us a language to bring it to consciousness again. It has been profoundly present all along, but has been somewhat repressed in the recent West.

A man would not necessarily or automatically have a masculine spirituality, one in which action takes priority over reflection or making connections? Is that right?

That's correct. Culturally and temperamentally, it seems, men are inclined that way, but that's not always true.

It's true that out on the playground, little boys are usually kicking things and pushing one another, while little girls are talking and sitting around relating to each other. But that doesn't mean that men can't be much more inclined toward the inner world than women.

In this connection, our culture is having a profound effect on women. It is doing a great deal to encourage them to be masculine in the sense of acting, achieving and performing in the outer world. That's what you would expect from a patriarchal culture. In doing this, however, the culture leaves out the reflective element. So, this isn't what I would call masculine spirituality. When I talk about masculine spirituality, I am talking about a whole spirituality, with action coming first and reflection and making connections following. If there's no reflection, it isn't spirituality.

Many people working in the area of spirituality say they attract many more women than men, usually a ratio of four or five to one. Is that your experience too?

Very much so. Currently, I'm trying to set up a dialogue on nuclear arms with engineers and scientists – mostly men – at a nearby air force base. To do that I've been meeting with the chaplain. He said it was unbelievable how unreflective such men are. He thinks he is going to have trouble finding six men who can take part. They don't have a language for inner reflection. They don't have a language to talk about faith. They can't discuss things, the chaplain says, unless they are objectified and given a law, order and structure. But the language of inner states, inner movements, inner awareness, and inner consciousness is foreign to them.

Why are so few men interested in spirituality and comfortable with it? Is it because spirituality needs to become more active, more masculine, or do men have to become more reflective, more feminine? Or, must both happen?

Both. We can't continue to reward men simply for doing and achieving. They are going to have to develop a world of interiority. Up to now, we have not seen that as necessary for men. It's even true of the clergy. I can't tell you how many diocesan priests have told me that they got through the seminary without ever being taught spirituality.

Because men aren't inclined toward the interior, they tend to move in that direction only when they are stretched or called or forced by circumstances. We see that for example, in married life – many, many men didn't know how to share their feelings with their wives until they went to Marriage Encounter.

Spirituality must also become more active or masculine. This morning, for example, I took a group of interns who are just beginning our program to the local jail, to a center for the homeless, and a home for the elderly. Several of them were saying that it seemed they were just being dumped into such activities without any preparation. In a way that's true, but we need more of this approach in our spirituality. It is intentional on my part. I think people with an overly-feminine spirituality resist it. They feel they have to be prepared, even overly prepared, for everything. Often, I think, this approach is the result of fear and insecurity.

And the Catholic Church, which is so heavily patriarchal, wound up with a spirituality that seems so heavily feminine because it hasn't been integrating the masculine and feminine?

Yes. That's what happens when you are not integrated, when you don't reach the point where the masculine and feminine come together. While the church has been heavily patriarchal, spirituality has been moving along on another track, with the result that the two aren't meeting. They are merely paying lip service to one another. The bishops, for example, will say how wonderful it is to be contemplative, but they have a very hard time being contemplative themselves. I saw this recently, for example, at a bishops' retreat I gave.

Because our spirituality is not integrated, we have an overly feminine, or "false feminine," spirituality. It is a very saccharine spirituality, a devotionism in which we dress up Infant of Prague statues and cover our altars with lace and candles and linens. Further, the church is not really stretched by such a spirituality. That's why peace and justice hasn't made it to the surface. Peace and justice will emerge when a masculine spirituality is recognized. We've seen the same thing happen in the charismatic movement. It, too, has a very sweet, very pious spirituality that lacks an active component. Again, I see a lack of integration.

In your article, you say a "father wound" is the primary reason why both men and women have failed to develop a masculine spirituality. Could you explain further what you mean by "father wound"?

I simply mean that many men and women lack a positive masculine component. This comes from the fact that they did not have a positive contact with fathers and male figures, especially early in life. They did not experience men who were demonstrative, who were communicative, who knew how to touch, who knew how to look into their children's eyes, who knew how to talk to them. Most men are not able to do that. As a result, they fail to pass on what is best about them to their children. In many cases, if not most, the reason they don't know how to do this is that it wasn't passed on to them. This has been going on for generations in a patriarchal culture such as ours. Women rear the children, while men are largely bread winners and not involved in close relationships with children in their early years. The effect of this has been disastrous, in some cases, completely dominating people's lives. They are unable to act, to trust themselves, to move into the world around them with self-confidence.

The reason is that the father-figure is a child's first outer person. You are connected to your mother. In the first years of life, you don't even know that you are different from her. As the first outer person you come in contact with, the father-figure leads you into the world outside yourself. When you haven't been affirmed in this by your father, you are always uncomfortable and lacking in confidence in terms of your own image and your activity in the outer world.

And that results in a spirituality lacking in the masculine characteristics?

Yes, it would be a primary cause in the sense that you would have male leaders and teachers – and this could be true of female leaders and teachers as well – who really

haven't integrated masculine spirituality into their lives. Again, let's take the clergy as an example again. For the most part, they have spent all of their lives inside institutions, churches and in sanctuaries. So much of their lives concerns in-house stuff. The rubber never hits the road. In other words, the gospel never hits the street. Frequently, there's little concern about unions, the homeless, battered women, nuclear arms, or any issues outside the church. When you have a false feminine spirituality, you wind up with a domestic spirituality primarily concerned with what's going on inside the church and with keeping people happy. Our priests' and bishops' inability to be prophetic is the result of a lack of a masculine spirituality. They are afraid to upset the government, or McDonnell Douglas or General Electric, both of whom are large defense contractors.

Finally, what can we learn from Jesus about the masculine and feminine spirituality?

If you go through the gospels, you'll see Jesus operating out of both a masculine and feminine mode. In fact, he's perfectly balanced. He's very comfortable with his inner world and can speak about prayer and relationships with great sensitivity. Next, he'll move into the outer world and you'll find him traveling to the next place, calling the Pharisees to task, getting involved with people, touching them, healing and challenging. Then, he'll move back into the desert, back into his interior life. That's his pattern. He's back and forth. His approach is both, and as a result, he calls and stretches us, whichever extreme we're on.

Out of our saccharine spirituality in the West in the recent past, our temptation has been to ignore this action, or masculine side. And, I think that's why we have such a devotional and sometimes impotent spirituality, one that doesn't engage and challenge the world.

Reflection Starters

1. Recall a time from the gospels when Jesus was using the masculine component of his spirituality. See yourself as part of the scene and interacting with him.
2. Recall a time from the gospels when Jesus was using the feminine component of his spirituality. Again, see yourself as part of the scene and interacting with him.
3. In which scene were you more comfortable? Which felt more natural to you?