

IS THE POPE CATHOLIC?
A Woman Confronts Her Church
by Joanna Manning
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Reviewed by PEG TITTLE

The focus of this book, written by Catholic nun Joanna Manning, is exactly as its title indicates. Manning argues that "the current Vatican teaching on women's ordination [and on women in general] [is] heretical according to traditional Catholic theology" (11). The basis of her argument is that "the leaders of the Catholic Church now publicly preach and promote a novel twist in the Catholic interpretation of both Scripture and tradition by defining God as intrinsically male" (12). She believes that "Jesus became incarnate as a universal human being beyond the confines of gender..." (103).

Some of her comments are particularly astute. She comments, for example, that "It is ironic that John Paul II, who has insisted in all his writings that women's nature is so different from men's ..., nevertheless finds the capacity within his male self to be an expert on women's lives and experience and the arbiter of their destiny" (63). Touché! She also points out that while the apostles being male has been considered evidence that "Jesus regarded maleness as an essential component" (109), their being married (except for John) has not been considered "an indicator of Jesus' preference for married leaders of the Church" (109). Another touché!

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that one of my questions throughout was 'Why don't you just leave the Church?' There seems to be two parts to Manning's answer. The first is this: "I know from the study of history that all institutional change is the product of events and energies which come both from within and from outside the particular institution in question.... While many dissidents left the Soviet Bloc and lived in exile to fight for change from outside the system, many stayed and suffered imprisonment, even death, to struggle for change from within" (15). In this regard, I applaud both her insight and her courage.

However, the second part of her answer seems to be that the Church itself is not patriarchal - it's the Pope who's the problem. Perhaps I did not read carefully enough, but it seems to me that many of Manning's arguments countering the patriarchal stance are grounded in *The Bible*, not the Church's historical records. And that makes me wonder why Manning doesn't just become a non-Catholic Christian. (However, though I am not the theologian she is, having read Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible*, I wonder about the quality of her Biblical evidence as well.)

Her chapter on "The Vatican, Global Politics, and Power" was informative - I've always wondered how is it that the Vatican has status (and a vote!) at the United Nations. And her student-teacher anecdotes stimulate me to become a better teacher.

As a feminist examination of the Roman Catholic Church, however, I found the book a little disappointing. Though it is certainly heading in the right direction, to echo Robin Morgan's general concern about similar critiques, it doesn't go (nearly) far enough. Nevertheless, it is probably a good read for Catholics, women *and* men.

For those who don't read it, I'll end by quoting in full one particularly powerful paragraph (118-119): "Would the machismo of this Catholic culture flourish if God was addressed as Madre as well as Padre? Would a Catholic man be so ready to raise a hand to slap his wife if he had seen the hands of women lift up the body and blood of Christ at the altar? Would Catholic soldiers in places like Bosnia or Rwanda consider the rape of women just another act of war if they knelt in confession before the female face of God as presented by a woman priest? This is not simply a theological debate within the Catholic Church, but one with wide repercussions in the contemporary world."