

A matter of Christology

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [March 17, 1999](#) issue

I began teaching the graduate class on the early church's views of Christ with ambivalent feelings. I had been given a rare and precious leave to work on a book, and I was anxious to use my writing time well. I shuddered to think of the time the class would take. I would have to spend one afternoon a week teaching, and on top of that--since the ancient texts are often subtle and intricate (in spite of being frequently bombastic and often boring)--I knew I could not face the class until I had reread the literature.

Since the texts are so difficult for beginners, I did not want to throw the students to the wolves by telling them to read and understand them on their own. And for the first time in 28 years of teaching graduate students, my class would be all female. I looked forward to that. Already fairly sure of what I would hear from them, I was nevertheless curious to find out how, as the feminists I knew they were, they would respond to the major christological issues that wreaked havoc in the early church.

The semester turned out both much worse and much better than I expected. On the "worse" side, only five weeks into the class I fell coming home from the neighbors and shattered my left ankle. I spent a week in the hospital following surgery, was slow to get my strength back, and for a long time I was in pain. Though the women graciously came to my house for class, brewed coffee, laughed and did whatever else was necessary in the way of using the library and xeroxing hard-to-find texts, I'm afraid they never did get the benefit of a fully functioning brain from their professor.

On the "better" side, the women were wonderful. I knew they were good students, and I was sure they would work hard. But given the different thought world of the texts, the unavoidable male language of the early church, and the inescapable images of power and humility, sacrifice and atonement that permeate the texts, I was prepared to spend a good part of the class trying to help them lay aside their understandable feminist mistrust of what they would be reading so they could hear what those texts were actually trying to say.

My worry was wasted. With their careful, creative and self-confident minds, they went over the literature of christological controversies and devoured it. They scrutinized it for its place in the ancient world, and they wrestled with its alien and complex vocabularies.

I was sure that they would find the theology of Antioch--with its emphasis on the humanity of Jesus in the incarnation and its caution about anthropomorphizing the Word by forcing the categories of human language onto God--far more congenial than that of Alexandria. As it turned out, they hated the Antiochene approach. To them, the theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Nestorius and even Theodoret produced no more than another familiar version of the atonement in which an innocent--and powerless--human being appears to have been created from the beginning of time for the sole purpose of being sacrificed to an all-powerful, distant God who knew nothing of human suffering.

They loved the Alexandrian tradition, particularly Cyril. I love that theology too (although it is hard to feel fond of Cyril himself). But I hadn't expected they would react the same way.

"Doesn't it bother you that Jesus Christ's true identity is so completely that of God the Word? Don't you find the absence of a fully functioning, separable human being just a little implausible?" I asked them.

"Of course not," they responded, while I sat immobile in my cast, still suffering from the effects of the mortality that Athanasius's incarnate Word had once leaped into hell to destroy. "Look at what it means to women and men, too, if Jesus is not just some innocent human victim God has set up to die, but rather is God's own self, the powerful God who created us and gives shape to our universe and loves us intimately--who for our sake chooses to be emptied of the divine power and shares in real human suffering and dies for the sake of the resurrection. Don't you see? What we have right here in the tradition are some real resources for a strong feminist Christology."

"Yes," I said, having been convinced of this for a very long time myself. "Still," I added, playing devil's advocate, "what about the lost humanity of Jesus?"

"Why, it's not lost at all," they answered. "Cyril never denies Jesus' humanity; it's just that, like Athanasius, he sees that there is no human being on earth who can set right what is broken in human life--including the effects of sexism. This is why he

argues for the natural union of humanity and divinity in Christ. Of course, we can be saved only by sharing life with God in Christ!"

I shake my head in surprise even now. I would never have imagined this ending to our rather radical class. It confirms my suspicion that resources for the radical transformation of the church are right there in the ancient tradition if we can only believe in the good faith of our ancestors and take the trouble to look for them.