

The Forum is a space for conversations on important topics that are relevant to military chaplaincy. In this issue the Forum homes in on soldiering and gender by focusing on Caitlin Flanagan's "[In Praise of Heroic Masculinity](#)."

REFLECTION ON

"In Praise of Heroic Masculinity"

By Sergeant Major Daniel L. Roberts

In Caitlin Flanagan's thought-provoking piece, she provides a stirring counterpoint to some progressive ideas about masculinity. Within liberal circles, the phrase and concept toxic masculinity has been popularized to refer to harmful traits attributed solely to men. Quoting from Shepherd Bliss, Flanagan defines the term as "behavior that diminishes women, children, other men . . . a way to describe that part of the male psyche that is abusive." Such groups have portrayed men as the cause of much evil in the world, including wars, rape, political power struggles, and domestic violence. Flanagan offers another view of masculinity that is worth honoring and has been the source of much goodness in the world: heroic acts of bravery, the protection of the innocent, and service to others.

It is worth noting that masculinity and femininity are both socially constructed terms and have meaning only within the circles in which these terms are agreed upon. For instance, in some progressive groups, the word masculinity is at best met with suspicion and resistance, and at worst, is subject to derision and attack. Flanagan herself notes, "I've talked about this topic [heroic masculinity] before, and almost instantly someone interrupts to report in outraged tones the monstrous action of some man who has been in the news. 'Is he heroic?' they will ask." She continues, "In progressive areas, there is a kind of suspicion about boys, a sense that if things aren't handled very carefully, they could go wrong and the boy might never express his feelings." In other words, within the culture she refers to there is

a worry that boys need to be taught to be sensitive rather than brutish, and if left to their own devices will likely harm others.

Flanagan counters assumptions about men and boys by using an example from a New York Times article. In it, the op-ed the author explains how she tried to raise her sons in a "gender-neutral way." Even though she taught them the importance of the inner and emotional lives of people, her sons, aged between three and seven, are only interested in shows and video games that involve combat between two dominant male figures. "Despite her best efforts, she has managed to produce boys who care deeply about being heroic and saving good people from villains," Flanagan reports. She continues, "Let them be who they are, including those boys—among them many artists and poets—who are very interested in what it means to be heroic, in the sense of defending and protecting the weak."

Flanagan also makes an important point that some ignore. Generally, men "are larger, faster, and stronger than women. This cannot be disputed, and it cannot be understood as some irrelevancy, because it comes with an obvious moral question that each man must answer for himself: Will he use his strength to dominate the weak or protect them?" This is truly the crux of the matter. As Flanagan points out, both men and women are capable of great strength and extraordinary deeds, but what they use their power for is the determinant of whether they are toxic or heroic.

Where the term toxic masculinity fails is that it is essentialism of the worst order. It paints men with broad brushes and attributes brutish, harmful, and violent traits to one gender rather than recognize that anyone, regardless of gender can perform both good and evil deeds. As Flanagan states, there are good cops and bad cops. Good police officers might be men or women and are willing to place their own bodies in harm's way. Such honorable servants are also ethical and lawful in their use of both legal and deadly force in defense of the innocent. On the other hand, bad cops are those who abuse their power to serve only themselves. Both men and women are capable of toxicity.

Flanagan shows that masculinity can also be linked to heroism. Borrowing from the common mindset that masculinity is normally attributed to men, Flanagan dispels the notion that traditional views of manhood are dangerous and need to change. Rather, the author points out that the same attributes of strength, power, bravery, and control can be directed against foes that seek to do harm. This is heroic and praiseworthy.

Phrases like toxic masculinity only serve to create division among people by painting classes of humans with broad strokes. Taken as a whole, no one individual matches such descriptions completely. We all are capable of both evil and good actions. Rather than create broad phrases, it is better to examine specific behavior. A person who is physically strong, wields great power, and directs that power against the vulnerable is engaging in toxic behavior. If those abilities are used to protect or help the innocent, then the person is acting in an honorable way. These statements are true whether the person in question is a man or a woman.

In my own research with servicewomen who have been morally injured, I interviewed fifty women veterans. They had been harmed in many ways and over 50% of them had been sexually assaulted, some by multiple people. Nearly all participants traced their wounds to a man who had harmed them. Those men represented an exceedingly gross misuse of power and strength. After hearing a few of those stories, it could be easy to accept toxic masculinity as an appropriate term. Participants also told stories of women who greatly harmed them. Would that be referred to as toxic femininity? Neither masculinity nor femininity is the problem, toxicity is.

To an earlier point, masculinity, like femininity, is a socially constructed term. Given society's current emphasis on gender fluidity and self-identification, words like masculine and feminine become even more difficult to define in ways that are generally accepted. Adding an adjective like toxic skews the debate even further. If one only looks at the adjectives themselves, clarity is immediately available. The issue is not toxic versus heroic masculinity. The question is, did the person, regardless of gender, behave in a toxic (harmful) or heroic (live-saving) way?

In the Army, it is acceptable to refer to both men and women as Soldiers. This is helpful because it orients them to a common group, a group that has a united purpose. Terms like toxic masculinity and even heroic masculinity are potentially divisive because in most people's minds, they assign behavior to one gender over another. On the other hand, toxic and heroic are terms that can be used with emotional clarity and refer much more specifically to a type of behavior rather than gender.

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RESPONSE TO

Sergeant Major Daniel Roberts's Reflection

By Chaplain (Major) Mel Baars O'Malley

Sergeant Major Daniel Roberts begins his piece by critiquing what he calls a progressive and liberal tendency to demonize men and not celebrate the kind of masculinity that is worth honoring. At first, he seems to take a position similar to Caitlin Flanagan's. Eventually, though, he names the problem as painting one gender with an attribute like toxicity without acknowledging that this trait and many others, both positive and negative, can be embodied by any person regardless of gender. I agree with this wider view of human capacity that traverses the entire spectrum of gender. Corrupt cops are not only men, but they can also be women who have lost their way. Women also run into burning buildings at their peril to help another. Men are not the only ones called either in their work or personal life to face physical danger. All people are capable of good and evil and assigning characteristics, even positive ones like heroism, to one gender alone divides people further.

In his work and research in the Army, Daniels has personally interviewed women who have been harmed by men who have abused their power and strength. He says it would be easy to characterize these men as toxic. Their behavior is abhorrent and cannot be tolerated in the Army or elsewhere. However, he is also clear that there are other stories, though fewer, in which women are the abuser. It is not masculinity that drives these crimes but toxicity. Every person, he argues, has the choice to be harmful or lifesaving. While this is true, it still seems important to address the particularities of this problem. For instance, while there are both male and female perpetrators of sexual trauma, most often, they are men. These perpetrators do not represent every man, nor does calling them toxic help change the trend. However, there is something within this problem which is connected to certain expressions of manhood. Is there an approach to cultivating healthy masculinity that might help address the root of this problem?

Perhaps we begin by teaching men not only to value their physical strength and size but also, to cultivate other aspects of being manly, even something as radical as vulnerability. Flanagan gives the example of the Nashville Chief of Police John Drake as an example of heroic masculinity.

What Drake did when he addressed his fellow officers who were hurting in the aftermath of a terrible school shooting is open the door of vulnerability. In this moment, he embodied something greater in his masculinity than being merely, "larger, faster, and stronger." Drake demonstrates the essence of what Paul teaches about divine paradox for all people regardless of their gender, "For when I am weak, I am strong (2 Cor 12:10)." It matters that Drake's police officers were present to witness his courage. His example might be enough to open a similar door in their lives and begin cultivating a wider approach to a masculinity that has room for far more than strength and power.

RESPONSE TO

Sergeant Major Daniel Roberts's Reflection

By Dr. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr.

Sergeant Major Roberts's essay is useful for two reasons, and both in a voice of military authority. First, it conveniently reprises a lot of what Flanagan says. Second, it accepts that gender is socially constructed. Two other things are worth noting about the social construction of gender, so that we don't misunderstand it. One, "social construction" doesn't mean that

something isn't real. Lots of things are both more clearly socially constructed than gender, and also more obviously real. Paper or digital money is clearly socially constructed—and a matter of life and death. Two, the idea of social construction is not new. It is present, for example, in the High Middle Ages, when Thomas Aquinas (not known as a flaming liberal) writes in his *De Veritate*

that things in general (including hard, physical things to stub your toe against) are nevertheless "constituted between two intellects" (that is, socially), where one is the mind of the human being and the other (in a theological twist) is the mind of God. Thus a clearly related idea—things are constructed between minds—is at home in a realist thinker of a period long before the present.

REFLECTION ON

"In Praise of Heroic Masculinity"

By Chaplain (Major) Mel Baars O'Malley

Caitlin Flanagan argues that it is imperative to support and even celebrate the inherent strengths of men, that, by in large, they are "larger, faster, and stronger than women." Her account of heroic masculinity is grounded in this concept of male physical superiority. She argues that physical dominance is what enabled a soccer team comprised of 15-year-old boys to beat the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team. It is also what allowed Mr. Fierro to overpower a man who opened fire at a club in Colorado Springs. Women and the weak depend on heroic men to keep them safe by being willing to run into a burning building or tackle a gunman to the ground, in her telling. Men are uniquely situated to do this kind of valiant work, and they should be praised for it. Because men are "larger, faster, and stronger than women," it is up to men to use these powers for good. When channeled in the wrong direction, these attributes become toxic, dangerous, and harmful. Though Flanagan argues that heroic masculinity is the antidote to toxic masculinity, in effect, she describes another problematic approach to masculinity, one that is limited only to physicality and no other meaningful dimensions of healthy manhood.

While Flanagan gives ample evidence that, in a gun fight, a struggle between good and bad cops, or even a tussle on the playground, it's important for the "good" guy to be stronger to protect the weaker ones, she doesn't account for those men who aren't physically strong because of illness, injury, physical disability, or even genetics. Can a man who is not physically "larger, faster, and stronger" still be a man? Can he be heroic or even toxic?

By focusing entirely on physical prowess as the marker for heroic masculinity, Flanagan misses important nuances how society might foster health in all men regardless of their physical capacity. She doesn't

address what might encourage a man to choose good in the first place. She also does not account for the men who experience a trauma response after acting "heroically." Take, for instance, Mr. Fierro. For those moments when he took down the gunman in the night club, he was "connected to greatness." This is what Flanagan says happens when a man stops another man from hurting someone. In this case, he beat the man's head repeatedly with the butt of the pistol he took from the gunman. In the heat of the moment, he was protecting his family and other unarmed people. What happens to him after the beating? What is the price for this kind of heroism?

As a chaplain in the Army, I have seen firsthand the cost of these expectations of heroic masculinity. Strong and capable on the battlefield, warriors often face a plethora of identity crises when off of it. Many grapple with moral injury, which is a "syndrome of shame, self-handicapping anger, and demoralization that occurs when deeply held beliefs and expectations about moral and ethical conduct are transgressed."¹ These men may have embodied Flanagan's definition of heroic masculinity for a time. However, faced with a trauma response in the aftermath of doing their duty, they may no longer feel worthy of their manhood. If being wounded through combat or other traumas—either physically, emotionally, or spiritually—means that a man cannot live up to the ideal of heroic masculinity, where does that leave him? What happens to his self-perception when he feels weak or is forced to ask for help because of these wounds?

Defining masculinity so narrowly cuts out huge swaths of men from developing a more well-rounded, healthy masculinity and, even more harmfully, isolates men from seeking help to address their wounds. In fact, many men may feel pressure to protect their manhood

and reputation through staying silent about their struggles, rather than seek out healing.² This is a vicious cycle where men end up suffering in silence and the underlying toxicity doesn't improve.

Part of the definition of heroic involves the idea of courage. Brene Brown argues that the true meaning of courage, a word from the Latin word for heart, is "to tell the story of who you are with your whole heart."³ While Flanagan focuses almost entirely on physical acts of bravery, she comes close to touching on a more profound act of courage. She speaks of the Nashville Chief of Police, John Drake, who addresses the overwhelming emotion he experienced in the aftermath of the Covenant School shooting. He says, "No one ever said it would be easy, but they said it would be worth it."

What if he could have taken his remarks a step further? What if he would have talked about the struggle of witnessing devastation and being powerless to change the outcome? What if he would have encouraged his colleagues to seek out help in dealing with the sadness, fear, helplessness, and anger? Sometimes being larger, faster, and stronger isn't the key to heroism. Courage is a matter of the heart, a willingness to speak truths, even when they hurt. This courage is for all of us, regardless of gender.

One area of strong agreement between myself and Flanagan is the issue of modeling. Men need role models to demonstrate what this kind of courage looks like, to teach them that addressing wounds and prioritizing healing is an act of courage. Drake takes a first step, but there is a lot more work to be done.

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NOTES

1 Brett Litz et al., *Adaptive Disclosure: A New Treatment for Military Trauma, Loss, and Moral Injury* (New York: Guilford, 2016), 21.

2 Kristen J. Leslie, Betrayal by Friendly Fire, in *War and Moral Injury*, edited by Robert E. Meagher and Douglas A. Pryer (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 250.

3 Brene Brown, The Power of Vulnerability, TEDxHouston, June 2010, https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_the_power_of_vulnerability?language=en.

RESPONSE TO

Chaplain (Major) Mel Baars O'Malley's Reflection

By Sergeant Major Daniel Roberts

In Chaplain (Major) O'Malley's treatment of the article, "In Praise of Heroic Masculinity," the author takes the discussion to a deeper level about the spirit of men who engage in heroic deeds. O'Malley asks readers to think about two male-centered topics. First, how should men who lack the physical strength, due to "illness, injury, physical disability, or even genetics," think about heroism? Is heroism limited to those acts of raw courage and power that involve physical combat or is there a type of courage that is based in words and thoughts. O'Malley posits that "sometimes being larger, faster, and stronger isn't the key to heroism. Courage is a matter of the heart, a willingness to speak truths, even when they hurt."

The second topic that O'Malley broaches is the idea of moral injury. What happens to men after they take part in physical combat, and as a result, take the life of another human being? "Strong and capable on the battlefield, warriors often face a plethora of identity crises when returning home. Many grapple with moral injury." Of course, military women, who are experiencing combat in far greater numbers than ever before, have faced these same challenges. O'Malley does not mean to suggest otherwise but focuses her attention on men as a counterpoint or deeper reflection on Caitlin's emphasis on physical prowess

as a sign of heroism. O'Malley asks two important questions in this area: "What is the price for this kind of heroism? [in relation to physical combat]" and, "What happens to his self-perception when he feels weak or is forced to ask for help because of these wounds [i.e. moral injury]?"

On the first point, O'Malley suggests that heroism is not limited to the corporeal and that physically weak men can be great heroes. I wholeheartedly agree. As a young man in the airborne infantry, I was a specimen of physical strength, courage, and potential killing power. Now that I am much older, those traits have left me, and I, like many other "old" Soldiers, struggled for a while to find my place and self-worth in the Army. This can be true for ex-infantrymen like me, but also for both men and women who serve in roles that do not involve combat. Administration, logistics, chaplaincy, medicine, communications, and many other fields are vital to the proper functioning of the U.S. Army. The men and women who perform these jobs routinely exhibit courage and heroism by standing up for what is right, working long hours to make sure Soldiers in the field receive the pay, food, and care they need, and by leaving their family to go on long deployments.

To O'Malley's second idea about moral injury: enacting heroism, whether as a

modern gladiator on the field of combat or as a spiritual warrior fighting against toxicity and injustice, can leave its mark. Doing the right thing is no guarantee that one will remain unscathed from the battle. The example of Jesus Christ would suggest the opposite. From my Christian point of view, Jesus was the ultimate doer of good, but God allowed Him to suffer at the hands of evil men. Unlike Jesus, who arose to glory after His suffering, people who experience moral wounds after a traumatic clash with evil may be left with depression, loss of self-esteem, metaphysical disorientation, and other maladies. Some may feel that they have lost their manhood. O'Malley notes: "Many men may feel pressure to protect their manhood and reputation through staying silent about their struggles, rather than seek out healing."

Such topics are worthy of much more discussion than can be had in this forum. As a Chaplain Corps, we must continue to sort through these and other topics related to the body and soul of the warrior. Questions such as, what does it mean to be a hero? What does one look like? And how do we model heroism in the arena in which we are called to serve? We should continue to discuss these questions with our Soldiers. We should also ask how we can provide better support to those Veterans who are no longer in our ranks.

RESPONSE TO

Chaplain (Major) O'Malley's Reflection

By Dr. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr.

Chaplain (Major) O'Malley points to the physical examples underpinning Flanagan's account. If we took strength and endurance as attributes of character, and the physical examples as emblematic rather than exhaustive, more of Flanagan's account would survive.

O'Malley also points to a problem in the classical account of the virtues—

and in the lives of Soldiers. In the classical account, a virtue is a habit positioned as a mean between extremes, so moderated by reason that it can never harm us, only do us good. The unity that reason achieves in the virtues is strong. After Freud, the integration that the ego achieves is always still subject to challenge—and as military chaplains

have learned, also to trauma. O'Malley's account of trauma precisely in the exercise of virtue is profound. As Jonathan Lear writes in the stark-titled book *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*, a human mind is not a given but an achievement, always under threat, always unfinished, always in need of healing.¹

NOTES

¹ Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

REFLECTION ON

"In Praise of Heroic Masculinity"

"Many-Modeled Heroism"

By Dr. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr.

"In Praise of Heroic Masculinity" by Caitlin Flanagan proposes a virtue, "heroic masculinity," to counter a vice, "toxic masculinity." The article both suggests that toxic masculinity would be a vice, and worries that the concept may be overused to typecast boys and men as inclined to toxicity. Thus, it offers "heroic masculinity" as a corrective—both a virtue to practice and a phrase to reclaim a good name. I'm not against the article's goal to "teach boys that strength can be a virtue," but I want to put it into a wider context that qualifies it in some ways and extends it in others.

What's good about the article is its focus on heroes, virtues, and praise. What gender adds to this is unclear. Unless you think traditional gender roles are under attack. But what if they're under expansion? Why wouldn't expansion be a good thing? What if they're expanding under exposure to . . . reality? Why shouldn't children and adults learn from a variety of role models?

According to Aristotle and Aquinas, the life of the virtues begins in a desire to imitate others, to acquire some human excellence that we see around us. We humans share this tendency toward excellence with animals: a swallow wants to make a nest distinctive of swallows; a human being wants to practice courage formed by reason. The law of our nature begins in the elemental desire, I want to be like that! Where "that" is something seen, told, read about. Different people will find different features salient. Different features will attract different people to imitate them. The maleness or femaleness or nonbinariness of a model may or may not matter to the imitator.

The classic traditions of the heroic and the virtues are helpful for thinking outside the bounds of the contested

nature of masculinity. Those traditions insist on the necessity of role models, but they do much to insulate the imitator from the model's limits. In Aristotle, the "hero" is actually a special category apart from the usual pattern by which people acquire virtues by imitating the wise. In one of Aristotle's most theological moments, a "hero" is technically someone who receives the virtues directly from God. That's quite a surprise to most readers of Aristotle. This means that Hercules cannot take credit for his heroism without sharing it with God. Although Aristotle never uses the word "grace," his Christian follower Thomas Aquinas sees grace in Aristotle's account and uses it to transform Aristotle's "hero" into someone who receives the gifts of the Spirit. There is little among the gifts of the Spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord) to make the hero look particularly masculine or physically strong.

Furthermore, Aquinas modifies Aristotle to avoid tying the virtues to imitating human beings directly, since they are all infected by sin, or as we might now say, toxicity. Indeed, that means that heroism and toxicity cannot be parallel or symmetrical, because virtue is our destiny and vice is self-impairment. Tying the word "imitation" to the related word "image," Aquinas observes that the human being is made in the image of God, and therefore God is the only appropriate model to imitate. On the other hand, Aquinas admits, the imitation of God could sound blasphemous. It turns out that there is only one model to imitate, the only one who is both human (and can attract us to say "I want to be like that") and the one in whose image we are made. That one, of course, is Jesus. But Jesus is that one for women and for men. And for men Jesus seems notably not . . .

macho. But because Jesus can also inhabit each one (Aquinas's somewhat uninspiring example is Paul), the variety of models returns.

Indeed, Jesus's example left many early Christians (not Aquinas) to find the particular heroism of Jesus incompatible with soldiering, a profession gendered masculine. Jesus's longest recorded interaction with a soldier is with the centurion who asks for healing for his "servant." In Matthew the word is *pais*, "boy," which in Greek (as in English) can mean his servant or his lover. In Luke's version the word is *doulos*, which clearly means servant—but Luke's version is later, leaving the impression that Luke is trying to straighten up the most interesting aspect of the story—an aspect that varies what it means to be a centurion. Whatever that story means, Jesus responds not to the centurion's heroic masculinity but to his "softer" love.

Perhaps this is the place to admit that notions of heroism are gendered from the start: Aristotle's word for virtue is *andreia*, which has the Greek word for (male) man in it (ἀνὴρ/ ἄνδρως), and our word for virtue has the Latin word for male man in it (*vir*, as in virile).

Nevertheless, the classic tradition makes virtues qualities of a person, not of a gender or any other abstraction. So, masculinity, as such, cannot be heroic, no more than masculinity, as such, can be toxic. Only

persons can be heroic or toxic (when "toxic" means vicious). There is a problem with toxic masculinity: it elevates a limited picture of masculinity over the virtues and becomes vicious. Heroic masculinity cannot do the same and succeed.

But because the virtues need concrete models, we cannot do without heroic men, and there must be such a thing as masculine heroism for all people to admire and to imitate to the extent that they want to be like that. We cannot do without particular ethnic and gendered and cultural heroisms of all kinds. Daniel Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct*, for example, praises traditional Judaism's masculinity of Torah study.¹ Sometimes it's important to attend to those particularities so that the models can increase without limit. We today must insist that Black lives matter because slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, and racist policing have given the impression that they don't. We as a people must insist that masculine heroism matters because all heroism does. But we today must not identify heroism with masculinity any more than masculinity with toxicity. In short, the options are not exhausted by rejecting talk of masculinity, on the one hand, or repristinating it, on the other. We can all use the language of the virtues to expand the realm of models beyond the types that limit them. As such, we must have a variety of models to see and learn the virtues. In the end, we will be so much richer when we do not identify the virtue with the vessel.

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NOTES

¹ Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (University of California Press, 1997).

RESPONSE TO

Dr. Eugene F. Rogers's Reflection

By Sergeant Major Daniel Roberts

In "Many-Modeled Heroism," a reflection on, "In Praise of Heroic Masculinity," Dr. Eugene Rogers provides a worthwhile treatise on the original article. First, he extolls the virtues of the piece in that it "focuses our attention on heroes, virtue, and praise." These are qualities toward which all men and women should strive. The author then goes on to explain that gender is not useful as a partial identifier to heroism or toxicity. This is in part because gender roles are expanding today beyond male and female and in part because the concept of role modeling is more important than gender constructs.

The majority of Rogers' reflection has this idea of role models in view. Borrowing from both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, the author states that, "the life of virtues begins in a desire to imitate others." In such an equation, gender, including the non-binary version "may or may not matter to the imitator." Both Aristotle and Aquinas theorize that heroic virtues come from God.

There is much to be admired about Rogers' work. Removing gender from the equation coincides with my own view on toxicity and heroism and frees

a consideration of the characteristics of a hero without unnecessary modifiers. Second, using the terms hero and virtue in a spiritual context is a powerful tool for furthering the education of readers. Third, in referring to Jesus as a model, Rogers points out that the Savior is an example for both men and women.

I differ a little bit from Rogers on his view of how men view Jesus. He states that "for men Jesus seems notably . . . not macho." I believe that is true for many, but some of our most elite warriors in special operations and the Rangers look to Jesus as a model of masculinity, strength, and power. The story of Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple with a whip comes to mind, as well as images of Jesus in the book of Revelations as a quite powerful and macho figure. With no attempt to delve into the theology of these scriptures, the point is that Jesus cuts both a gentle and tough figure in the Bible, not merely a soft one. This may seem to be a finer point, but Jesus is an example of masculinity for some people.

My own reflection intersects with Rogers on a powerful point. Heroism

need not be associated with a particular gender. In both of our estimations, heroic traits may be reflected in a man or a woman. While Rogers' emphasis is on spirituality and my work is more focused on physicality, both are legitimate realms of consideration with regards to heroism. The spiritual warrior brings prayer, preaching, and counseling to the fight, while the corporeal hero uses the body and steel to fight for justice and peace. Whether someone identifies as he/him, she/her, or they/them, they can enact goodness or evil in the world.

Rogers further extends this point by stating, "We must not identify the virtue with the vessel." I am in wholehearted agreement with that. I think that too often we miss the value of some role models because we are identifying too heavily with the person's gender. Men should be able to imitate women who model virtue. Women should be able to do the same. In my view, a hero uses the traits that are necessary at the time he or she is called on to act. At any given time, this might include kindness, gentleness, love, peacefulness, wisdom, courage, bodily strength, thunderous speech, or deadly force.

RESPONSE TO

Dr. Eugene F. Rogers's Reflection

By Chaplain (Major) Mel Baars O'Malley

Professor Eugene Rogers begins his response to "In Praise of Heroic Masculinity" by reframing the idea that traditional gender roles are under attack with the notion that, instead, they are in the process of expanding. This approach to gender makes space for both men and women to live out the full spectrum of the human experience. He suggests that the path toward virtue begins with imitation. He poses the question, "Why shouldn't children and adults learn from a variety of role models?" Imbedded in this question is an important acknowledgement that making the virtues one's own can arise from imitation of anyone who embodies them, which is a dynamic that is not fully restricted by gender. Rogers seamlessly moves from Aristotle's account of the "hero," one to whom God gives virtues, to Aquinas' portrait of a virtuous person, one who accepts the gifts of the Spirit, wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. Ultimately, heroism has very little to do with masculinity that is defined by physical strength. And yet,

the words for heroism and virtue in Greek and Latin have been gendered as masculine for millennia.

Rogers is clear, however, that even though gender is encoded in the language, virtues themselves cannot be gendered. Virtues are characteristics of a person. They are not inherently masculine or feminine. Heroism and toxicity are not masculine either, but ways in which people choose to live and act in the world. To suggest that they are limited to the male experience is to put artificial limits on concepts that have much broader application. And yet, the only way to learn these qualities is to see them in others and decide which ones to make our own. The models who demonstrate virtues such as heroism will always be gendered in some way. Those of us who endeavor to live out the gifts of the Spirit need contextualized examples to follow. Through connecting with an expression of heroism, whether masculine or feminine, we each have an opportunity to expand beyond the limitations of binary gender.

I appreciate how Rogers enlarges our view of gender to make those attributes traditionally understood as masculine or feminine accessible to all people. While Flanagan articulates a very narrow view of the "best" kind of masculinity as heroic and physically strong, Rogers argues that such a limited approach misses the full picture. While he speaks of this in terms of individuals reaching their full, God-inspired virtuous potential, I focus, instead, on the possible harm limits to gender may place on men who don't live up to the ideal because of injury, illness, genetics, or recovering from trauma. Both critiques of Flanagan's approach to heroic masculinity recognize that limitations do not help us address the larger problem. People of every gender are looking for examples to follow. Our world needs courageous followers who accept the gifts of the Spirit, who demonstrate wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord so that others might learn to imitate these virtues, too.