

From: **The Logic of Self-Giving: International Meeting "Women" Rome 1996**, Laity Today: Review of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, 40, Vatican City 1997.

I

**Being a Woman at the dawn
of the Third Millennium**

ROUND TABLE

A panorama

In this great and dramatic moment in history (cf. *Christifideles Laici*, 3), we are called to decide "who we want to be" and what type of society we want to build. Mary Ann Glendon does not hesitate to compare this choice we must make today to that of the children of Israel at the moment of entering the Promised Land: "The Lord says: 'See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil' (*Deut* 30:15). So it is for us: we can contribute to building the civilization of life and love or we can consent to the invasion of the culture of death...".

Confirming the right choice, Irina Alberti gives examples from a recent past in which the negation of God's presence in life and the destruction of the Church and the family have resulted in building a civilization within which hatred has taken the place of love; but in which the women have succeeded in not allowing the *faish traditions* of people to be extinguished. Alberti says:

"In the Soviet period, as regards the family, the woman does not manage to resist, she has not the strength, she cannot oppose an omnipotent State. The seeds of hatred and destruction scattered before the Revolution grow and develop, becoming something that is part of life. The Soviet period in Russia is completely steeped in hatred, and is therefore a period of negation and destruction. A new era, a new period begins for the life of women. The woman does not manage to defend the family because she cannot resist a State in which the family is considered an obstacle to the new regime, to the new society that is to be built. The totalitarian ideology wants the child to be property of the collectivity, excluding a participation, an active role of the family, and much less of the mother. (Looking at Russia today, I would say that, if the country does not succeed in rebuilding the family, it will not succeed in rebuilding society nor in rebuilding its own humanity, a humanity that has been wounded, outraged, and in many cases, killed, annihilated). At the same time, however, we note an extraordinary phe-

nomenon regarding the presence and role of women in the life of the people. I refer to women's resistance to the attack against religion. The woman has not managed to save the family, but in many cases, has managed to save, to preserve some sprout of faith and some memory of life in the Church. Much has been said about the Russian 'babuske', the Russian grandmothers, who were able to preserve the Christian faith in a situation in which this faith was not only prohibited, derided, humiliated, but was even considered to be a criminal activity. Believing was equivalent to a subversive action against the State, against the regime. I can say from personal experience that today in Russia there are many people — middle-aged, but also younger — who speak about what the presence of grandmothers has meant for them, even of grandmothers who simply mentioned the possibility of believing, and the fact that there is God, there is Jesus Christ, and there is the Mother of God, greatly venerated, greatly loved; or who, on other occasions, told some story from the Gospel, or copied by hand whole passages from the Bible, to be left for the children or grandchildren. In many cases, when you meet people who have already come to the faith or are seeking the faith, you discover, at a certain moment, that somewhere in their life, in their history, there has been a feminine figure (grandmother, mother or aunt), a person from an earlier generation, who may not have banded on much at a theological or ecclesial level — because she could not — but has certainly passed on the need for God, the desire to find God, the intuition that there is Someone; the hope that there is Someone; the urge to go in search of this hope. In my opinion, this is a chapter in the history of humanity that is perhaps unique and, in any case, is extremely important in Russia, because, in many ways, it is the foundation for what could be Russia's rebirth.

Speaking of Russia, I am speaking of a situation that concerns us all. And in this situation, I think, I am even convinced, that women have a role to play that is of the first importance. It is woman who is able to let love be born and built anew. And, if this does not happen, nothing will happen. They will go on forever talking of economic reforms, market economy, democratisation, they will speak a great many words — more or less fine, more or less

true — that will have no meaning, no roots in reality. There is a very long road to go, and in Russia there are already women who are actively going in this direction. The rebirth of civil society in Russia can only be based on solidarity and, in the long run, on love — that civilisation of love of which John Paul II is always speaking. His are beautiful words and, when they arrive in Russia, they have an enormous resonance".

The damage done by denying the role of the family raises the question of maintaining family traditions in civilisations where they are still strong, although threatened. It is with great conviction that Kathryn Hawa Hoonkwap speaks in defence of the family:

"The role of the woman in an African society which has a structure of the extended family is very important. Apart from procreation, she is a mother, not only to her biological children, but to all children living in the extended family system. It is a family whose members care for each other. No matter how large the extended family, they protect, care, share whatever they have and show concern for the welfare of all the young, the aged and the disabled. The African woman plays her role as a mother with joy and dignity and she is greatly distressed if she is childless. The future of an African woman who is married is incomplete without children; motherhood enhances her position as a wife in the family and as a complete woman in the society.

In African societies, children are a family's wealth; a wife and a husband without children, no matter their material wealth, are often regarded as poor people. The birth of a child into a family calls for a great celebration. African culture does not put a limit on the number of children a family or a woman can have, yet she manages to space her children through prolonged breast feeding and abstinence from sexual intercourse.

Chastity before marriage is highly prized. Girls are taught not to mingle with boys, they are not encouraged to be by themselves during courtship. They are always under the strict supervision of their mothers, who are often blamed if their daughters are not found as virgins at marriage. The practice of early marriages is to promote and safeguard the chastity of young girls. Traditional African culture condemns pre-marital sex and encourages chastity

before marriage. These norms and values tend to limit the number of pregnancies outside marriage and makes abortion an abomination.

In a world that is increasingly becoming threatened from all sides, with, inter alia, violence, over-exploitation of our natural habitat, war and general environmental degradation, etc., women as caretakers of humanity should vocalize more against all forms of violence, including violence against the unborn. Further, it has been observed that environmental needs in Africa are linked with poverty. For example, people in the rural areas of Africa are suffering from the polluted water caused by factories dumping their waste disposal. Condoms used by people in the hotels are thrown out in nearby waste ground accessible to children, who pick them up to use as balloons...

The concept of 'spiritual motherhood' extends to the work of women religious, nurses, teachers, social workers and consecrated women, who carry on the work of promoting life, nourishing, ennobling and enriching it in all its ramifications. A child born into the world is not 'fully formed'. A child is defenseless, helpless, ignorant and unable to take care of basic nutritional and hygienic needs. He or she is ignorant in cultural and religious matters. A child does not know its identity and needs to be guided in the immediate environment and in the world in general. As mothers begin their role of caring and teaching, their efforts are often complemented by the work of these other carers".

Hanna Suchocka appeals to the family, to husbands, to society in general to find ways leading to a *better balance between work and family*.

"Of great importance is how far the active role of woman is accepted by members of her own family. The role of the husband is crucial in this matter. It is very difficult for women to play a double role. This could lead to tensions in the family. The main problem for the woman is how to avoid the collapse of the family because of her professional or political activity.

In many countries one can observe efforts leading to enactment of a special law on equality of rights between women and men. From the point of view mentioned above, the special law is not the best solution. It is only a very formal solution. Without agreement

inside the family, legal provisions can be empty provisions. I am not overlooking the importance of some constitutional and legal provisions concerning the principle of non-discrimination and equality, but the scope of special rights is very disputable. How far do the 'numerus clausus' and special quotas for women help them to participate in public life?

Being in favour of professional activity for women, I think it is specially important task for all of us to diminish the negative consequences of women's employment on family life.

The structure of employment has changed after the fall of communism. In many countries real opportunities have been created for setting up and developing private enterprises, opening a new chance for women; for active women, better educated and what is also very important — for women over 40. Younger women find a job more easily and do not need to risk starting their own businesses. But, older women have more professional experience and greater financial assets. At the same time, their children are older, giving the women more time to devote to business activities.

The research made in Poland shows that more than 50% of women — small-business owners — wanted to develop their own business, while only a very small percentage had considered giving it up. We can therefore hope that small women's enterprises will start up more and more often and grow even more dynamically. There is not enough recognition of the benefits of this type of women's work. This activity can not only influence an economic boom, but can also be a good way of limiting unemployment".

The Round Table continued with a general discussion, reflecting the concrete situations in which the women from the various countries have to live and carry out their mission. Attention was focused on a number of questions of immediate importance today, among them: poverty, unpaid work, quotas in official or political structures, the violence that women suffer, but also that in which they take part. Some extracts follow:

— *On poverty*: "African women are poor, they become promiscuous, they get more children, they become poorer. They are facing big problems because of lack of access to proper information, especially regarding their dignity and their quality. There seems to be a

confusion... People think that to have dignity you have to be the same as men in all aspects. So, if you have feminine qualities, you don't seem to be progressing as other women are".

— *On unpaid work*: "How can we raise the value of unpaid labour done by women, so that in national and international statistics it is counted, even if it is not paid". The participant from Tanzania continues: "Everyone wants to go to the office or to the labour market because to stay at home is not counted, it is not respected and not valued...". A woman from the United States says: "When I meet women who have chosen not to work outside the home, or to stay at home for 5, 10 or 20 years, I find that the women making that choice desperately want their society to recognize the valuable contribution they are making".

— *On the necessity to make a choice*: A woman from Argentina says: "We need to stress the question of discernment. How are we to discern whether our vocation is to remain at home, to work full-time outside the home, or to try to find a balance between maternal self-sacrifice and public service? How are we to discern God's will for us? I think that these questions should be raised in catechesis, in the formation given in Catholic schools and in other Church institutions. In these contexts, to what extent is any thought given to this subject of the discernment that women and men have to make in so many cases? It would be very useful to gather and communicate the experiences of those among us who have succeeded in some way in reconciling these tensions, in making this discernment".

— *On quotas*: "In India, we are discussing right now in Parliament the bill for a 33% quota of women. Most women's groups demanded it, but there were others who said they did not want quotas. My question is: "unless there is a quota, how can women enter into politics and even ask for equal rights?" In spite of women's coming into politics, the men's parties are not giving them the right to stand, and when they are given it, they are simply puppets for their husbands or parties".

"I think that the rights and duties of women are something that cannot be eluded. Coming to the subject of women's presence, of quotas. In Italy, the quota was abolished because it was said to be a lack of respect for men. Well, in the last elections we had a collapse of women's representation in Parliament".

— *On violence*: "In my own country, Great Britain, it doesn't always seem to be true that when women are in leadership in politics, there are solutions that protect women and life. That may yet be proved differently, but certainly not for the decade of the '80's. I am struggling to make sense of the other new phenomenon, of women's involvement in violence and in making it happen. It is a great thing that we have begun to speak about women as victims of violence, but the paradox of our relation to violence is, I think, much more complex. I wish I could be sure that women's solutions would always protect life, especially when they have to take on positions of power or governance. I would be glad to hear from any of the women here about the kind of compromises you have to make in the real world, not the world where we can affirm our principles with clarity, but the world where difficult choices and decisions have to be made. I take some comfort from a statement made in passing in the Holy Father's wonderful message for the World Day of Peace 1996. He says that the person is entrusted in a special way to women, but *not exclusively*. That is an important reminder. It must be in the renewed relationship between women and men that a new concern and a new pattern of responsibility for life must be born. Otherwise we just reassert in a different guise some of the problems of old".

Mary Ann Glendon closes the debate: "There are many connections among the questions. I would like to make explicit what I think was implicit in a number of them. These are questions about poverty and about quotas — the question of the representation of women in public life. Maybe we haven't asked the question perfectly well. Let me try to reformulate it. We can say now in many countries that for women without children the chances are exactly equal to those of men. The salaries are equal, the opportunities are equal. We can say that the women's liberation movement finished its work with respect to a certain category of women. But what happens in public and economic life to men and women with children? Men and women who have decided to make substantial commitments to family life; who subordinate advancement to family life in different ways and at different stages of life. They are under-represented in policy and in economic life. This is not just a question of justice for women or for mothers and fathers; it is the

gravest question for the whole society. If your policy makers are increasingly belonging to what I call the 'modernizing elites' (male-female, first world and third world), then you are going to have systematic disadvantaging of the people who are reproducing society, the men and women who are raising the future citizens. They are already falling behind other types of households everywhere. Our societies have to start recognizing and rewarding in tangible ways these men and women who are doing an important service".