

The anthropological and theological bases of the dignity and mission of woman in the Magisterium of John Paul II

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1. A constant preoccupation

The theme proposed for our reflection is one which, from the beginning of the Pontificate,¹ has been returning with significant frequency in the teachings of the Pope. Reflection on woman is, indeed, the immediate and specific subject of at least two very important documents: *Mulieris Dignitatem* (15 August 1988) and *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995); but it is brought forward with analytical thoroughness in catechesis, speeches, messages, homilies, etc. It is a teaching that, with respect to earlier Magisterium,² shows a considerable increase in quality and quantity.³

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¹ Already on 29 April 1979 the question is raised in the audience for the XII National Assembly of the APL-COLP (Domestic Helpers), cf. *Insegnamenti II* (1979), 1018-1023.

² Cf. JOHN XXIII, Speech for the Opening of the Second Vatican Council, in *Enchiridion Vaticanum*, Bologna 1985, 75; *Godium et Spes*, 9,29,31,40,50; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 5,32; *Ad Gentes*, 17; PATT. VI, *Procurare all'uomo contemporaneo il messaggio cristiano nella sua integralità*, in "Insegnamenti di Paolo VI", XI (1974), 630-642. For bibliography on women in the Magisterium, cf. *La donna nel magistero di Paolo VI*, Roma 1980; *The Church and international Women's Year 1975*, Pontifical Council for the Laity 1977; *La femme dans l'enseignement des Papes*, Abbaye St-Pierre de Solesmes 1982; *Les enseignements pontificaux. Le problème féminin (1878-1995)*, Tournai 1985; A. ALUFFI, *Il privilegio di essere donna nella documentazione del Vaticano II*, Roma 1967; T. ALLALA, *La mujer y los ministerios en la Iglesia del Vaticano II a Pablo VI*, Salamanca 1982; T. ANTONIOTTI, *La Chiesa e la nuova coscienza femminile: una lettura del Magistero del postconcilio*, in "La donna nella Chiesa e nel mondo", Naples 1988, 285-313; G. BUONANTINI, *Le donne nel Concilio Vaticano II*, Roma 1984; G. CAROLA RIZZO, *Il ruolo della donna nei documenti pontifici da Leone XIII a Paolo VI*, in "Ricerche sullo status sociale della donna", Roma 1975, vol. 2, 752-826; R. HARRMAN, *The Vocation of Women: the Teaching of the modern Popes from Leo XIII to Paul VI*, Roma 1983.

³ We quote here only the more important documents of John Paul II, and we want to show the diversity of the occasions on which the Pope has approached our subject. The major documents are essentially the encyclical *Redemptio Mater* (25 March 1987),

In the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* we find the most organic expression of the Pope's thinking on the subject. It is therefore a primary reference; but it is to be seen in the context of the Wednesday catechesis of the '80's — on the theology of the body and human love — without which all its richness would not be revealed. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, with reference to the Synod of Bishops of 1987 on the Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the world, John Paul II states:

"The Fathers of the recent Assembly... dealt with the dignity and vocation of women. One of their recommendations was for a further study of the anthropological and theological bases that are needed in order to solve the problems connected with the meaning

the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (15 August 1988) and the *Letter to Women* (29 June 1995). To these should be added the section on *Women and Man*, nos. 45 to 52 of the *Apostolic Exhortation Christifidelis Laici*, and two cycles of catechesis: that on human love, published in the volume *Coram et deo in vivo. Catechesis sull'amore umano* (Roma 1987) and that specifically on *Women* (including some reflections on *Our Lady*), 22 June 1994; 6 July 1994; 13 March 1995; 6 September 1995; 29 November 1995; 6 December 1995. In 1995, the year of the IV U.N. World Conference on Women in Beijing, the Pope devoted to the subject several talks at the *Sunday Angelus*: 25 June; 9, 16, 23 and 30 July; 6, 13, 15, 20 and 27 August; 3 and 10 September; 8 December. On various occasions John Paul II focused on the subject of women when addressing international bodies, for example for the XXV International Conference of FAO (16 November 1989), and the Messages for the International Conference on Population and Development (18 March 1994) and for the IV U.N. Conference on Women (26 May 1995). Another significant group of interventions refers to the dignity and vocation of women, for example 5 November 1979; 11 September 1984; 10 June 1987; 9 and 30 April 1989; 20 June 1993; 24 April 1994; 19 and 20 January 1995; 5, 12, 19 and 26 February 1995; 10 May 1995; 1 and 29 October 1985. John Paul II has also approached the question of women in relation to the family, to work, to feminism, to women's associations, to Women's World Days, to the priesthood reserved to men, and during bishops' *ad limina* visits... For further documentation on the Pope's interventions, cf. P. VANZAN - A. ACCETTA, *L'essere e l'agire della donna in Ciantarra Paolo II*, Roma 1996; *Dignità e vocazione della donna. Per una lettura della "Mulieris dignitatem"*, Città del Vaticano 1989; M. FARINA, *La "Mulieris dignitatem": il progetto di Dio appella una nuova autocoscienza femminile. Approccio teologico-fondamentale*, in "Rivista di Scienza dell'educazione" 27 (1989) 11-14; *Id.*, *La questione donna: un'istanza critica per la teologia*, *Rivista Teologica* 1 (1990) 91-120; S. MANGIOLINI (ed.), *Profesia della donna. Lettera apostolica "Mulieris dignitatem"*, *Teza e commenti*, Roma 1988; A. SFERRA, *La "Mulieris dignitatem". Commenti e direzioni*, *Visioni* 23 (1991) 512-566; D. TETTAMANZI, *Conosci così la fede con me l'Insegnamento. Meditando con il Papa la "Mulieris dignitatem"*, Roma 1988; M. TOSI (ed.) *Essere donna. Studi sulla lettera apostolica "Mulieris dignitatem"*, Torino 1989; P. VANZAN, *"Mulieris dignitatem": percorsi, contenuti e prospettive*, *La Civiltà Cattolica* 139 (1988) 4, 255-258.

and dignity of being a woman and being a man. It is a question of understanding the reason for and the consequences of the Creator's decision that the human being should always and only exist as a woman or a man. It is only beginning from these bases that it is possible to understand the greatness of the dignity and vocation of women and to be able to speak of their active presence in the Church and in society. This is what I intend to deal with in this document".¹

In this text the Pope indicates a fundamental methodological premise for our reflection: only if we start from the anthropological and theological bases can we grasp the depth of woman's dignity and mission. When, indeed, we go to the root of the personal being of the man and the woman, which implies identity and difference, we are able to think of woman as an 'other' being and not as 'another thing'.

The aim of this talk is therefore to present the *anthropological and theological bases* of the dignity and mission of woman in the Magisterium of John Paul II. I will not go into the questions — even the burning questions — related to her dignity and mission. It is necessary first to give two clarifications of considerable importance:

— We take as our starting-point the Papal teaching, and not the ample debate that is in progress on these matters in the fields of theology, philosophy and the human sciences, as well as in cultural and social circles. Clearly, this does not mean that no account has been taken of specialized literature nor of the challenges from feminist thought. It means, rather, that we will not here be entering *directly* into the cultural debate by discussing positions taken by others; what we will be presenting are fundamental lines for relevant reflection. Our choice should, however, make it possible to give an adequate response to the legitimate claims of 'feminism' and, at the same time, a serene criticism of certain of its positions that cannot be reconciled with Catholic teaching.

— Secondly, it belongs to the nature of the Magisterium to formulate Christian doctrine, stating its content and indicating its limits. The Magisterium is therefore addressed to the whole People of

¹ *Mulieris dignitatem*, 1.

God as a starting-point for further reflection. The indications given by the Pope in his teaching on woman need to be considered in depth, critically and systematically, with an appropriate theological method. Our reflection will be developed here on two points. First of all, we will go into the anthropological basis of the man-woman relationship. Secondly, we will raise the question of its origin. Finally, we will speak about the purpose of the relationship.

2. The anthropological basis: the dual unity of man and woman

A) Reflection on the man-woman relationship is one of the principal elements of the anthropology implied in the Magisterium of John Paul II.² The Pope starts from a series of considerations on the two Genesis accounts of creation (cf. *Gen* 1:27 and *Gen* 2:18-25), which converge in the affirmation of man made "in the image and likeness of God", constituting — in the words of the Holy Father — "the immutable basis of all Christian anthropology".³ *Mulieris Dignitatem* states: "Man cannot exist 'alone' (cf. *Gen* 2:18); he can exist only as a 'unity of the two', and therefore in relation to another human person... Being a person in the image and likeness of God thus also involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other 'I'".⁴ The man-woman relationship can thus be seen as an expression of the ontological principle of dual unity, according to which, in contingent reality, unity always implies an internal polarity (this is true also for soul and body, individual and community).⁵

We will do no more than list four essential aspects of the significance of the man-woman relationship.

² Cf. G. CHASTRAINE, *Uomo e donna*, Pavia 1986; C. GULLONORI, *Intelligenza ontologica del maschile e del femminile*, Roma 1991; A. SCIALA, *L'immagine Dei e la sessualità umana*, in "Anthropos" 1 (1992), 61-73; Id., *Maria modello del cristiano e della donna*, in S. MAGGIOLINI (Ed.), *Professione della donna. Testimonie apostoliche "Mulieris dignitatem"*, Trento e Livorno, Roma 1988; P. VANRAN, "Mulieris dignitatem": razioni, contenuti e prospettive, *Le Chiese Cattoliche* 139 (1988) 4, 255-278.

³ *Mulieris dignitatem*, 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ Cf. A. SCIALA, *Homo Unus cum Barbaris. Uno stile teologico*, Milano 1991, 131-138.

a) The human being exists always and only as masculine and feminine. No man (or no woman) can, alone, be the whole of the human being; he or she is always confronted with the other, inaccessible mode of being human. So, in the man-woman relationship we can discover the contingent character of the human creature: the I needs the other, depends on the other for fulfilment.⁹ The duality, masculine and feminine, of 'gender' is therefore both internal and external to the I. Better: the I finds within itself a lack that opens it up for something 'outside itself'. This is the context for reflection on the principle of help, a help which is not one-sided but mutual.¹⁰ This contingent character not only identifies the limit of the human being, but also the human capacity for auto-transcendence in the discovery of the other as positive for the self. In this sense, it shows that, like every creature, the human being is a sign: not only an individual (identity) but also a person (relation-difference). Being a person "in the image and likeness of God" thus also involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other 'T'.¹¹

b) The relation between masculine and feminine can at the same time be characterized as a relationship of identity and difference.¹²

The question of identity can easily be related to the absolute equality of the two (man and woman) in being persons and in everything deriving from personhood. The conciliar text that the Pope constantly quotes to illustrate this is taken from the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*: "Man, the only creature on earth that God wanted for its own sake, cannot fully find himself except in sincere self-giving".¹³ This links the Pope to the Western philosophical tradition that we can find in the definition of Boetius: "persona est naturae rationalis individua substantia" (the *persona* is an individual substance of a rational nature).¹⁴

⁹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Uomo e donna: la creatura. Catechesi sull'amore umano*, Roma 1987, 58.

¹⁰ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Women*, 7.

¹¹ *Mulieris dignitatem*, 7.

¹² Cf. A. SCOLA, *Identicalità e differenza*, Madrid 1969.

¹³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

¹⁴ BOETIUS, *Liber de persona et duabus naturis*, III: PL 64, 1343. Reprinted in St. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 29, a. 1.

The question of difference is more complex. Thinking the difference between the genders is precisely what seems problematical (psychoanalysis has profound things to say on the subject). It cannot, in any case, be reduced to a simple problem of roles; it must be understood ontologically. In this sense, the dual unity is a phenomenological expression of what Thomas called the "distinctio realis" and Heidegger the "ontological difference". The man-woman relationship, like the relation between being and beings is a call to human freedom from Being, through the reality which is its sign.

The dual unity of gender does not therefore mean a pacific symmetrical reciprocity as Aristophanes thought in Plato's *Symposium*. Man and woman are not two halves destined to be joined together so as to recreate a lost unity. That is clear even at the phenomenological level of *status*. Man does not live only spousal relations, but also those of paternity, fraternity, etc.

On the other hand, the man-woman reciprocity "can serve as a paradigmatic case for the perennially communitarian character of the human being".¹⁵

There is another aspect related to the question of sexual difference that we cannot fail to mention. I refer to the way in which the dual unity inevitably imposes on the human consciousness an even keener awareness of one's original dependence. The sexual character of human nature, linked with procreation, brings the discovery of death. The dual unity places the I within the circle of human generations as, implacably, they succeed one another; the species preserves itself, but the individual is exposed to death.

c) From a strictly theological standpoint, human sexuality, and therefore the difference of genders, belongs to the human being as image of God.¹⁶ Saying this allows us to avoid, in definition of the human being, any restriction to the intracosmic sphere (and so, any reduction of sexuality to the animal level). On the other hand, it makes us understand that the image cannot be reduced to the purely spiritual element. Moreover, including sexual difference in the *imago Dei* will allow us to speak — under precise conditions —

¹⁵ H.U. VON BALHUSAR, *Theological Ethics* vol. 2, Milano 1982, 344.

¹⁶ Cf. A. SCOLA, *L'Imago Dei e la sessualità umana*, art. cit.

of a certain analogy between the man-woman relationship and Trinitarian relations. *Comunion* as an essential dimension of the human being belongs to being in God's image.

A) What has been said makes it possible to see in spousal love the *analogatum principis* of every kind of love¹⁷ and, at the same time, a privileged metaphor for the relationship between the human being and reality.¹⁸ In this regard, the Pope states: "The nature both of the one and the other love (virginity and marriage) is 'spousal' that is, a love of total self-giving. The one and the other love both tend to express the spousal significance of the body, inscribed 'from the beginning' within the personal structure of man and of woman"¹⁹

B) These four elements that characterize the sense of the man-woman relationship allow us to conclude that sexuality is an original, and not a derived dimension of the human being. It is impossible to construct an anthropology while abstracting from the sexed nature of the human being. If the sexual difference was not essential in considering the person, the relationship to the other would be established independently of this difference. In this case sexuality would be a purely accidental fact.

Is it not this kind of 'disincarnate' anthropology that leads to negation of the woman as a personal subject of 'desire', with the risk of reducing her to a mere object of masculine desire? Such a position would end by compromising even the value of maternity and virginity since woman's personal dignity would not be their essential presupposition, but, on the contrary, only a consequence resulting from them.

Affirming human sexuality as an integral part of the *imago Dei* allows us, moreover, to differentiate radically between human sexuality and animal sexuality — with which, obviously, it has solid links at the biological, instinctual level. Against any gnostic tempta-

¹⁷ This is an insight due to Solov'ev. Cf. V. Solov'ev, *Il significato dell'amore e altri scritti*, Milano 1983.

¹⁸ Scheeben uses the man-woman relationship to define the relation between faith and reason. Cf. M.J. NEWMAN, *I mistieri del cristianesimo*, Brescia 1990, 793-806.

¹⁹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Uomo e donna...*, op. cit., 309.

tion, we have to affirm the fully human, that is, personal character of sexuality. The body, in this sense, expresses the person,²⁰ and expresses the person also in being masculine or feminine. Any offence against the dignity of the body (something to which, unfortunately, the woman is more exposed than the man) is an offence against the dignity of the person.

— Another consequence of the vision of dual unity consists in radically nullifying any attempt to oppose man and woman in a way that implies exclusion. On the contrary, it is only in their mutual dependence that they attain their personal character. This dependence implies the simultaneous affirmation of their identity and their difference. Exalting exclusively one of the poles against the other can only break the original dual unity willed by the Creator. It will therefore be impossible to promote woman's dignity and rights without respecting this characteristic. On the other hand, it is clear that any form of 'masculinism' contradicts the nature of the creative design. So, it is a positive fact that the current debate on the question of women is proceeding in terms of *reciprocity*, marking development with regard to the earlier phases of *emancipation and separateness*.²¹ Without going here into the concrete questions involved, there can be no doubt that the search for an equality (we prefer to say identity), while respecting the difference-diversity, corresponds better to the Christian vision of life.²²

Efforts to promote the dignity and mission of women in the Church and in the world can be eminently creative if we consider all the dimensions of the feminine being, those that woman shares with man through common identity and those that are proper to her because she is a woman.

3. The origin of the dual unity of man-woman

A) The anthropological affirmation of the dual unity, that is, of man and woman, is decisive. It requires, however, to be gone into at greater depth. We cannot here examine, even in brief outline,

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 75.

²¹ Cf. M. FARINA, *op. cit.*, 111-112.

²² Cf. A. SCOLA, *Temp. Urb.*, *op. cit.*, 108-110.

the philosophical basis of the dual unity; that would lead us to spell out the terms of an ontology that would be adequate for the anthropology underlying our discourse. Instead, we pause a moment to consider the theological basis that, starting from the content of revelation, accounts better for why God willed us to be man-woman.

To do this we have to fix our eyes on the fullness of revelation and, therefore, on Jesus Christ: "Eternal truth about the human being, man and woman — a truth which is immutably fixed in human experience — at the same time constitutes the mystery which only in 'the Incarnate Word takes on light ... since Christ fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear, as the Council teaches'.²⁷ In the revelation of the incarnate Son of God, we must, therefore, be better able to throw light on dual unity, also on that of man-woman.²⁸

In the event of the Incarnation a new and definitive relationship is established between God and humankind. Through the hypostatic union, in fact, the Person of Jesus Christ constitutes the place of encounter between God and humanity. This encounter can be construed as a spousal union; it constitutes, indeed, the new sponsality: "It is only the act of supreme love by which God, emptying himself of his divinity, gives himself entirely, that reopens the possibility of a renewed union".²⁹ The dual unity of man-woman is in reference to the hypostatic union of Christ as to its foundation. "Through the joining of the two natures in Christ God's global project is made manifest: a project which, starting from the one flesh of Adam and Eve, through the one flesh of the Redeemer, reaches the one flesh of the Mystical Body, within which, through the suffering of the Paschal Mystery man and woman reach the perfection of their likeness to God".³⁰

What has been said about the Christological foundation of the dual unity calls, in turn, for deeper reflection. The incarnation of the Son can, in fact, be conceived only within the Trinitarian relationships. It is in the dynamism of the divine Life, in the relation

between Father and Son and Spirit, in the so-called 'processions', that we have to seek the possibility of the Incarnation. In other words: that the Word is made flesh supposes the eternal procession of the Word from the Father and, together with the Father, the procession of the Spirit; it supposes the intratrinitarian life as a unity of nature and a trinity of persons. The mystery of the Trinity is, therefore, the ultimate foundation of the dual unity.

The relations between Trinity and dual unity are not, however, merely the final result of a complex theological reflection. There is an aspect that makes them truly accessible. It is this: in the dual unity we find an analogy of Trinitarian communion. In fact, as the Holy Father suggests in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the human being is not in God's image only because he or she is free and rational, but also as a being who is fulfilled in communion, as relation.³¹

The image of God is complete in interpersonal communion. In this key thesis, developed in *Mulieris Dignitatem* from the reflection about woman and not yet sufficiently explored by theology, can be found one of the most significant contributions of the Papal Magisterium. Its importance concerns the whole field of dogmatic theology.

B) These considerations may be rather impenetrable, but far from being abstract, they have decisive relevance in the concrete situations of human existence.

In the first place, and this seems to me particularly important, we have to say that a culture which does not accept the revelation of the Triune God makes itself ultimately incapable of thinking about sexual difference in a positive way. And that is an impediment to serene acceptance of the diverse, of the man and the woman. It is not for nothing that the evident acceptance of homosexuality is peculiar both to classical paganism and to that of today. If from the beginning there is not the possibility of a difference that does not change identity: such as exists, in the full sense, in the life of the Triune God, from whose loving design the human being emerges as one originally sexed, any

³¹ Cf. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 7.

²⁷ *Mulieris dignitatem*, 2.

²⁸ This reflection is inspired by C. Guerinot, *Intelligens coniuges*, op. cit. 163-174.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

further difference will be experienced as the result of a fall or as fruit of violence. So a society that loses its reference to the personal Triune God, to the Other, is not able to think of sexuality as original. It is unable to keep from falling into a negative view of sexuality, which becomes an object of prohibitions or else treated as banal and taken for granted as being related merely to the "animal" character of the human being. It remains in any case on the fringe of any responsible consideration. As a result sexuality will be either censured or insignificant.

Another consequence of the failure to understand the Trinitarian and Christological foundation closely concerns the institution of the family, founded on marriage. When, in fact, we speak of Trinitarian unity and the hypostatic union as ultimate foundations of the dual unity of man-woman, this shows that the difference, without confusion and without separateness, is something positive that exalts and does not break unity. It gives us the insight that unity is the full meaning of difference. Difference, otherness, is a way towards a more complete unity. This also can let us understand why, in the sacrament by which the woman constitutes with the man *una caro* (one flesh) there is expressed the saving will of the God of Jesus Christ, asking man not to separate what God has joined together. Indissolubility is the destiny and ultimate nucleus of the man-woman relationship in marriage. That is why indissolubility is at the heart of the vocation of marriage. We can even say that, strictly speaking, marriage is a vocation precisely because of indissolubility. Here spousal love reaches its apex and the vocation of marriage reveals its highest dignity.

One last, very general, point. Recovering reflection on the Trinity as foundation of anthropology cannot but be favourable to a deeper notion of person, which is very often identified with the notion of "individual" or of "spiritual subject".²⁸ Moreover, this notion provides adequate instruments for a criticism both of the liberal and of the collectivist system, giving the basis for a correct relationship between the State and civil society.

²⁸ Cf. A. SCOTI, *Hum. De.*, op. cit. 93-95.

4. The purpose of the dual unity of man-woman

Up till now we have dwelt on the anthropological foundation of the dignity and mission of woman (dual unity) and on their theological roots (Christological and Trinitarian). In this third and last part of our journey we must approach the question of the purpose of the dual unity. A reflection must, indeed, grasp together the origin and the end if it can be said to be truly complete.

A) Our starting-point is a statement by Balthasar: the mystery of man and woman "derives the maximum of its mysterious richness only from the mystery of Christ and the Church (Cf. *Eph.* 5:27,33)".²⁹ If we look well, in fact, the couple Christ-Church is presented as an original couple. With regard to it, the couple man-woman is, in a certain sense, derivative. This is in accordance with a well known classical principle that the end-purpose of a reality is included in its origin.³⁰ The dual unity has its definitive archetype in the marriage between the Crucified and Risen Lord and his Body which is the Church.³¹

The Pauline image of the Church as Spouse of Christ³² has its reference in salvation history, in which Yahweh chooses the Hebrew people, whose fulfilment, in the fullness of time, is the new people of God. This spousal dimension of the God-man relationship in the Church is well expressed by Augustine: "The whole Church is, in fact, the bride of Christ and its principle and first fruit is the flesh of Christ".³³

The Pauline image allows us to affirm that the Church stands before God as a feminine interlocutor, and receives from God all her fe-

²⁹ H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Teologia mistica*, vol. 3, Milano 1983, 265.

³⁰ In this sense Balthasar affirms: "The distinction parallels of the very image Dei: Let us make man in our image and likeness and God created man in his likeness, in the image of God he created him, male and female He created them. If this were not the case, Christ could neither refer to the relationship between the two sexes in preserving the mystery of Himself in relation to the Church nor make it possible for the sacrament of marriage to symbolise His relationship in the bodily relation" (H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Gli anni di vita del cristiano*, Milano 1985, 321).

³¹ Cf. *Mulieris dignitate*, 25-27.

³² Cf. *Eph.* 5: 25-32.

³³ St. AUGUSTINE, *In ep. PA. Tr.* 2, 2.

cundity.²⁴ The Lord, in fact, loves his people as his bride and offers his own life for the salvation of his people. From the sacrifice of the Cross springs the obedient love of the Church, which is also *forma humanitatis*. In this spousal relationship "the man-woman polarity is linked with the mystery of the Christ-Church relation (cf. *Eph.*, 5). In this relation not only does spousal love find its completion, but the link is broken that binds it to death through the closed circle of the generations required for the species. Not only because in Christ death is conquered but also, and more precisely, because Christ inaugurates a new form of fecundity that is not identified with human procreation. This is fecundity for the Kingdom, which becomes an eschatological sign of the nuptial relationship between Christ and the Church. The virginal fecundity, or spousality, which is in no way unsexed".²⁵

The most excellent way to grasp in all its depth the spousal relationship between Christ and the Church is through the figure of Mary. Mary's virginal motherhood throws, in fact, an intense light upon the mystical marriage of the Lamb. Balthasar enlightens us again in this regard: "The fact that the Church can become 'mother' of the believers in Christ always presupposes that Mary has conceived and given birth in the world to the Messiah".²⁶

As Mother and Virgin, Mary is archetype of the Church. In her person is concentrated, on the one hand, the Motherhood of the Church, whose womb is the baptismal font, and on the other, the perfect obedience of faith which tradition links, in a special way, with virginity.

Mary is also the archetype for every human being. She is the one who, eminently among humankind, fulfils the supernatural destiny of being sons in the Son.²⁷ Mary conceives her whole life in function of the Son: in her, as in no other creature, is fulfilled the design pre-established by the Father, since she was preserved from original sin and her whole history, from the im-

maculate conception to the assumption, is an affirmation of the will of the Father in the following of the Son.²⁸

Mary, furthermore, is archetype of woman,²⁹ as we are reminded in *Redemptoris Mater*.³⁰ In the thought of John Paul II this special link between woman and Mary is founded on the mystery of the Virgin's divine Motherhood.³¹ In the mystery of the *Theotókos* new light is thrown upon the Mary-Eve relationship: as mother of believers, the Virgin, daughter of Eve, mother of the living, becomes the new Eve.³²

The reference to Mary as archetype of woman concerns certain dimensions of her dignity and mission. I am referring to spousality, maternity and prophetic "genius". The first dimension brings us back to what we have said about the dual unity, that is, the spousal nature of the human being.³³ The theme of motherhood opens the way for an understanding of the special link between woman and life.³⁴ As for the "prophetic genius",³⁵ this is especially related to the logic of love which, in the end, is the only logic that is credible for humankind.

²⁴ Cf. *Redemptoris Mater*, 44-47.

²⁵ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesis at the General Audience* (6-IX-1995), 3.

²⁶ "This Marian dimension of Christian life takes on special importance in relation to women and their status. In fact, femininity has a unique relationship with the mother of the Redeemer, a subject which can be studied in greater depth elsewhere. Here I simply wish to note that the figure of Mary of Nazareth sheds light on womanhood as such by the way (not that God, in the sublime event of the incarnation of his Son, assumed himself to the ministry, the free and active ministry of a woman. It can thus be said that women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own true advancement. In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-giving totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; fruitless fidelity and tireless decision to work; the ability to combine penetrating intellect with words of support and encouragement" (*Redemptoris Mater*, 46).

²⁷ *Mulieris dignitatem*, 3-5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-11.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

³⁰ Cf. for instance, JOHN PAUL II, *Message for the World Day of Peace* (26-12-December 1994), n. 3: "This invitation to become teachers of peace, directed particularly to women, is based on a realization that to them God entrusts the human being in a special way"; cf. also *In.*, *Inauguratum Vitae*, 58; *In.*, *Message to the Secretary of the International Conference on Population and Development* (18 March 1994).

³¹ *Mulieris dignitatem*, 29-30; *Letter to Women*, 11.

²⁴ Cf. H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Spousa Virgo*, Brescia 1972, 139-187; *In.*, *Il suo nel frammento*, Milano 1970, 241-245; *Id.*, *Punti fermi*, Milano 1972, 240-246.

²⁵ A. SOOLA, *Uusi Usi van Balthasar...*, op. cit. 115-116.

²⁶ H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Tommasianità*, vol. 3, op. cit. 271.

²⁷ Cf. A. SOOLA, *Maria modello del cristiano e della donna*, in S. MARCOLINI (Ed.), *Profeta...*, op. cit. 149-158.

B) From this ecclesial and Marian standpoint we can refer to two consequences.

— The ecclesial Marian archetype shows that the essential content of maternity is not only the act of generation but also the task of education. From this point of view it is in no way offensive for the dignity of woman and her rights if we underline her importance within the family. To speak of the differences of *status* within the family (paternity, maternity, fraternity, etc.) would be a long discourse. I will only say that it belongs objectively to the mother's task as educator to bring the child to recognize dependence on the father as sign of the divine Fatherhood. Often today the fathers are absent, but that is also because the mothers fail in their duty in this respect.

— I conclude with a brief reference to the man woman relationship as it relates to the constitution of the Church. The Church lives by a twofold principle: Petrine and Marian.* For the Petrine dimension there is an ultimate connection with the *sacra potestas*. But power in the Church takes the form of witness, even to the point of martyrdom. In this sense, as John Paul II teaches us with his style of government, Peter depends on Mary. The Marian dimension, in fact, expresses in depth the nature of the Church, born from the heart of the justified when they receive the incarnate Word of God, making of their own lives an offering pleasing to the Trinity.

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* Cf. G. CHATELAIN, *Principio mariano e principio petrino*, in *Dignità e vocazione della donna. Per una lettura della "Mulieris dignitatem"*, Vatican City 1989, 154-163.