

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.

One of the most acute analyses of contemporary culture is due to Hans Urs von Balthasar. In the book Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe (Only love is credible) he gives an exact description of the world as it has taken shape from the time of Bacon and Descartes to our own day. He states, among other things: "If the relation between nature and grace is split in the dialectical sense of 'knowledge' and 'faith' as opposites, then the earthly being is necessarily placed under the sign of 'superior' knowledge and the forces of love that are immanent in the world are overcome and stifled by science, technology, cybernetics. The result is a world without women, without children, without respect for the poverty and humility characteristic of love; a world in which everything is seen in function of profit and power, and whatever is unproductive, gratuitous, useless is despised, persecuted, cancelled; in which the mask and face of technology is even passed off as art".

The world which experiences the consequences of the split between creation and redemption, nature and grace, faith and reason, is a world where the prevailing interpretation of man and nature is given through technology and the 'noticeability' of facts. A world marked by a radical distortion of the meaning of "masculine" and 'feminine', where men and women, indistinctly, tend to set store by the former and disparage the latter. A world without love.

As Christians, what is our attitude to this reality?

Today, no one does more than the Pope to defend the dignity and the rights of women. No one with such force and passion, no one so consistently. His Magisterium is based on the Word of God, by which it is illuminated. And he exhorts us to let ourselves be guided by this Word which "enables us to grasp clearly the ultimate anthropological basis of the dignity of women, making it evident as a part of God's plan for humanity" (Letter to Women, 6).

The texts gathered here are the fruit of the International Meeting organized in Rome by the Pontifical Council for the Laity from 6 to 8 December 1996 on the theme: "A renewed commitment of all for the good of the world's women". The reference to the Pope's teaching is constantly present. Three specific facts emerge:

1. The first is that of femininity. Affirming that women "make an indispensable contribution to the growth of a culture... open to the sense of 'mystery'" (ibid., 2), John Paul II underlines how the 'receptivity' that is incarnate in a woman's person and that finds expression in 'openness' and 'expectation', is essential if the 'being' and "acting" of men and women are to reflect their humanity.

Modelled on Mary's fiat, this receptivity essentially means openness to "God's love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). Receiving Love in order to give love, the woman therefore becomes for humanity a sign of the right order of love. Referring to the fifth chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians the Pope writes: "When the author calls Christ 'the Bridegroom' and the Church 'the Bride', he indirectly confirms through this analogy the truth about woman as bride. The Bridegroom is the one who loves. The Bride is loved: it is she who receives love, in order to love in return" (Mulieris Dignitatem, 20). The genius of woman is precisely in showing that what constitutes the nucleus of 'being' a human person is the order of love. The One to love us first was God. And, "if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 Jn 4:11).

2. The second fact is that the distortion of the meaning of 'masculine' and 'feminine' has simultaneously brought distortion of notions and prerogatives that are typically masculine, such as production, achievement, power... Eclipsing the specific dimension of femininity, all of that has resulted in an age-old disparagement of women. The perception of this by the participants in the Meeting corresponded to the Pope's summing up of this aberrations: "We are heirs to a history which has conditioned us to a remarkable extent. In every time and place, this conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women. Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their pre-

rogatives misrepresented, they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity" (Letter to Women, 3).

Recovering the feminine dimension of humanity will only be possible on condition that there is a profound change in the self-awareness of men and women. If it happens, its effects will be felt in the economy, in politics, in culture. If it happens, it will be possible to lay the foundations for a common ethic inspired by awareness that the constitutive element of the whole creation is love.

3. The third fact is that, throughout history, women have not been able to exercise fully the rights pertaining to them in the life of society. Even today, this situation is, not infrequently, without admission, as John Paul himself states when speaking of the obstacles which still prevent women from being fully integrated into social, political and economic life. "We need only think of how the gift of motherhood is often penalized rather than rewarded, even though humanity owes its very survival to this gift. Certainly, much remains to be done to prevent discrimination against those who have chosen to be wives and mothers. As far as personal rights are concerned, there is an urgent need to achieve real equality in every area: equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancements, equality of spouses with regard to family rights and the recognition of everything that is part of the rights and duties of citizens in a democratic State" (ibid., 4).

In spite of the conditioning women have made immense contributions to the life of the Church and of society. The participants spoke of this, referring to the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, which states: "The Church gives thanks for all the manifestations of the feminine 'genius' which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations... The Church asks that these invaluable 'manifestations of the Spirit' (cf. 1 Cor 12:4ff), which with great generosity are poured forth upon the 'daughters' of the eternal Jerusalem, may be attentively recognized and appreciated so that they may return for the common good of the Church and of humanity, especially in our times" (n. 31).

This volume points to a more faithful adherence to the will of God, who created the human being — masculine and feminine — in his likeness. Offering it to all who work to enable ever more men and women to express fully and fruitfully the riches of their humanity in the spirit of Mary's fiat, the Pontifical Council for the Laity hopes to contribute to the search for solutions that correspond better to God's plan.

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