



# Laity Today

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PONTIFICIUM CONSILIUM PRO LAICIS

# MEN AND WOMEN

DIVERSITY AND MUTUAL COMPLEMENTARITY

*Study Seminar*

Vatican City, 30-31 January 2004



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## PREFACE

The contemporary world is currently embroiled in transformations of overwhelming depth and breadth. Events seem to have far exceeded the forecasts made in the 1970s by the American sociologist, Alvin Toffler, in his famous book, *Future Shock*,<sup>1</sup> which, at the time, was considered to be verging on science-fiction because of its radical nature. When asked, in the 1990s, how far his forecasts had come true he replied that the main flaw in his hypotheses was that they had not been radical enough. At the heart of the epoch-making changes which are redesigning the world today is the human person, and his or her dignity and destiny. Contemporary culture is challenging the most vital aspects of the existence of the human being, in ways that go so far as to overturn our understanding of human nature, and particularly of human sexual identity and relations between the sexes. This is a distortion that is inevitably impacting on the future of the human race. In a climate of aggressive “pansexualism”, and with disastrous results, contemporary culture is proposing and imposing models for sexual identity and relations between the sexes that are not only superficial and reductive, but often disfigured and self-destructive. Highly ideologised strategies for radically redefining sexual identity and relations between the sexes (for example, the *gender* ideology, and the *gender feminism* school of thought) are reducing sexual identity to socially constructed roles, making them subject to manipulation and a question of arbitrary free choice. Establishing and consolidating these tendencies is done by “deconstructing” the family, education and culture, and especially by dismantling religion, which is viewed as the primary hurdle in the path of these changes. There are those who maintain that a full-blown cultural revolution is in progress. Indeed, it is the case that we are not

<sup>1</sup> A. TOFFLER, *Future Shock*, Pan Books, London, 1972.

confronted merely by theories but by authentic strategies, thought out and organised at the international level, driven by extremely powerful lobbies, as we saw at Beijing in 1995 at the United Nations Conference on Women.

The two-day Seminar on “Women and men: diversity and mutual complementarity” which was organised in the Vatican by the Pontifical Council for the Laity on 30-31 January 2004 took stock of this cultural environment, in a thorough debate on the nature of the sexual identity of the human person and the relationship between man and woman. This was not the first time that the Pontifical Council for the Laity had addressed this issue. It had earlier convened an International Conference in 1996 on “A renewed commitment of all for the good of the world’s women”, the proceedings of which have been published in *The Logic of Self-giving*. The regular revisiting of this issue by our Pontifical Council is in response to the pressing demand to examine it in greater depth made in *Christifideles Laici*, its *magna charta* in every sense of the term, in which the Pope said that “The condition that will assure the rightful presence of woman in the Church and in society is a more penetrating and accurate consideration of the anthropological foundation for masculinity and femininity with the intent of clarifying woman’s personal identity in relation to man, that is, a diversity yet mutual complementarity, not only as it concerns roles to be held and functions to be performed, but also, and more deeply, as it concerns her make-up and meaning as a person. The Synod Fathers have deeply felt this requirement, maintaining that ‘the anthropological and theological foundations for resolving questions about the true significance and dignity of each sex require deeper study’”.<sup>2</sup>

This passage in the apostolic exhortation provides us with an important methodological blueprint that should not be underestimated. For it is only by arguing on solid anthropological and theological bases that we can fully grasp the meaning of what it is to be a woman or a man, and the dignity that stems from this. We must therefore begin

<sup>2</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, no. 50.



at the roots, from the very structure of the human person who never exists as a *neutral being*, but always as a *sexed being*. John Paul II wrote that “Womanhood and manhood are complementary not only from the physical and psychological points of view, but also from the ontological. It is only through the duality of the “masculine” and the “feminine” that the “human” finds full realisation”.<sup>3</sup> The Holy Father is not speaking here in the abstract, but is affirming a reality with far-reaching and very real implications for the lives of every person. It has been rightly said that we are born male and female, but become men and women. How, then, can we help our contemporaries to experience this reality fully, responsibly and maturely? This is the challenge we have to take up.

Our intention was to conduct a wide-ranging reflection within the framework of the socio-cultural changes that are taking place today. The first part of the seminar was devoted specifically to this analysis, focussing on the cultural and the human aspects – but above all the significance – of the changes occurring in customs and morality, and the dominant trends in this sphere. Our purpose was to take stock of, and seek to understand, the direction in which men and women are moving at the dawn of the millennium. In that part of the seminar, we heard from Lucetta Scaraffia, lecturer in Contemporary History at the “La Sapienza” University in Rome; Vincent Aucante, Director of the “San Luigi dei Francesi” Cultural Centre in Rome; the journalist Karna Swanson, and Manfred Lütz, member of the Pontifical Council for the Laity. What emerged from their papers, in which they highlighted the limitations and inadequacies of the positions adopted by a feminism which is now adrift, revealed the need for a reaffirmation of the anthropological and theological bases of the “male” and the “female” identities, and examined specific ways of living according to the specific features of each, with particular attention to fatherhood.

Since the issues of dignity, participation in social life and equality between the sexes have now become an integral part of certain strate-

<sup>3</sup> Id., *Letter to Women*, no. 7.

gies being implemented at the international level by various different organisations – including the United Nations and its agencies, and numerous non-governmental organisations – we had to spell out the socio-cultural framework looking carefully at what is happening in these extremely important fora. Let us not forget that the recommendations and resolutions passed at international conferences become tools that are used to bring powerful pressure to bear on the law-makers in all the member states of the United Nations. It is at this level that the value of the voice of the Holy See, which is too often “a voice crying in the wilderness”, can be appreciated, but a voice which must not be silenced. We addressed all these questions in the second part of the Seminar. Most Reverend Diarmuid Martin, Coadjutor Archbishop of Dublin, gave us an interesting first-hand account based on his 20-year experience of working on behalf of the Holy See in these organisations. His paper, and the one given by Marguerite Peeters, the Director General of the Institute for the Dynamics of Intercultural Dialogue, emphasised the way in which the deconstruction of the traditional value system was set in motion by the United Nations conferences organised in the 1990s, particularly at Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995). By disseminating the idea that everything can be constructed and deconstructed according to values that are in vogue at any given moment in time, these strategies set out to establish a new international ethos based on individualism, which makes it difficult to pass an objective judgement on the rights and duties of the person towards self and towards others.

The third – central – phase was dedicated to examining the Magisterium of the Church regarding the dual unity of the human person. Maria Teresa Garutti Bellenzier and Most Reverend Carlo Caffarra, the Archbishop of Bologna, offered a well-documented reflection on the part played by women in the history of salvation, in order to bring out the deepest truths about the feminine. On this same topic, John Paul II provided an extremely important contribution by opening up new and fascinating prospects for theological and philosophical reflection on the human body (the theology of the body), marriage and the family. His most important documents are the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*

(1987), the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), and his *Letter to Women* (1995). Neither should we forget the long cycle of Wednesday catecheses, that have been published also in English under the title *The Theology of the Body*,<sup>4</sup> and his countless addresses devoted to these issues. For many years to come, John Paul II's extremely rich and prophetic Magisterium in this field will remain a fruitful source of inspiration for theological and anthropological research, but above all a source on which all men and women of our age can draw to make his teaching a programme for their lives.

To round off the Seminar, we endeavoured to identify some pastoral perspectives.

Giulia Paola Di Nicola and Attilio Danese, a married couple and co-directors of "Prospettiva Persona" gave a joint paper on "The family: the place for the formation of the identity of the man and the woman" addressed the role of the family in the difficult task of forming the child's sexed identity which is particularly threatened today, and is one of the causes of the profound and widespread crisis of the father figure. María Eugenia Díaz de Pfennich, President of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations, and Guzmán Carriquiry, both speaking on "Participation and cooperation in the life of the Church", emphasised the need for a "co-ordinated and harmonious presence" of men and women in the Church's life in order to play an active part in her mission, to be able to appreciate and enhance the presence and participation of women in the life of Church communities, while at the same time seeking different ways of enabling Catholic men play a more responsible, active, visible and participatory presence in the Church, dispelling the widely-held commonplace that religion is "only for the women". Fr Denis Biju-Duval, Dean of the Pontifical Institute "Redemptor Hominis", had been asked to address the theme of "The cultural question: possibilities for dialogue and proposals". This is one of the biggest challenges of our age: dialogue between the Church and

<sup>4</sup> Id., *The Theology of the Body. Human Love in the Divine Plan*, Boston, Pauline Books and Media, 1997.

contemporary culture in this vitally important area. How can we put across to post-modern man, who is so often bewildered and confused, the teaching of the Church about the dignity of the human person, human love, marriage and family? Knowing that man is the “primary and fundamental way”,<sup>5</sup> the Church is being called upon to play her role as the Good Samaritan of humanity, particularly by announcing the whole truth about men and women and their transcendental vocation. Moreover, in this age of overwhelming changes, the Church is being asked to cry out that “beneath all changes there are many realities which do not change and which have their ultimate foundation in Christ, Who is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever (cf. *Heb* 13: 8)”.<sup>6</sup> Today, more than ever before, we Christians must find the courage to swim against the tide imposed by the dominant culture. We are too often defensive in our dealings with the world, and too rarely offer positive proposals. But we possess a treasure that the world needs: the Gospel and the Church’s Magisterium. We must therefore revive within ourselves the spirit of the ancient prophets, the courageous messengers and intrepid defenders of God’s plan for humanity. John Paul II urges us to “to pursue, on the basis of the personal dignity of man and woman and their mutual relationship, a critical study to better and more deeply understand the values and specific gifts of femininity and masculinity, not only in the surroundings of social living but also and above all in living as Christians and as members of the Church”.<sup>7</sup>

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith then gave a valuable and providential contribution to the issues dealt with at the Seminar. Only four months later, it published its *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*, a document which we have included in this publication as an appendix. This is yet further proof of the Church’s concern

<sup>5</sup> ID., Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Hominis*, no. 14.

<sup>6</sup> SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 10.

<sup>7</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, no. 50.

*Preface*

for and interest in the human person. Mindful of the duty to hand on the original truth about the human being, of which it is the depository, the Church wishes to safeguard this truth at a moment in history in which there is a prevalence of “certain currents of thought which are often at variance with the authentic advancement of women”.<sup>8</sup> It is a document that is intended to stand as “a starting point for further examination in the Church, as well as an impetus for dialogue with all men and women of good will, in a sincere search for the truth and in a common commitment to the development of ever more authentic relationships”.<sup>9</sup>

+ Stanisław Rylko

*President  
of the Pontifical Council for the Laity*

<sup>8</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*, no. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*



**I. THE IDENTITY OF MAN AND WOMAN:  
THE PRESENT SITUATION AND CURRENT TRENDS**





# Socio-cultural changes in women's lives

LUCETTA SCARAFFIA

*Lecturer in Contemporary History, at "La Sapienza" University, Rome,  
journalist and writer*

Hobsbawm once said that the women's revolution was the only successful one in 20<sup>th</sup> century. For in Western societies today the differences between sex roles are tending to disappear. We have moved away from two different but complementary roles, each needing the other, to a kind of "unisex" role, more akin to the male role, with the result that complementarity has been replaced by competition between men and women.

Responsibility for this change lies only to a tiny extent with the feminist movements. It has been the socio-cultural changes that have been decisive, driven by the modernisation of Western societies.

There can be no doubt that one of the most powerful driving forces was the Industrial Revolution which raised living standards to unprecedented levels, and reduced mortality, particularly for infants. This transformation laid the foundations for enabling women – at least for part of their lives – to distance themselves from their biological role as mothers. In traditional societies, where women had to give birth at least three times in order to ensure the survival of one child, and when average life expectancy at birth was under forty years, women's lives were entirely occupied by their task of procreating.

Without the demographic revolution that the Industrial Revolution made possible, and which substantially reduced mortality levels, no society would therefore have been able to even consider large-scale birth control. For it was only with the Industrial Revolution that it became possible to think in terms of reducing the birth rate without the risk of defaulting on the obligation to perpetuate one's own social group. It is no coincidence that the first neo-Malthusian

campaigns were waged in England, the cradle of the Industrial Revolution.

In very recent times we have witnessed another revolution driven by scientific progress: the discovery of DNA, which makes it possible to establish with certainty the identity of a child's father. This discovery has done away with the need to control women's behaviour to be sure of a father's identity. This is a cultural revolution of vast proportions, which we are still far from having fully taken on board, recalling that the reason that was always used to justify keeping women away from public places was the need to be able to control their fidelity. Today, women's sexual behaviour is – or soon could be – freed from this subjection, and faithfulness can become a free choice, liberated of any social constraints.

Another result of the Industrial Revolution was the increase in paid employment, enabling individuals to survive regardless of whether they were members of a family or a community. This gave individuals the freedom to choose where to live and what occupation to perform. Paid employment rapidly spread, to include women, although they were still only in a minority.

But this was not the only change that occurred in the organisation of labour that has affected sex-based roles: with the rise of the modern state new occupations came into being which, for the first time in history, were available to men or women. The first of these new occupations was teaching in elementary schools, and working in post offices where both women and men had the same type of duties, even though women – naturally – were paid less for the same work. This played a decisive part in removing the former divisions between men's work and women's work, paving the way for the admission of women to every occupation and profession.

From the outset, with the prospect of involving everyone in political decision-taking, the American and British revolutions exposed the contradiction in equality proclaimed to be the birthright of every citizen but which, in reality, was the preserve of men alone. During the French Revolution a group of women immediately raised the problem

of “women citizens”, and it became clear at once that women were anxious to play a part in the political life of their country, even though they had to wait for more than a century for this to come about. Until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century women virtually everywhere were excluded from the key aspect of modernity: the possibility for personal self-fulfilment by exercising the right to choose where to live, what trade or occupation to take up, which political party to support, and which religion to belong to.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century women were unable to decide virtually anything (except that in the Catholic countries they could decide between taking the veil or marrying). Not only was marriage arranged by their families, but the woman's status as a wife and mother was governed by very rigid models. Women were therefore entirely excluded from modernity.

One can therefore fully understand how the alliance between the two parties that were left out of modernisation – women and the Church – came about. Women were excluded from modernity and denied the possibility of achieving self-fulfilment through work, political activity and intellectual life, and were relegated to a world apart – the world of the family – where other laws applied: no competition, no personal self-fulfilment, but only service to others, devotion without compensation, which was at least appreciated by the Church that promised them a reward in the hereafter. Women's first achievement, supported by the Romantic culture, was to be able to choose their husband according to their own personal preferences. Then it became possible for them to study, attend university and, little by little, gain access to all the professions. By so doing, women have been able gradually to acquire the same rights to individual freedom that men have – not to a mixing of sex roles in which men would also agree to take on women's roles – leading eventually to a levelling-down of women's roles to become identical to those of men, delegating housework, as soon as they could afford it, to paid maids from the Third World. It is obvious that when, in the name of individual freedom, the bulkheads separating sex-determined roles collapsed, women chose to take on the role

which enjoyed the highest social and financial prestige: the male role. And this has gone beyond the intentions of the feminist movements which, since the 1970s, have been proposing a reappraisal and enhancement of female specificity.

As women became gradually accepted by modern society, however, as they obtained the same rights as men and free access to men's roles, they not only abandoned the woman's traditional places in society, but also religion. It is significant in this connection that the great rift between the Church and women in Italy coincided with the two 1970's referendums to introduce divorce and abortion. But the Church had already made it clear, with Paul VI's controversial encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968), that acceptance of modernity would never go so far as to touch on the problem of procreation, disappointing all the progressives and providing the first opportunity for a clash with women's freedom. In Western societies, women's emancipation has been based on the idea of distancing women from their natural role, which the Church has always staunchly defended, by both prohibiting artificial birth control and rejecting the ordination of women.

Precisely because of this, and despite the fact women's emancipation came about and took root only in the Western countries, that is to say the countries with an underlying Christian matrix, however secularised, there still remains a widespread conviction that the Catholic Church has always been the "enemy of women", first burnt alive as witches, and now oppressed by a resolute opposition to abortion. This fails to take account of the fact that history shows that Christianity has always demonstrated respect and concern for women in a way that is unknown in other cultural traditions. This charge is compounded by another: the Church's opposition to women priests. In Western-type societies, where women now have access to all occupations and professions and to all the roles traditionally reserved for men, this prohibition remains the only obstacle to the total cancellation of sex role differences, which John Paul II denounced in no uncertain terms in *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

But birth control still remains the most fiercely contested issue of all,

precisely since *Humanae Vitae*. The importance of that encyclical and its prophetic force has still to be fully recognised by the Church herself. For in it, on the problem of birth control, Paul VI indicated a very specific threat: that the increase in artificial birth control would reach such proportions that it would very soon lead to the total control of human reproduction by technology. Today we can see all this actually occurring. The extraordinary advances in reproductive technologies are now making it possible both to store embryos and use them for experimental purposes and, through cloning, even to artificially create life.

The emancipation of women therefore lies at the social roots of progress in genetic engineering. We saw it in the debate on the possibility of cloning a baby girl, Eva, in which the most open-minded and “enlightened” commentators defended cloning – perhaps hiding behind the excuse of its therapeutic usefulness – and advocated the introduction of abortion rights into legislation and into the collective mindset; even more than birth control, these advances have finally given people the possibility of moving away from being the creatures of God to become the sole custodians of the right to the life and death of other human beings.

The moment we seek to deprive God of the power to give life and take it away (because the other side of freedom to abort is euthanasia) by acting on life with increasingly more powerful and sophisticated scientific methods, we open up the path to such monstrous practices as human cloning, or machines surrogating for a pregnant mother's womb. These practices have always found medical justification. Science thereby promises to be able to control procreation eugenically and to guarantee healthier, better-looking and more talented children.

For birth control has always needed lofty ethical motivation: global overpopulation, eugenics. No-one ever owns up to practising it for their own selfish ends.

Birth control has always been linked to two schools of thought – women's emancipation, and atheism – the refusal to recognise the will of God in the creation of human beings, whose most immediate consequence is the eugenetic temptation to try to improve humanity with

“scientific instruments”. British neo-Malthusian movements were closely allied – and often shared the same leaders, such as Charles Bradlaugh – with the “freethought movements”, whose aim was to eradicate the religious roots from society, which they considered to be a source of exclusion and obscurantism, or with scientists like Francis Galton who transferred Darwinian evolutionism to human beings. Eugenic selection – a spectre lying behind all forms of birth control – was therefore put forward as a lawful practice which scientists must apply to hasten the natural selection process. The roots of the birth control movement, which saw the lower birth rate and the freedom of abortion to be positive signs of a country’s modernity, therefore lay in both secularisation and women’s emancipation, and this original linkage persists to this day. Birth control only began to attract general support in the 1960s, when the idea of “planning” became politically fashionable, and people started to believe that life itself had to be planned, and children should therefore only be born when they were wanted. It was said that children who were “wanted” in this way would be more loved, better brought up, and therefore become better people. And although nearly forty years of planned births have amply demonstrated that this hope is baseless, no-one has so far challenged the planning dogma, and it is now considered to be a primary human right. For one of the unchallenged dogmas of modern society is that no-one must prevent the fulfilment of one’s desires, as the only hope of happiness for human beings.

All this conceals a great utopian vision: that all human beings, thanks to their rational instruments, that is to say, science (even psychology is considered to be a science) will succeed in achieving happiness. Today, utopia is no longer equality, which was crushed in the ruins of the Berlin Wall, but the possibility of finding happiness by making one’s desires come true.

It was in the 1970s that things changed: for the first time, feminists openly claimed the right to personal self-fulfilment. Shouting the slogan, “*Il corpo è mio, e lo gestisco io*” (“My body is mine, and I manage it myself”) as they marched through the streets, they showed that

underlying birth control there is only an individual selfish desire, and this is one of the reasons for the breakup of the couple.

The linkage between women's emancipation and the spread of birth control – the only condition for enabling women to liberate themselves from their biological destiny without having to embrace chastity – demonstrates that feminism cannot be considered to be just one more movement among many, a mere process of enlarging democracy. Women's emancipation presupposes controlling life (which obviously includes controlling death) and therefore forces us to address issues that have always been considered as falling into the realm of religion. For women's emancipation has not only been a political and social process, but it has also brought about changes which challenge and break up the very roots of a society's culture, driving through a new process of cultural construction which naturally also involves religion, although not primarily. As evidenced from the feminists' new interpretations of the book of *Genesis*, it is a process that goes so far as to suggest a reinterpretation of the myth of the origins of our culture.

This is a problem that we have not always clearly realised, because it has been hidden behind a mass of politically correct commonplaces, to the point of making it a prickly issue to take up. But it has been picked up by people looking in from the outside, particularly those who view us with suspicion and hostility, such as the Islamists who constantly denounce the dangers that the “women's revolution” pose to the stability of a religious-cultural system.

Today, even though the most sensitive members of the laity have now come to admit that it is not true that the decision to have a baby “is based on a linear conception of rationality” (Claudia Mancina), responsible procreation – meaning birth control – is still considered to be a vital part of civilisation, as a human right. One reason for this is that birth control is the basic condition for implementing that emancipation process designed to give women increasing equality with men, and is considered to be an undisputed achievement of Western culture. But women are rediscovering – and perhaps knew it all along – that motherhood is not modernisable, or fully controllable in rational terms.

For regardless of any other consideration, a child's development demands unrewarded devotion, love, and the ability to care, all of which have always characterised the woman's role and cannot be equated with a competitive society driven by gain, in which women have to live when they join the world of male work.

Despite all, then, as far as the fundamental aspect of motherhood is concerned, women are not amenable to modernity, and stand as an insoluble contradiction within the dogma of individual self-fulfilment, of happiness as the fulfilment of one's own desires. Motherhood – which in many respects cannot be reduced to rational control and scientific intervention – teaches us that human beings are not called merely to achieve the gratification of personal desires, but to reach out to what is new, to accept the unexpected, and to be repaid in ways that cannot even be imagined.

The Church, by defending procreation, continues to stand by the side of women – but not on the side of the feminists – precisely because the Church is unaffected by the negative effects of modernity. And that ancient bond between the two parties excluded from modern society – women and the Church – still functions in defiance of many women. For women's emancipation has brought the problems linked to the reproductive sphere into the political arena. But these are ethical problems that have to do with the concept of life itself, and are therefore indissolubly bound up with religious tradition. The entry of women into the political sphere has therefore brought religion with it, which had been driven out by secularisation, mainly of the 19<sup>th</sup> century variety.

Women's emancipation is therefore opening up contradictions in terms of two crucial issues in modern culture: secularisation and individual self-fulfilment, which is incompatible with motherhood. This hostility between lay women and the Church on the subject of procreation control therefore needs to be analysed without the haste and superficiality which is normally reserved for a topic that is taken as given.



# Fatherhood

VINCENT AUCANTE

*Director of the "San Luigi dei Francesi" Cultural Centre in Rome,  
Adviser to the Embassy of France to the Holy See*

While the first few pages of the book of Genesis gradually reveal what is specific to man and woman based on the nature of the undifferentiated human being, Western societies today seem to be proceeding in the opposite direction. We are therefore seeing the breakdown, in many fields, of every distinction between men and women, to the point of introducing the theory of *gender*, which holds that a person can decide at will whether to be a man or woman. Even the interplay between the character of, and the differences between, the sexes is being weakened.<sup>1</sup> Ethnologists, however, have shown that the categories used in these arguments are culturally bound up with our Western civilisations, and can in no way be claimed to be universal.<sup>2</sup> And this gives rise to a serious suspicion regarding the relevance of these theories, and the credit to be given to them.

Here lies the source of the benchmarks that structure our societies, and the once dominant position of men over women, which used to be

<sup>1</sup> Cf. for example, J.-P. WINTER, *La différence des sexes est-elle réelle, symbolique ou imaginaire?* in "Revue d'éthique et de théologie morale", "Le Supplément" no. 225, *La filiation interrogée*, Paris, Cerf, 2003, 87-95. The main problem here is the timing: whatever we are at a given moment in time is the outcome of our history which we can neither cancel nor forget. We cannot go back in time, and yet it is time which fashions our lives, such that we can never entirely reject what has been given to us, or what we were at birth, man or woman. Put another way, achieving total amnesia which would make it possible for us to start a new life, if that is what we want, is an illusion, because our present life brings with it the full weight of our own past. In short, it is time that fashions the human being, not the reverse.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. F. HÉRITIER, *Masculin/féminin. La pensée de la différence*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1996, 21-22.

the source of many forms of discrimination,<sup>3</sup> is now under threat. And with this upheaval of society, the conditions of men in comparison to women, and vice versa, become ill-defined, or to put it another way, they seem to need to be ceaselessly redefined. This applies particularly to fatherhood, and the part reserved to the father. Since the publication of Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, the "father's death", as a necessary part of the history of every human being, has emerged as a necessary feature of the collective unconscious. Let us briefly recall the myth invented by the founder of psychoanalysis. The primal horde, symbolising developing humanity, was subject to an older dominant male, who forced out or castrated the young rival males who competed with him for the women. They eventually joined forces to murder the chief and finally to share between themselves the enjoyment of what they had seized from him. But with the "father's murder", those who had become "sons" decided to keep up the alliance by extending the prohibition. In other words, they became "sons" prohibiting incest. This nontemporal, rather than historical, scheme of things weighs heavily on the collective unconscious of Western societies, particularly on the concept of fatherhood, which is thereby watered-down to a simplistic motive, according to which fatherhood is always seen as something negative, because the "son" accedes to sonship only by killing his father. According to Freud, the only fatherhood that exists is cancelled out, and should therefore be written as follows: ~~fatherhood~~.

But that is not all: with the development of the demands of the women's liberation movements – whose primary struggle was for strict equality between men and women, and subsequently achieving the radical independence of women by doing without any male presence – the place of the man in family relations disappeared in the confusion, and

<sup>3</sup> See for example B. ANGLERAUD, *Culture féminine, culture masculine: l'exemple du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, in *Homme et femme, l'insaisissable différence*, Paris, Cerf, 1993, 39-46. This is certainly not the prerogative of Western societies alone, as demonstrated by ethnologists: women in traditional societies are the object of an exchange consecrated by marriage which gives every individual their place within the structures of primitive societies (cf. for example, C. LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, Paris, Mouton, 1967, 548ff).

with it the status of fatherhood. “May 1968 marked the death of the father” says Tony Anatrella laconically.<sup>4</sup> And this tendency has become even more complex with the development of biotechnologies which are now making assisted procreation possible with an ever-smaller male contribution, and one can well imagine that it will not be long before the father’s genetic contribution will no longer be necessary to produce children, as revealed by the spectres raised at the time of the much-trumpeted announcement of the first human clone. Conversely, women and homosexual men are increasingly demanding the right to fatherhood.

In this paper I should like to examine fatherhood as such, from a phenomenological point of view, based on the phenomena as they present themselves, and seek to identify the place of the father in fatherhood. By clarifying the nature of the relationship between two persons – the father and his child – we will try to identify some of the conditions that make fatherhood possible, to see whether it is an abstract category, a subjective attitude, a symbolic function that anyone can take upon themselves, or a necessary natural disposition. But as Gabriel Marcel emphasised earlier, fatherhood relates to a mysterious reality because it opens the way to “a hidden and prohibited reality which makes the head spin”.<sup>5</sup> Raising a corner of the veil, faced with the vast array of questions opening up before our eyes, we would merely look at a few aspects of fatherhood, trying to identify their authenticity. Without getting too involved in a psychological analysis or an examination of sociological data, we will try to look at things closely as they come across to us. Little by little we shall examine the moment of procreation, the period of gestation, birth, childhood and the end. By only considering the phenomena, and closely examining the part played by fatherhood in each stage, it will be possible to draw a distinction between authentic fatherhood and surrogate fatherhood, emphasising above all the historical nature of fatherhood.

<sup>4</sup> T. ANATRELLA, *La différence interdite*, Paris, Flammarion, 1998, 9ff [our translation].

<sup>5</sup> G. MARCEL, *Homo Viator*, Paris, Aubier-Montaigne, 1944, 98 [our translation].

## 1. FATHERHOOD AND GENERATION

Save for the wholly exceptional phenomenon of parthenogenesis, procreation requires the presence of two distinct gametes, one provided by a man, who will become the father, and the other provided by a woman, who *a priori* should be the mother.<sup>6</sup> The conception of the child is the fruit of a secret meeting within the body of the mother, from which the father is practically excluded. And if fatherhood is to be reduced merely to biological generation it would certainly be a quasi-zero, in which what one parent has given is immediately removed from his sight. Redress must therefore be sought in the law alone, according to which the father is the person who, by acknowledging the child to be his own, takes on the responsibility of being its father. Reduced to a social and symbolic function, fatherhood would thereby be conditional upon the history of cultures and civilisations, changing from one part of the world or from one age to another, offering a whole range of different possibilities, as evidenced in ethnological and social anthropological studies.<sup>7</sup> All of a sudden, as Gabriel Marcel had previously noted, fatherhood would be reabsorbed into relativism.<sup>8</sup> And this has to do with the two ways of viewing fatherhood from a psychoanalytical point of view: in social terms or in terms of subjectivity.

However, the figure of the father seems to be firmly set into French

<sup>6</sup> The practice of “surrogate motherhood” – whereby a woman lends her womb, for payment, to bear the child of another woman who cannot or does not wish to become pregnant – is an evident abuse as a result of collusion between the development of technological possibilities in our society and the weakening of moral values. The dissociation between the mother and the egg donor also raises legal difficulties because some of these mothers have subsequently claimed the child they have carried as their own. There is no room here to go into the details of these distressing issues, which fall outside the scope of this paper, but we cannot fail to mention the fact that turning the human body into a mere object, and in particular someone else’s body, considering them to be only a means to an end, is the consequence of a long subversion process, in which human dignity has given way to financial gain.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. F. HÉRITIER, *op. cit.*, 57ff.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. G. MARCEL, *op. cit.*, 137.

legislation, as the basis for parent-child relations (*'filiation'*), even though historians and jurists may consider that “the truth of blood and the truth of law do not coincide”.<sup>9</sup> In general terms, under French law, socially recognised paternity prevails over paternity by blood, even though the latter is not expressly eliminated.<sup>10</sup> Viewed from this narrow perspective, it is possible to imagine an essentially matriarchal social structure from which paternity is virtually excluded, such that the father's role can be played indifferently by a man or by a woman.

It is evident that fatherhood is excluded by this kind of thinking. These are obviously dead-end streets as far as our enquiry is concerned: the essence of fatherhood is neither biological, social, legal nor subjective, even though the act of procreation, and the parent-child relationship deriving from it, is bound up with fatherhood.

Let us dwell for a moment on the period of gestation, from conception to birth. If we merely look at the most immediate and simple exercise of fatherhood which a future father can experience, there are two specific features to be noted. First of all, the roles of the father and mother in relation to their child are manifestly skewed. The exercise of fatherhood is correlative to the exercise of motherhood in a wholly paradoxical manner, because only the mother can bear the child inside her body. All this had already been dealt with at length by Gabriel Marcel, who said that “the experience of fatherhood develops on the basis of what can only be defined as a ‘zero experience’”. In other words, something which is the exact opposite to what applies to motherhood”.<sup>11</sup> In other words, even though fatherhood comes about as a result of the quasi-zero experience of generation, it can only be consid-

<sup>9</sup> G. REMOND, *Filiation biologique, filiation affective*, in “Revue d'éthique et de théologie morale”, “Le Supplément”, no. 225, *La filiation interrogée*, cit., 56ff [our translation]. This remark is particularly relevant here because by analysing the DNA it is now possible to establish beyond doubt that a father is genetically related to his child.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> G. MARCEL, *op. cit.*, 142 [our translation]. Or the statement by J.-L. MARION, that “fatherhood is achieved ‘symbolically’, not always before everything and not always from a biological point of view” (in *Etant donné*, Paris, P.U.F., 1997, 414) [our translation].

ered in terms of the relationship which unites a man and a woman, both of whom discover parenthood, one fatherhood and the other motherhood.<sup>12</sup> In short, fatherhood cannot exist without motherhood.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, if the father does not immediately establish a relationship with his child, who has been separated from him in the mother's womb, except in the rare moments in the final days of pregnancy when it is possible to touch and to speak to the baby through the mother's stomach, there is no doubt that the father is expectant for his child and looks forward to it. This gives us a first key to interpreting the nature of fatherhood: once conception has occurred, fatherhood consists of silently expecting and waiting for the secret of a life which is in the process of developing. In other words, as Gustav Siewerth has clearly pointed out, fatherhood occurs deep within the future father, in his heart, where there develops a twofold dimension of an "intimate fervour wrapped around him like a scarf", and a sense of "freedom which lets things be and offers with kindness".<sup>14</sup> The burgeoning of fatherhood is therefore radically bound up with the arousal of paternal love which, by its very nature, is given to the child without expecting anything in exchange, because as Aristotle wrote in *Nicomachean Ethics*, love is a sort of excess of feeling.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The parallel drawn by Lévinas between fertility and fatherhood (cf. for example E. LÉVINAS, *Totalité et infini*, Amsterdam, Matinus Nijhoff, 1971, reprinted as *Livre de Poche*, 300), is not therefore the best way of addressing the problem. Neither is it possible to agree with Silvano Petrosino, who places the action of the mother on the same plane as the action of the father, and goes so far as to apply the word "father" indifferently to the one or to the other (Cf. S. PETROSINO – P. GILBERT, *Le don*, Bruxelles, Lessuis, 2003, 66-67). The avenues suggested by Xavier Lacroix regarding a covenant between the sexes open to a transcendental interpretation reveal different prospects regarding what we might define as "spiritual fatherhood" (cf. X. LACROIX, *La différence sexuelle a-t-elle une portée spirituelle?* in *Homme et femme, l'insaisissable différence*, cit., 139-149).

<sup>13</sup> The couple therefore plays an important and preliminary role in preparing for fatherhood even in the extreme case of single women who use artificial insemination. But fatherhood also involves a third person, the child, with the result that the problems relating to the couple are secondary to the issue that we are addressing here.

<sup>14</sup> G. SIEWERTH, *Métaphysique de l'enfance*, Saint Maur, Parole et silence, 2001, 37 [our translation].

<sup>15</sup> Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII, 11, 1161a 16.

## 2. BIRTH

Birth places the child in the arms of the father. They are no longer two strangers to each other, and from the first few months, a deep and intimate bond gradually develops between them. Even though it never manages to achieve the intensity of the bond that exists between the child and its mother, a first fatherhood bond is built up little by little. But from what has been said, it is obvious that the father must receive the child born to him not only in the sense in which a child is always received, as Siewerth noted<sup>16</sup> but because he has to take in a being which is alien to him in so many respects. Jean-Luc Marion says that “every child is naturally born of its mother, but in the strict sense of the term it always remains a child of a father unknown: all children are foundlings, in the sense that all of them ultimately have to be taken in”.<sup>17</sup>

Here we can see that expectation is not always absolutely necessary to enable the father to begin fatherhood by welcoming in the child, but it does facilitate it because it prepares the father to welcome in the child at its birth, and to receive it. The expectation of an adoptive father, who is waiting for a child from outside, is wholly similar to the expectation of a birth father. We shall return shortly to examine this attitude of expectation, through which the father prepares himself for fatherhood, and achieves it.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. G. SIEWERTH, *op. cit.*, 39. The instruments for inter-uterine exploration, such as amniocentesis, provide us with a great deal of information about the baby during the period of gestation. The use of this information to practise eugenics based on the parents' wishes is a grave act of subversion which rejects the gift of the child. The evil consequences of such attitudes are already clearly visible in certain countries in the Far East, where the combination of pre-implantation diagnosis and the ancestral privileges enjoyed by the parents of a male child, has led almost to the systematic abortion of female embryos, creating a huge imbalance between the sexes in Japan and in China (cf. F. FUKUYAMA, *La fin de l'homme*, Paris, La table ronde, 2002, 127-128).

<sup>17</sup> J.-L. MARION, *op. cit.*, 414 [our translation].

### 3. FATHERHOOD AND “FILIALITY”

We have seen that fatherhood is revealed more in the expectation of the child than in its conception, and how it can develop after the child is born. The relationship between the father and his child develops in other dimensions, too. A great deal has been written on the theme of what Lévinas called “filiality” but, strangely enough, little is said about fatherhood. It is “filial kinship” (‘filiation’) that is invoked, while fatherhood is too often dealt with purely as a legal or subjective matter.

It is also true to say that one of the paradoxical features of our societies today is that we expect the father to do his duty towards his offspring precisely at the time when the virtual absence of a carnal bond between them becomes the founding social model of “one-parent families”. In this way, the quasi-zero role performed by the father during generation strangely becomes the very model of fatherhood. What is specific about our societies is not that people experience situations of this kind, which only occurred occasionally in the past, such as when one member of the couple died, but that today it has been made into a norm.<sup>18</sup> One of our contradictions is also the fact that we retain part of the legislation based on the natural structure of the family, made up of a man and a woman, while at the same time we give legal status to deconstructed forms of the family which destroy this natural structure. The fact that the father has virtually no rights under French abortion legislation confirms this sidelining of the father’s role, as if the mother alone had anything to say about the right to life or death of “her” child.

By restricting fatherhood to the purely legal dimension of “filial kinship”, the distance between the father and his child, which is already wide because of the absence of any original carnal experience, is doubled. This gives rise to the risk that the father may consider his child only from a theoretical point of view and, as Gabriel Marcel has emphasised, he may be tempted to project his own ambitions on to his

<sup>18</sup> Cf. T. ANATRELLA, *op. cit.*, 34-37.



child.<sup>19</sup> The child is therefore stripped of its dignity as a person, reduced to the status of an object. Here, Lévinas is certainly right when he says that the relationship of possession which the father exercises over his child is not fatherhood.<sup>20</sup>

It is hardly necessary to recall that the child does not cling to its father as immediately as it does to its mother, because they have a different history: the father has not been able to establish as close a relationship with his children as their mother, because of the bodily asymmetry that we have already referred to above. So long as the child is safe within its mother, the father remains something of an outsider, which does not mean that he must be absent, or that he will remain a stranger to his child after its birth. For the fatherhood which then unites the child to its father remains intimately linked to motherhood, while not confusing them: fatherhood is correlative to motherhood. One can therefore talk in terms of “maternal fatherhood”, that is to say, fatherhood which is intimately linked to motherhood.

Fatherhood is also inseparable from a deep and true love which Siewerth has so beautifully described by saying that “maternal love has strength in the gentle and contemplative look, the further the event of nature has distance it from him: it encompasses the totality of motherhood and sonship in the father’s heart, and at the same time is full of gratitude, concern and reverential respect”.<sup>21</sup>

Respect for this twofold embrace also entails the need for the father to agree to wait again, entering into a state of ascesis which we believe

<sup>19</sup> Cf. G. MARCEL, *op. cit.*, 160.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. E. LÉVINAS, *Totalité et infini*, cit., 299. But it is impossible to agree with him when he considers fatherhood from the point of view of otherness. Considering that fatherhood is the answer to the question, “How can I make myself an other?”, he concludes that “Paternity is a relationship with a stranger who, while being other, is me” [our translation], Lévinas subverts fatherhood, and fails to grasp the unbridgeable distance of sonship by blood which separates the father from his child and certainly does not create fatherhood, as we have seen. The child, whether or not it resembles its father, whether or not it is adopted, is an other to its father, and any attempt to construct fatherhood based on the paternal ego leads inexorably to an incomplete fatherhood.

<sup>21</sup> G. SIEWERTH, *op. cit.*, 36-37 [our translation].

to be one of the secrets for an understanding of the role of the father in the education of his children. It is an ascesis which does not mean not knowing a child, or becoming inward-looking, but accepting a relationship that is not yet complete, and keeping a reserve within which the child can grow, a reserve which is not possible except in loving dialogue with the mother and his child.<sup>22</sup> It is probable, conversely, that the over-rapid imposition of fatherhood detached from motherhood will make it impossible for a deep and happy fatherhood to flourish, and this is a point about which psychologists would certainly have a great deal to say.

#### 4. FATHERHOOD DURING INFANCY

After the moment of conception, the period of pregnancy and the birth, the father's relationship with his child grows little by little following the pace of his child's upbringing. But until that time, fatherhood has not yet been fully manifested and still remains latent in many respects. The child has to detach itself from its mother's protection in order to go out to an encounter with its father in a father-child relationship which must no longer be confused with the mother-child relationship. It must be a more specifically paternal fatherhood.

Children generally know their mother, if for no other reason than it is the mother who has carried them in her womb. The mother cuddles her child and establishes an intimate and silent relationship with it, which is characteristic of motherhood as a haven in which the child can develop so long as it is still dependent. But as soon as the child wishes, or is obliged to distance itself from the mother it has to leave the

<sup>22</sup> Access to the child therefore presupposes the mediation of the mother, which makes fatherhood somewhat fragile, as Sibylle von Streng has quite rightly pointed out on many occasions. We would add that this sort of attitude on the part of the father is not typical in our Western societies: one only has to think of the Biblical figures of Abraham and Isaac, or Jacob and Joseph.

protective wing of motherhood, come out into the open and, to use Heidegger's beautiful image, "be cast into the world".<sup>23</sup> Then the child calls to the father, and sets out in search of its origins, the origins of its father, calling the father as its father, as Jean-Luc Marion has powerfully stated, by saying that "the father decides to be the father because his child is urging him to acknowledge his fatherhood... The father is born into fatherhood in so far as he responds to this call of his child".<sup>24</sup> If, as Paul Gilbert has said, this urging is characterised by Otherness,<sup>25</sup> the latter is also a *sine qua non* condition for the call to be heeded. In other words, the father must already be ready, already be listening, in that attitude of expectation/waiting mentioned earlier, in order to be able to hear the call of his child, and accede to the new régime of fatherhood.

Paradoxically, as Gabriel Marcel had already noted – an idea that was subsequently developed by Jean-Luc Marion – it is the child who first calls to the father,<sup>26</sup> thereby heralding in a new type of relationship that was not previously possible in the history of fatherhood. This brings into being what we might call "paternal fatherhood", based on the maternal fatherhood which, as we have seen already, was still closely linked to motherhood. In response to the call of his child, the father enters into a relationship of specific and authentic fatherhood.<sup>27</sup> This metamorphosis of fatherhood brings about an important transforma-

<sup>23</sup> Cf. M. HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit*, § 38, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1926, 175; ID., *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, t. 3, Frankfurt, Klostermann, 1991, 228.

<sup>24</sup> J.-L. MARION, *op. cit.*, 415 [our translation].

<sup>25</sup> Cf. S. PETROSINO – P. GILBERT, *op. cit.*, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. G. MARCEL, *op. cit.*, 162.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Luc Marion places this call at the moment of birth, when the father, hearing his child's first cry, gives it his own name in exchange (cf. J.-L. MARION, *op. cit.*, 415). I think it is possible for the structure of this call to develop throughout the whole period of the child's development. For the period of expectation prepares the father for the first stage in fatherhood which we have defined as "maternal fatherhood", incorporating it into an intimate relationship with motherhood which serves as a haven for the child. The call subsequently leads to the discovery of a fatherhood regime without mediation, that we have called here "paternal fatherhood", which develops throughout the whole of the period of infancy, as a sort of *Responsorio* to the call of the child which enters several times into the history of fatherhood.

tion in relations between the father and the child which we must admit falls well outside the dialectic of “the father’s death” as theorised by Freud.

Let us be quite clear about this: the father must not conceal fatherhood behind an attitude which has nothing paternal about it, but must take in his child who is calling out to him; and in order to be able to hear this call, he has to be listening and thereby rediscover that condition of expectation he had as the child grew within its mother’s body. In this way, fatherhood once again finds itself conditioned by an interior ascesis which makes the father receptive, and opens his heart.

It should be noted that these two fatherhood régimes overlap with the functions of the father and the mother in bringing up the child, which fall outside the scope of this paper. In other words, the relationship between expecting and bringing up the child does not exclude the exercise of paternal authority, which itself opens up another field for reflection which, for reasons of space, we cannot enter into in this paper.

## 5. CONCLUSION: THE METAMORPHOSIS OF FATHERHOOD

In everything that has been said so far, we have seen fatherhood in terms of a history, the history of the relationship between the child and its father. Although the biological part is not the basis of this relationship, it is nevertheless at its roots, that “quasi-zero” we spoke about earlier. Fatherhood is revealed at the beginning of its history through motherhood and filial kinship, such that the child cannot clearly distinguish between fatherhood and motherhood until it is separated from its mother. This is why we have spoken about “maternal fatherhood” as that first fatherhood regime which includes filial-kinship, motherhood, and what is specific to the relationship of “filiality” which unites the father and his child.

As the child grows up, it will have to detach itself from the mother and move out alone into the world. It is then that the child can begin

to call out, a cry which can have a tragic outcome if the father is not listening, if he is not in that position of loving expectation that we have spoken about already. We have also seen that filial kinship is distinct from fatherhood, but that it can facilitate the metamorphosis of fatherhood. For the question of father-sonship is on the sidelines of fatherhood, but because it is not alien to it, it can be used as a common thread to lead the child to turn to its father and discover the paternal fatherhood regime. Let us remember that the metamorphosis of fatherhood presupposes that the father has already given up the idea of dominating his child and of reifying it.<sup>28</sup> The full exercise of authentic fatherhood, on the other hand, depends on the father's renunciation to project his own ego, and on his loving and patient expectation and waiting.

The identification of several fatherhood regimes during the first stages in the life of the child has enabled us to show that authentic fatherhood undergoes a metamorphosis during the course of its history and experiences changes which have their roots in its first manifestations when the father experiences expectation, while the mother carries his child in her womb. It is from this first fatherhood, confined in asceticism, and victim of a cruel experience deficit that the maternal fatherhood is born, which welcomes both motherhood and the child, an interior birth in the father's heart which is a kind of *Responsorio* to the birth of the child. Paternal fatherhood will follow later, even though it stems from those experiences, as the fatherhood which knows how to listen to the child in order to capture its call and how to practise a renewed "filiality". In this way, the history of the child, from gestation to birth, is the key to the development of fatherhood. One unchanging feature runs throughout this long period: authentic fatherhood always depends on the relationship of trusting love bonding the father to his child.<sup>29</sup>

As we have already emphasised, fatherhood is not based upon biological filial-kinship, which enables us to affirm with Gabriel Marcel that

<sup>28</sup> Cf. G. MARCEL, *op. cit.*, 165. This by no means excludes the role played by the father in educating his child.

<sup>29</sup> This point has also been emphasised by Gabriel Marcel (cf. *ibid.*, 166).

adoption can lead to authentic and full fatherhood.<sup>30</sup> Does this perhaps mean that the sex difference has no role to play at all? We have already seen that authentic fatherhood forms part of a *continuum* in which all the subsequent metamorphoses take place. At the beginning of this history there is necessarily the mother and the father, who establish a relationship of motherhood and fatherhood, respectively, with their child. With the permission of the psychoanalysts, these are not merely abstract definitions, and the mere symbolic function of the father or of the mother performed by others does not help to determine fatherhood. Or to put it in another way, fatherhood is not a role that can be played by just anyone, because it is linked to the continuity of our life, in which the original sex difference which is given to us from the time of our birth, plays an inalienable role. In other words, fatherhood is inseparable from the flesh in the broad sense of the term, which includes both the sex difference as well as the sensation or proof of self.<sup>31</sup>

There still remain the breakdowns, separations and the suffering that afflict too many children's lives. When authentic fatherhood is defective, or when it is absent, it is necessary to resort to a surrogate fatherhood. One may well imagine that while authentic fatherhood is rooted by its very essence in sex differentiation, this is not the case with surrogate fatherhood, which bridges a void. Surrogate fatherhood, being of a second degree, will only be meaningful if it forms part of a project to help and to bring up the child that is intended to relieve the injured child, but these are considerations that need to be analysed by others who are far more competent than I.

In conclusion, the metamorphosis of fatherhood that I have sketched out here, albeit over-hastily, highlights the irreplaceable figure of fathers, whom Péguy once described as "the great adventurers of the modern world".

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 170.

<sup>31</sup> Cf., on this aspect of the flesh, D. FRANCK, *Chair et corps*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1981, 41-49, 90ff; M. HENRY, *Incarnation. Une philosophie de la chair*, Paris, Seuil, 2000, 153-163, 172-174, etc; J.-L. MARION, *op. cit.*, 321-323; E. STEIN, *Zum Problem des Einfühlung*, Halle 1917 (reprinted München, Kaffke 1980) 50-51, etc.

## The feminist ideologies of today: is it possible to speak of a post-feminism?

KARNA SWANSON

*Journalist, she helped to launch the web site [www.mufernueva.org](http://www.mufernueva.org)  
dedicated to the investigation of feminism*

Living in a democratic and capitalistic society you soon learn that what survives is what sells. In the market, when a product doesn't sell, it disappears. Store owners don't keep merchandise in their stores that do not sell. The merchandise is sent back to the manufacturer and, thus, disappears. The same happens in politics. When a politician runs for office, but doesn't receive enough votes to get elected, that man disappears from the public eye.

In the same vein, over twenty years ago in October 1982 the *New York Times Magazine* featured an article titled "Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation". The term coined reflected the opinion prevalent at the time that feminism was no longer trendy, no longer "in". A Gallup poll in the Nineties supported this claim when it stated that only thirty per cent of all American women considered themselves feminists. Women not only felt that the need to fight for the right to education, the vote, to own property or to work was over, but even further, that the feminists of the Sixties with their man-hating *mantras* and lesbian tendencies were not helping them to come to grips with the realities of being a woman in a new world where all the rules have changed and all expectations concerning women have been altered. Feminism thus became *passé*, and the American mass media culture stocked our shelves full of what they determined to be post-feminism.

In the following pages I am going to attempt a more precise definition of feminism, the positive and negative aspects of feminism, an exposition of the popular elements of feminism in the Sixties, why it

sold then and why it stopped selling in the Nineties, and then a proposal for a New Feminism for today.

### *What is feminism?*

In the strictest sense of the term, feminism would mean pertaining to feminine things, or pro-feminine. Definitions of feminism, however, abound, as well as feminist theories.

The *New Oxford Dictionary* defines feminism as merely the “advocacy of women’s rights or the equality of sexes”. This is a very reductive view of feminism as it only addresses the political action of the women’s movement for equality, and not a broader consideration of the woman.

Olympe de Gouge is said to be the first feminist. A French woman living during the French Revolution, she wrote the Declaration of the Rights of the Woman in 1791, a response to the revolution’s Declaration of the Rights of Men which embraced Equality, Liberty and Fraternity for all men, but not for women. She was guillotined by the revolutionists, but not before she was able to circulate copies of her writings which instigated an entirely new movement aimed at fighting for the rights of women in otherwise free societies.

The First Wave of feminism began in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as the suffragist movement. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1799) represents the beginning of the feminist movement, which became synonymous with suffrage. She wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she makes the case that women need to be educated just as well as men so that they can grow up to be moral and autonomous human beings. Wollstonecraft received her inspiration from the ideas that spread from France.

First wave feminism sold in Europe and in the United States because it responded to a particular desire in women, to be allowed to be active and equal participants in society. With the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1920, feminism didn’t sell anymore. Women were content with their position in society.



## *Second Wave*

Feminism remained quiet until the Sixties when it awoke as part of the social revolution during the civil rights movement by realizing that similar to race discrimination there was a great deal of sex discrimination inherent in the American system.

This second wave of feminism was much more radical and outspoken than its first wave counterparts. It was characterized by aggressive and radical political activism, civil rights, sexual liberation, legalization of birth control and abortion, the right to choose and the promotion of sisterhood and lesbianism.

Organizations founded in this moment in history and which are still very active today include NOW, the National Organization for Women with Betty Friedan as its first president (author of *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Second Stage*, and *The Fountain of Age*), National Women's Political Caucus, and the Women's Equity Action League, National Abortion Rights Action League which fights for abortion rights, Emily's List which works towards boosting women into political positions, and of course, Planned Parenthood which works towards the rights for contraception and abortion. The Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) was founded in 1987 as a response against the alleged post feminist era by Eleanor Smeal, and is very much a resurgence of this liberal feminism.

Role Models figured prominently in Second Wave feminism, and major figures include Margaret Sanger (founder of Planned Parenthood), Susan Brownmiller (author of *Femininity*), Gloria Steinem (*Ms. Magazine*), Germain Greer (*The Female Eunuch*, *The Whole Woman*).

It is interesting to note that although these women were hailed as heroines to their generation, with the passing of time these women have changed some of their ideas regarding the more radical elements of the Sixties feminism, especially concerning their often pessimistic views on men, marriage, motherhood, love and femininity itself.

Liberal feminism is essentially reformist as opposed to revolutionary, although revolutionary elements from different ideologies leaked into the liberal feminist movement. Liberal feminists basically work

within existing systems of power and knowledge – working so that these systems are more responsive to women’s issues. Critiques of liberal feminism are actually often these criticisms of the radical strands of other feminisms that have meshed with the liberal foundations.

Below are some of the radical strands with which post-feminists take issue.

### *Marxist feminism*

Marxist feminists are primarily concerned with the division of labor that keeps women in the domestic sphere and men in the workplace. In addition to this, when women do enter the workforce, they are delegated to jobs that are deemed appropriate for their gender and are usually underpaid for their work.

Juliett Mitchell and Shulamith Firestone were the great figures of this revolutionary movement working on two fronts: class and gender oppression. Their view that gender inequality is part of a larger system of oppression associated with the way capitalism exploits labor markets, distanced them from the liberal feminists who maybe didn’t embrace capitalism, but worked to achieve equality in that system.

Unlike liberal feminism, Marxist feminism supports revolutionary changes in the current economic system. Liberal and Marxist feminism, however, are similar in the sense that both exist as a reaction to the unjust treatment of women that lies inherent in each system, rather than on a pro-active movement promoting a philosophically-based understanding of feminine identity.

### *Radical feminism*

Radical feminism is an essentialist brand of feminism that sees women as so fundamentally different from men that the only way to escape masculine oppression is to establish separate female communities. Radical feminists like Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin are often treated in the media as the part that speaks for the whole.

### *Radical-libertarian feminism*

The radical-libertarian feminists wish to do away with the concept of femininity and its accompanying reproductive, mothering and sexual roles. They aim for an androgynous society which combines both masculine and feminine characteristics for the individual as well as for society. This concept implies that sex is pleasure, and so this current condones heterosexual and lesbian sex; also, it considers motherhood to be a woman's weakness.

### *Radical-cultural feminism*

This kind of feminism rejects masculinity as a desirable quality and encourages women to embrace femaleness only. Women should emphasize traits culturally associated with women and deemphasize traits culturally associated with men. The consequence of this is that only sex with women is acceptable. Motherhood is regarded as a source of power.

### *Psychoanalytic and gender feminism*

Psychoanalytic and gender feminists believe that "women's way of acting is rooted deep in women's psyche".

For the psychoanalytic feminist, the ideal "human person is a blend of positive feminine and positive masculine traits". This strand of feminism is rooted in the writings and theories of Sigmund Freud and encourage women to fight socially constructed feminine manners of acting.

Gender Feminism emphasizes a boy's and a girl's *psycho-moral* development rather than their *psycho-sexual* development. Gender feminists separate biology from the identity and nature of a person, thus woman's biological capacity to bear children, according to gender feminists, has no real connection to a woman's psychological or psychomoral development. This strand of feminism is the most radical of all the strands, and sadly to report, the most active today in international organizations like the United Nations and in the governments of the most affluent countries.

### *Ecofeminism*

Ecofeminists emphasize the woman's ties to nature. Women possess physiological qualities of fertility and motherhood that are similar to mother earth and create in them a predisposition to be caring, nurturing, and intuitive. These traits, they assert, are undervalued in a male dominated society that spends more time ruling the Earth than caring for and protecting it. These female virtues they draw from analogies with nature are necessary for improved social relations and less aggressive, more sustainable ways of life. Mary Daly created black and white categories for the male and female relegating men to the sphere of death- and destruction-loving and assigning women to the sphere of life-giving and life-loving. Women must make their influence effective, according to Daly, or nature would be destroyed.

### *Spiritual Ecofeminism*

Spiritual-ecofeminists link dominion over the earth to the destructive male. Furthermore, the Judeo-Christian belief that God gave humans dominion over the earth goes hand in hand with the degradation of the earth's ecosystems.

As men hold dominion over the earth, thus debasing and destroying the earth, so do they also dominate, debase and destroy women. In placing dominion of the earth as a duty of man, Christianity not only sanctions the subjugation of women, but considers it just and right.

Judaism and Christianity must then be freed from the idea of a male God who orders the dominion of the earth, and embrace a celebration of nature through the practice of "earth-based spiritualities".

### *Post-modern feminism*

This strand of feminism was not active in the Sixties, but has since taken root in academic feminism today. Post-modern feminism understands masculinity and femininity to be cultural categories (or social constructions) that are subject to interrogation and change. It is an

anti-essentialist brand of feminism based in premodern philosophies that reject objective realities and critiques the notion that there is a single meaning – invoked by the philosophical tradition as a whole, but also by some feminists – for the word ‘woman’, and a universal female condition (see Jane Gallop, Luce Irigaray, Bell Hooks). This brand of feminism denies that the concept of feminine actually exists, and that there is a universal condition of the woman.

The question at hand is, why did all of this sell in the Sixties? That period was a time of change and revolution in general, and for those women in particular who had enjoyed far more access to education and political activism. They were ready for a total break with the unjust social structures that kept them in the home with little or no interaction or influence in society or politics. The product of feminism was extremely attractive to these women. They were buying independence, free sex, divorce, higher education, and a whole new life that promised self-fulfillment. It was an easy sell, and women of all walks of life and educational levels laid down their credit card and took feminism home with them.

Forty years later women are reconsidering what they had bought into in the Sixties, and they are paying the price in terms of instability in relationships, more work, depression and frustration. For example, over fifty per cent of all marriages in the United States end in divorce. Most women, however, don’t even make it to the altar. Fifty-three per cent of all Canadian women between twenty and forty will never marry. Women are twice as likely today to be single mothers as just twenty years ago. This means women are both provider and caretaker at home, resulting in more work and more stress in their lives. Twelve million American women suffer from depression, anxiety disorders and 2.7 million women suffer from alcoholism.

### *Post-feminism*

It is here that we can historically insert the phenomena of post-feminism in a more accurate historical perspective. Feminism simply no longer sells. The ideas listed above no longer resound in the minds and

hearts of mainstream women. They consider the price for freedom and independence too high. Women want men in their lives, and being feminine, staying at home, married, and pregnant are definitively “in”.

That feminism doesn't appeal to women is one reason, but there is another, equally important strategic reason why feminism is flailing. “Divide and conquer” is an effective strategy and the downfall of feminism is exactly in its pluralism.

According to Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, two very young and very anti-post-feminism feminists, “by feminists, we mean each and every politically and socially conscious woman or man who works for equality within or outside the movement, writes about feminism, or calls her-or himself a feminist. In reality, there is no formal alliance of women we can call ‘the feminists’. Although there are institutions and other forums under which women and men organize and rally, feminism isn't a bureaucratic monolith like Communism or Marxism. It's a loose collection of individuals”.<sup>1</sup>

With this definition in mind, sixty per cent of American women labeled themselves as their own type of feminist. This is to say, they believe in the equality of the woman, but don't have any allegiance to any particular feminist group, but to a loose collection of individuals. Feminism is undefined, it has lost its momentum, and has disappeared from the consciousness of women.

### *Libertarian feminists*

There is hope. Many women are recognizing the need for a resurgence of a more positive feminism, and many new strands are emerging. More conservative and traditional lines of liberal feminism have thus emerged called Libertarian Feminists. These are feminists who have rejected the more radical notions of Liberal Feminism and have returned to the roots of feminism in the suffragist movement.

<sup>1</sup> J. BAUMGARDNER – A. RICHARDS, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000, 54.

One group of these feminists upholds the importance of traditional female roles. These are women such as Danielle Crittenden (*What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us*) and Wendy Shallit (*A Return To Modesty*).

These organizations include the Susan B. Anthony Foundation, an organization of women devoted to boosting more conservative and traditional women into political positions, the Women's Freedom Network, founded in early 1993 by a group of women who were seeking alternatives to extremist ideological feminism and the anti-feminist traditionalism, the Association of Libertarian Feminists, and the Independent Women's Forum.

The most notable of these women is Cathy Young, probably the most articulate representative of the younger generation of conservative, libertarian feminists. Also prominent is Christina Hoff Sommers, author of *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women*, and *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men*.

Another new strand of feminists are those that not only question feminism as a movement, but its individualistic roots. This view questions liberal feminism's focus on the individual and not on the community. A historical critique of liberal feminism focuses on its racist, classist and heterosexist past.<sup>2</sup>

### *Catholic feminism*

After John Paul II's call for a new feminism in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* and his leadership in the 1995 Beijing women's conference, several organizations and women have taken on the challenge of creating a new feminism that is a positive current of thought and action in favor of the true identity and mission of the woman. This new

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent critique of this sort see ELIZABETH FOX-GENOVESE, *Feminism without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism*, Chapel Hill London, University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

feminism is a feminism of a different kind that shows to the world an alternative to the often misguided feminisms of the past, as well as exposing their errors and false anthropological foundations.

Many great names and organizations come to mind when discussing this particular strand of feminism. I am more familiar with the Americans Mary Ann Glendon, Helen M. Alvaré, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and then Janne Haaland Matlary from Norway who have all led the way with many articles and books on the topic of creating a new feminism.

## CONCLUSION

But even with all these great new ideas emerging, there is a disturbing lack of unity in the articulation of a solid, basic, authentic feminism. When we survey the failed feminisms of the Sixties, one thing becomes clear and that is feminism's lack of solid and unified feminism. The different strands disagreed radically regarding the identity of the woman, and a feminism existing apart from a specific ideology or political platform simply never existed.

The Catholic Church with its profound understanding of humankind has the knowledge necessary to articulate a new feminism, but it hasn't yet articulated it in a pro-active and clear manner. This is the challenge facing us all today, and also a responsibility. Women need a new feminism. Women need to know again who they are and regain confidence in the importance of their roles as wives, mothers and educators in the world. We need to articulate it, and then communicate, or sell it if you will. We need to sell it in the schools, to the media, and to politicians. If we do this, I promise that it will sell because it will be the truth and the truth always sells. It might not be an easy sell as the truth isn't easy to accept and live by, but once women take it home, they will keep it and it will change their lives, their families, and ultimately society.



## Changes and crisis in the relationship between man and woman

MANFRED LÜTZ

*Psychiatrist and psychotherapist, graduate in Theology, author of numerous publications. Since 1996, member of the Pontifical Council for the Laity*

I have been given such a vast subject area to cover that I shall not be able to deal with it systematically here, even in very broad outlines. My limited knowledge of the present state of research, furthermore, means that I shall not be able to offer a comprehensive analysis which should also take account, among other things, of historical-social, historical, psychological and psycho-social factors. Drawing on my own knowledge and personal experience as a psychiatrist, psychotherapist and theologian, I shall therefore merely mention a number of aspects of particular relevance to this seminar regarding the changes that have thrown the relationship between men and women into crisis. In particular, I intend to emphasise this transformation in the Christian Western cultural environments which, because of globalisation, play a decisive worldwide role.

The relationship between men and women, which is expressed in different ways in different cultures, has always undergone change in the course of the history of humanity. Biological differences have been the main decisive factors in this relationship: pregnancy, childbirth, breast-feeding and bringing up the children have directed the attention of women into the family, while such features as greater physical strength have given men the role of the “representative” of the family outside it. Until quite recently, in every cultural environment, and not only in the so-called “Western world”, women were not able to exercise their rights, including their legal rights, personally. We take it for granted today that women have the right to vote, full equality in marriage, access to all the occupations and professions, and the right to appear

independently in court to defend their rights. But the fact remains that these rights were all achieved only quite recently, and only then after long and often fierce battles, waged primarily by the feminist movement. All this is the consequence of anthropology and not only biology, of culture and not only nature, and of institutions and not only women's physical constitution. This result was acknowledged by John Paul II, particularly in his *Letter to Women* in which he wrote, "I cannot fail to express my admiration for those women of good will who have devoted their lives to defending the dignity of womanhood by fighting for their basic social, economic and political rights, demonstrating courageous initiative at a time when this was considered extremely inappropriate, the sign of a lack of femininity, a manifestation of exhibitionism, and even a sin!"<sup>1</sup>

This recognition by the Pope is surprising in a number of ways. For the prevailing stereotype in public opinion in many Western countries is that of a Catholic Church which is run through with misogyny. As evidence of this they point to the fact that the battle waged by women for decades to gain access to all the professions (a hundred years ago, to enter the medical profession and more recently to join the military) seems to have been stopped in its tracks by only one final bastion: the ministerial priesthood, which is reserved exclusively to men. Moreover, wide currency has been given to the strange idea that the Church imposes celibacy on the clergy because it considers women, even as wives, to be a hindrance to the proper performance of the priestly ministry. The Catholic Church, today as ever, is the most adamant opponent worldwide of artificial birth control and the right to abortion, which have hastened the exchange of roles in the man-woman relationship which some women have experienced as liberation. It is therefore above all in relation to women that, particularly in the West, in "fatherless societies",<sup>2</sup> that one finds the Catholic Church generally caricatured as domineering and patriarchal, and easy to challenge because it is

<sup>1</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Women*, no. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. MITSCHERLICH, *Auf dem Weg zur vaterlosen Gesellschaft: Ideen zur Sozialpsychologie*, Zürich, München, 1989.

charged with being misogynist and opposed to sexuality. How, then, was the Pope able to speak so highly of feminism and its essential achievements?

The Holy Father's appreciative comments on feminism also surprised Catholics, who interpret feminism as an anti-Christian combative ideology, which has deprived women of their "natural" vocation and, by waging fierce campaigns in favour of abortion, has been responsible for the murder of hundreds of thousands of children in their mother's womb.

Provocation stimulates reflection. What is provocative in John Paul II's statements is the fact that, firstly, he refutes the hackneyed charge that the Catholic Church is misogynistic, and secondly he points out that feminism varies very widely and is far more complex than might seem at first sight.

For the issue that interests us here, it is important to remember, firstly, that modernity inevitably clashed with the cultural model of the bourgeois societies which had a deeply unjust view of the relationship between men and women, for which there was no justification whatsoever in terms of the biological differences between human beings as women and as men, but were the cultural outcome of the history of ideas. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, middle-class women were confined to the home, considered almost as nonsexual beings, covered from head to toe, and kept well away from social influences. In his book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which has since become a classic in its field, Max Weber, the co-founder of modern sociology and an agnostic with no particular religious preferences, traced back the patriarchal features typical of 19<sup>th</sup>-century bourgeois society which degraded women and the hostility to the body and sexuality to a Calvinistic mentality above all. The absurd consequences of a radical predestination doctrine that totally denied human beings the possibility of cooperating in saving their soul through "good works" led, at the social level, to anarchic situations (example the Anabaptists in Münster) and at a personal level, to hopeless fatalism. That induced Calvinist thinkers to adapt their views, and while formally retaining the fundamental

principle, to relativise the total futility of human endeavours. In short, even though “good works” had no effect on predestination, the signs of divine election could nevertheless be seen from personal financial success. It is interesting to note that Max Weber traced the origins of modern capitalism to its spiritual roots, even though – in his view – capitalism was unaware of it.

For the purposes of our seminar, what are relevant here are the collateral social effects that accompanied the victorious economic progress of Calvinism, which has not yet ended. Even though Calvinism remained a narrowly limited phenomenon as a religious denomination, the mentality it created became decisive to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois societies. This led its strict patriarchal orientation (the Pilgrim Fathers, etc.) to become the rule also among the bourgeoisie.<sup>3</sup> Access to employment, which is an essential factor to financial success, was the sole prerogative of the men, while women earned nothing financially even though they worked hard from dawn to dusk in the home. This explains the saying, “I am *only* a housewife”. One can therefore easily understand why women reacted by protesting against this belittled role.

The situation in the Catholic world was different, however, because society there was much more markedly agricultural, and working roles were not so rigidly separated as they were in industrial societies: men and women went out together to work in fields, and both were present in the home. It may be true that archaic differences also remained here too, but there were none of the excesses of the male world; furthermore, the faith-based mentality which imbued the rural world – unlike

<sup>3</sup> On the relationship between men and women, the Protestant philosopher, Gottlieb Fichte, writing at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in his *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, (*Foundations of Natural Right*) that the woman who surrenders her personality by affirming her human dignity necessarily gives all she possesses to the man she loves. The minimum consequence of this is that she assigns to him her assets and all her rights, and goes with him. Only united with him, and only before his eyes and in his affairs can she remain alive and active. She has ceased to live an individual life, and her life has become part of his life, something which can be to the optimal degree from the fact that she even takes his name (cited in U. BECK, *Das ganz normale Chaos der Liebe*, Frankfurt am Main, Surkamp, 1990, 79).

the bourgeois urban environments that were very soon affected by secularism – produced anti-patriarchal effects in various ways. Today, when some Catholics reproach themselves they reveal an ignorance of the fact that even the feminists have recognised that the Catholic Church was the only area in which women of every condition could break out of the patriarchal society.<sup>4</sup> For while Protestantism only acknowledged women's subordinate role as a wife, looking askance at the morality of unmarried women, or labelling them “old spinsters”, every Catholic woman enjoyed the freedom to join a female Religious Congregation, often one which was outside the jurisdiction of the Bishop or the local civil authorities. We cannot therefore say that women were fated to live a harsh kind of spinsterhood. St Teresa of Avila, a woman who was far from oppressed, said that one of the reasons why she had become a nun was to avoid “being dominated by a stupid man”. But, even outside the convent, spinsterhood was the rule rather than the exception in an age when marriage was mainly a financial arrangement, and only thirty per cent of the adult population was married!

Furthermore, the silly ideological cliché that it was due to devotion to Mary that women only played a subordinate and nonsexual role could not be further from the truth. The beautiful Madonna in the Catholic religious tradition was a strong woman; “sublime Woman and Lady”, as she is called in a well-known German Marian hymn.<sup>5</sup>

Our Lady “with the mantle” as she is depicted in so many images, is the sign of this “strength”. Compared with Mary, St Joseph almost seems to be the “weaker” one. Mary Daly, the “progenitrix” of feminist theology, who subsequently became embroiled in senseless conjectures, provided an interesting interpretation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception:<sup>6</sup> the fact that Mary was conceived without

<sup>4</sup> Cf. H. SCHENK, *Die feministische Herausforderung*, München 1980, 55.

<sup>5</sup> “O eilet, sie zu schauen, die schönste aller Frauen (Hasten to see her, the most beautiful of women...)”. This verse of the popular Marian hymn by Johann Khuen and Joseph Clauder, “*Sagt an, wer ist doch diese*” dates back to 1638 (GL 588, bearbeitet Dreves 1885).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. M. DALY, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Boston, Beacon, 1985.

original sin shows that women are not subordinate to the mercies of man or their social status, but were originally liberated by the Grace of God himself. The traditional importance of the mother figure in the Latin countries is something that itself contradicts the image, which is widespread in anti-Catholic propaganda, of a Church that oppresses women. For women, the authoritative role of the Italian *mamma* regarding vital family decisions is a source of great pride.

The fact that the modern feminist movement began in the Protestant countries and only later reached the Catholic countries is therefore due in part to the fact that women were more oppressed in the bourgeois societies. These remarks are by no means intended in an anti-ecumenical sense, but are the result of objective sociological research. What was decisive, historically speaking, is that it was the Protestant countries, not the Catholic countries, that played a political and military, as well as a cultural, leadership role in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Catholic Church the protagonists were still to a certain extent women – that is to say the countless foundresses of religious Congregations – public life was soon to be dominated exclusively by the men. Faced with the different forms of *Kulturkampf* in that age, Catholicism was put on the defensive. One can therefore fully understand the revolt by women against the deliberately contrived and unjust oppression to which they were subjected by a completely patriarchal society.

I personally believe that the fact that this movement came into being in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not due, as many mistakenly think today, to the widespread progress that was only then giving women (who had always been oppressed) the possibility to rebel. It was rather that the differentiation of women's and men's roles stemmed from a mutual and complex power relationship that had developed across the centuries, while 19<sup>th</sup>-century chauvinistic ambitions brought about by men's thirst for power played on these role differences in order to establish the unilateral domination of women by men. The resultant discrediting of the differentiation of the roles of men and women was to lead, much later on, to the establishment of the

extremist and simplistic variation of the feminist movement which, in the name of some “unisex ideology”, not only rejected unilateral power relations, but went so far as to deny even the “natural” role differences, considered to be “biological”: women could do and desire anything that men could do and desire. Any talk about sex differences was taboo.

But let us return to the feminist movement. It moved through various phases: a movement for women’s education and training, a movement for women professionals, a movement for the protection of morality and motherhood, and the suffragette movement. But these movements never managed to percolate down to every section of the population. They grew, and they declined, but they never had any decisive impact. In this situation the one concern of women of every social class was unwanted pregnancies, and the injustice of the abortion laws – an issue addressed by Pope John Paul II, emphasising that men often bore the greatest guilt for abortion by shirking their responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> In legal and social terms, the burden of an unwanted pregnancy and the penalty for having an abortion fell solely to the women. It was as a result of the reaction by women of every social class and every nationality to this unjust state of affairs that what became known as the “new” feminist movement came into being; and its decisive success was due to its advocacy of the legalisation of abortion, throwing wide the gates to other feminist claims. Today, the movement is enjoying its latest victories, such as the fact that, in the name of political correctness, everything has to be expressed in bisexual language: except when speaking about murderers, criminals or individuals of that kind, in some languages the feminine form must always be added, even in the liturgical texts. In Germany, for example, “sons of God” (*Söhne Gottes*) – which is what all of us are in Jesus Christ – has now been changed to “children of God” (*Kinder Gottes*) which naturally has a completely different meaning altogether.

The total victory of the feminist movement in Western countries

<sup>7</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Women*, no. 5.

has revolutionised relations between men and women. Women have therefore come to find themselves overburdened with duties connected with their role, because despite the new possibilities open to them today, they are still determined to continue performing their traditional tasks. But at the same time they have learned to exploit the new situation positively, acquiring greater legal security and financial independence. Together with other phenomena that have yet to be analysed, thanks to these developments, more women than men file for divorce today. The “biological”, sociological, economic and legal emancipation of women from binding relations with the male sex has strengthened women’s pride, in an extremely short period of time historically speaking, while at the same time throwing men into a serious identity crisis. This crisis, which is also partly due to the speed with which the changes have occurred in this sphere, is still with us today – a crisis which is causing considerable psychological stress in men. The consequences of separation and divorce cause greater suffering to men in the medium-term than they do to women, because men often cannot get by on their own, and are unable to come to terms with the indignity they have suffered. The rise in the phenomenon of husbands battered by their wives is often a source of hilarity, even in psychiatric clinics, while women maltreated by their husbands can be sure of everyone’s compassion, if nothing else because of the difference in their physical strength.

The fact that the demand for the legalisation of abortion lies at the root of the modern historical successes of feminism, and is in a sense what constituted, and still constitutes, the founding myth of the new feminist movement, explains why it is often discussed over-emotionally. Any kind of attack on legalised abortion provokes such powerful reactions that they verge on a denial of reality, with the result that it is often impossible even to mention the fact that abortion entails the killing of an innocent baby. However, the latest developments show that the issues are now being rethought. In Germany, many feminists have joined the Green Party, whose bioethical stances are often very close to the Catholic position, and in struggling to protect the embryo at the moment of the fusion of the egg and the sperm after *in vitro* fertilisation,



they are having to recognise that, in the past, they were responsible for making the mother's womb a less safe place for the unborn baby. It is important for the Church to take note of this and use it to foster a new sensitivity to the injustice of abortion.

The tragedy of the feminist movement stems from the fact that their struggle against the undeniable injustice of male judges punishing only women for resorting to abortion has not only failed to do away with this injustice, but it has created another one. By yielding to pressure for "political correctness" dictated by the feminist movement, the legislation of many countries has found itself confronted by a serious moral dilemma: should the ultimate freedom for women be the freedom to kill babies in the mother's womb? Many sensitive feminists have clearly realised the absurdity of these consequences. Even though they had formerly rallied around the enlightenment banner, they now firmly reject any enlightenment about the life (and the death) of the unborn baby. In Germany all the stops were pulled out to prevent the screening of a film on abortion on the national television network. People have displaced the idea that a person exists in the mother's womb, and linguistic conventions have been found to down-play the horrific reality of abortion. People have also come round to realising that even if the battle for women's rights is eventually won, it will ultimately turn into a defeat, because the price paid will have been the denial of fundamental moral values. In a wholly cynical society, who would defend the (moral) rights of women to save them from any more oppression? The real basis of all morality is faith in God. "Why should I be good if God does not exist?" asked Max Horkheimer, the old founder of the Frankfurt School, showing how the feminist movement, by attacking the associations that fashion the ethical code (in Western societies this basically means the Christian Churches), has forfeited its authority. Broad-minded feminists like Alice Schwartz in Germany have acknowledged and demonstrated their appreciation of the Churches as institutions which safeguard "values". Despite this, however, the feminist movement has not (yet) found the courage to question its stances over abortion.

But it is in the field of sexual morality that feminism comes surprisingly close to the views of the Catholic Church, although neither seem to realise it. Adrienne Rich, a modern feminist, has defined the pill as a ‘patriarchal’ discovery made by men”.<sup>8</sup> Alice Schwarzer has written that, “in the past, at least, women were able to refuse an unwanted pregnancy out of prudery or fear, but today, thanks to sex education and the pill, they always have to be compliant.”<sup>9</sup> Earlier still, Max Horkheimer, to the amazement of his students, had welcomed the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* with the words, “the price we shall have to pay for the pill is the death of eros”.<sup>10</sup> Ernest Bornemann, one of the leaders of the “sexual revolution” in Germany, admitted towards the end of his life that the project had failed, and that because of the pill, sexuality had been separated from love and procreation, making it the object of rampant commercialisation on what he called the “sex market economy”.<sup>11</sup> Lurking behind this artificial isolation of sexuality are evident economic interests, with the result that, albeit in various different ways, women have once again become objects of sexual exploitation. As early as the 1960s, feminists were bitterly criticising the so-called liberal press for their front page photographs of naked women.

By translating Catholic sexual morality into contemporary language one can clearly see that in society as a whole, perhaps unconsciously, there has been a return to the holistic view of Catholic thought. Even bourgeois sexual morality, with its inhibitions due to having isolated and discredited sexuality, viewed as a taboo subject, had moved far away from the joyful character of the traditions of Catholic societies (certain adjustments by some Catholics only reveal an excessive keenness to “keep up with the times”). The Catholic Church’s healthy

<sup>8</sup> Cited in H. SCHENK, *Die Befreiung des weiblichen Begehrens*, Köln 1991, 199 [our translation].

<sup>9</sup> A. SCHWARZER, *Der kleine Unterschied und seine großen Folgen*, Frankfurt am Main 1975, 181 [our translation].

<sup>10</sup> Cited in H. RÖSSNER, (editor), *Der Nabe und der ferne Gott*, Berlin 1981, 331 [our translation].

<sup>11</sup> Cf. E. BORNEMANN, *Sexuelle Marktwirtschaft*, Wien 1992.

tradition regarding sexuality is based on the holistic-ecological view of the human person which links the sex drive, personal love and readiness to accept the gift of children. As recent experience has taught us, there are some subtle natural links which cannot be destroyed with impunity, and without eventually having to pay the consequences: manipulation has unpredictable and unforeseen consequences. When a man has one woman purely to satisfy his sexual needs, another woman to satisfy his emotional needs, and a third to bear him children, he is using all of them as means to an end, and in reality he loves none of them. Even here, the Catholic and the feminist positions come very close.

The feminist movement, then, by unleashing fierce opposition against the oppression of the bourgeois patriarchal society, and taking it to extremes, has plunged men into an identity crisis, and has thrown the relationship between men and women into turmoil. Women are once again being subjugated to the sex industry market. A new trend, which has also been fostered by the homosexual movement, sees the differentiation between the roles of the two sexes as a hypothesis which can be accepted or rejected at will, considering the indeterminacy of the resulting gender roles to be a virtue. This has led to chaos and confusion.

Accompanying this crisis in role identities is a widening crisis in personal relations. In the past, marriage tended to be more of a financial and economic arrangement. Overly powerful feelings were therefore not to be expected. It was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, under the influence of Romanticism, that the sentimental bonds in relations between men and women began to become decisive. This change, coupled with generalised secularisation, created a very specific type of crisis. As the writer Dieter Wellershoff has put it, "At one time, sweethearts came up against the barrier raised by the institutions. Today, they are thrown into the quagmire of an ideology of happiness".<sup>12</sup> The fact that marriage is on the decline in Western cultural environments, as the sociologist Ulrich Beck has so clear-sightedly pointed out, is not because marriage

<sup>12</sup> Cited in U. BECK – E. BECK-GERNSHEIM, *op. cit.*, 133 [our translation].

has been devalued but because it has been excessively overrated. With the loss of religion, it is as if the love relationship is expected to create a kind of earthly paradise. “No God, no priests... so at least I have you!”<sup>13</sup> But this is asking too much of another person. It is when, in their “desire to be spared from each other”,<sup>14</sup> the partners attack one other, that the end of the marriage has been reached. Jürg Willi, an internationally renowned therapist for married couples, says that, “The greater the expectations, the more fragile will be the marriage”.<sup>15</sup> He can also see a potential threat in the utopian expectations that the couple place in each other within their relationship, and from which they both draw strength. Referring to Meister Eckhart, Willi says that, “what it really comes down to is the desire for that mystical union with God, in which one empties oneself, in order to be filled with God”.<sup>16</sup> This signifies the failure of the great project for happiness through love which drives the desire of people today like few other things: “The God of the private sphere is love. We are living in the age of the pop song that becomes reality. Romanticism has won, and the therapists are cashing in”.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, “whereas at one time, women thwarted in love would give up all hope, today they continue to hope and ‘give up’ marriage”.<sup>18</sup> This strangely dramatic state of affairs has been revealed in opinion polls conducted among young people, who claim that they consider faithfulness to be the highest value and the family their greatest desire, while accepting divorce, because in their environment this failure is now seen as normal.

All in all, the situation is depressing. The loftiest value no longer seems to have a chance in reality. In divorce, self-fulfilment, as a “consolidated cultural need”,<sup>19</sup> finds its sociological symbol, as it were, in

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> J. WILLI, *Was hält Paare zusammen?* Hamburg 1991, 140 [our translation].

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>17</sup> U. BECK – E. BECK-GERNSHEIM, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

divorce, but then all that remains is the “thrill of freedom” (Wysocki):<sup>20</sup> a rootless existence, marked by the dramatic compulsion to continue separating, and finally ending up in public old people’s homes, cared for by specialist nurses. And finally, an anonymous burial. There are many cities in northern Germany where over fifty per cent of the graves are already nameless.

But this suggests a further reflection. In his book, *What keeps couples together*,<sup>21</sup> Jürg Willi sums up his ten-year experience as a family therapist by offering a number of positive conclusions which are very close to the Catholic viewpoint: we must stop denying the catastrophic consequences of divorce. Divorce is one of the most serious of all health risks. But the idea that people can live together without the bonds of marriage in order to be able to separate more easily is also “naive and dangerous”. Jürg Willi is also sceptical about trial marriages, to enable couples to become thoroughly acquainted with each another before marriage, because “the couple’s conviction that they know each other thoroughly stunts their mutual growth”.<sup>22</sup> He also points out that, “The inability to wait prevents the potential of love from becoming concentrated to the point of building up the power it needs to truly burst into the lives of the couple”.<sup>23</sup> This sounds almost like a psychological explanation of the – existential – statement by Pope John Paul II: “You cannot live life as simply a trial run, and you cannot have a trial run of death. You cannot love merely as a trial run, or accept a person only on trial and for a limited period of time”.<sup>24</sup> Young people today are also yearning for stability. Self-assured girls now reject the “macho” attitude of certain boys. Initiatives to foster chastity before marriage are catching public attention.

The result is that the often turbulent events of recent years have given rise everywhere to a powerful desire: the desire of the feminist

<sup>20</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> J. WILLI, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>24</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Homily in Cologne, Germany, 15 November 1980 [our translation].

movement for a “redeemed” differentiation between women and men, not one that has been defined artificially and unilaterally by men, and that is just to women. After the turbulent period of feminist attacks, men are seeking renewed self-assurance, half-way between both *softie* surrender and obstinate *machismo*. Lastly, there is a desire for stable and happy relationships, without rigid stereotypical roles and without skewed power relations, in which the great hopes of young people for a family life surrounded by affection can be achieved through fidelity. Pope John Paul II was extremely sensitive to these aspirations and to these demands of our age, and never tired of responding to them. He sought to free women’s issues from a strictly clerical viewpoint, by putting an end to the debate on the ordination of women and placing the equal rights and equal dignity of women on the agenda in a way that his predecessors had never done before him. In the scientific debate on the Magisterium of John Paul II people nowadays talk about the Pope’s “feminism”.<sup>25</sup> But unlike the statements made by the Holy Father, the debate within the Church often fails to keep abreast of the developments of modern feminism. It continues to be imbued with that kind of “unisex” feminism that has been amply superseded today, demanding ordination for women because women should be able to do everything that men can do. But with modern feminism an agreement can be reached around the fact that men and women have different roles, for example at the celebration of Mass, where the priest, as a man, acts “in persona Christi” – the Bridegroom of the Church – before a Community which, as the Bride, has a feminine connotation. For modern feminists would only object if “domination” by one sex over the other were to occur. John Paul II himself had this to say about it: “All the reasons in favour of the ‘subjection’ of woman to man must be understood in the sense of a ‘mutual subjection’ of both ‘out of reverence for Christ’”<sup>26</sup>. To the extent that, in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, the priestly ministry is increasingly construed and seen as a priestly

<sup>25</sup> Cf. M.A. GLENDON, *The Pope’s New Feminism*, in “Crisis” 3/1997.

<sup>26</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, no. 24.

service, the conflict over women's ordination will also be settled consistently with the thinking of modern feminism.

John Paul II spoke out robustly in defence of the dignity of women, against the background of the crisis of sexuality and the failure of the so-called sexual revolution which, while setting out to liberate women from the constraints of bourgeois morality, only managed to create new forms of dependency, particularly for women. Both the Pope and modern feminists say that women must not be a mere object of desire. The fact that sexuality and the birth of a new human life are so precious that any form of manipulation must be outlawed are convictions of modern sexologists and leading bioethics experts. Lastly, the sacramental character of marriage gives the marriage bond a stability which lasts far beyond passing feelings. The social repercussions of Jesus' teaching about marriage in his own age led above all to affording greater protection to women against the arbitrary control of men, so much so that his Apostles, who were true men of their age, said, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry" (Mt 19:10). But this is not only a question of rights. It is a question of happiness, and the happiness of the couple: the man and woman. The Catholic Church's response to the pressing demands regarding the relationship between men and women today is essentially a renewed concept of marriage and the family, as two realities which assuage a deep-seated craving by the men and women of our age for the happiness and security of the couple and their children, throughout the whole of their lives, knowing that they are safe in God's good hands.





## **II. DIGNITY, PARTICIPATION, EQUALITY: INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIES**



## Activities of the Holy See: contributions, judgments, prospects\*

MOST REV. DIARMUID MARTIN  
*Coadjutor Archbishop of Dublin, Ireland,  
former Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace,  
and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations Office in Geneva*

Before being appointed Coadjutor Archbishop of Dublin I had worked for 20 years negotiating with the international organisations. This enabled me to attend the main United Nations Conferences, including the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) and the Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), both of which fell within the same intellectual framework. Looking back today, ten years after the Beijing Conference, I ask myself what has changed, and what effects they have had on the status of contemporary women in society and in the Church.

The United Nations Conferences in the 1990s had a major impact on world culture, but they were quite different from the ones it organised in the 1980s. For example, the 1984 Mexico City Conference on Population and Development mainly focused on the widespread distribution of contraceptives, governmental policies to encourage people to take decisions of a particular type, and on procuring the funding needed to achieve these objectives. Only one delegation stressed the importance of women's education and empowerment: and that was the Holy See. Ten years later, women's education and empowerment formed the centre-piece of the Cairo and Beijing conferences. This was a new departure, brought about by the changes that had occurred in the whole cultural environment in the meantime,

\* Transcribed from recordings not reviewed by the author.

with repercussions on the semantics of words which had since taken on different meanings.

Having moved beyond a purely technical understanding of population control, for example, the Conferences in the 1990s recognised that if people were educated to act responsibly they would take decisions which would form the basis of a new ethical understanding of the issues on the agenda. In other words, the Conferences came up with the idea of framing a new set of general ethical principles for international relations. This in itself was positive, and something that the Holy See could quite easily endorse, for an ethical dimension was lacking. But, as we have seen in the course of these Conferences, the problem was that international organisations have only a limited capacity to engage in ethical debate: it has to hinge exclusively around voting procedures or reaching a consensus. Ethics rests on quite different bases from those that underlie negotiations regarding different political factors. It should, however, be borne in mind that the defence of a global common good still has to be pursued today through legislation, through negotiations between nation states in which, oddly, the responsibility for developing a global political ethos is given to civil servants who are paid to safeguard their country's national interests. This creates tense situations, in which the interests and influence of the most powerful countries may steer the process of seeking an ethical vision to suit them.

What had happened, then, between the 1980s and the 1990s? First of all, feminism itself evolved. Between the beginning and the middle of the 1990s, it was no longer a culture that was the exclusive preserve of the Western élites, but it had spread among the working classes in different parts of the world, gathering strength as it did so.

Another major impetus came from changes taking place in United States politics, when the liberal wing of the Democratic Party came to power only a few months before the Cairo Conference. The first measure adopted by the Clinton administration was to change the *Mexico City Population Policy* launched under the Reagan Presidency that denied access by pro-abortion organisations to the resources of the *Family Planning Fund*. This was done on the very day the new

administration was installed, quite clearly demonstrating the important part which that policy had played during the election campaign.

But not everything can be laid at the door of the Clinton administration. In Europe, too, a change had occurred in the meantime: the view of social life had moved away from the broader Christian – or perhaps we should say, Catholic – tradition, under the powerful influence of the mentality of the northern European countries, particularly the Netherlands, all highly secularised and individualistic countries, incapable of any form of dialogue on religious issues and values. The whole of the West had opened up to a new liberal mentality whose dominant element was a powerful streak of individualism. I remember that at the end of the first preparatory meeting for the Cairo Conference, the Chair, who was the Secretary for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), defined the meeting as a victory for individual choice. And some thought that “individual” and “person” meant the same thing. But quite a different philosophy of individualism lay at the heart of the debate on human reproduction in Cairo, even before Beijing: attempts to identify only individual elements of reproductive health and reproductive rights, leaving out the relational element, because of the incapacity to address it, despite the fact that it is an essential part of human sexuality and of mature relations between men and women. It is interesting to note how reasonable discussions can degenerate into extreme individualism. For example, the idea that no woman should ever be forced to have sexual relations, at any time, in any way, or with anyone, was phrased in the following way: women and individuals in general may have sexual relations with anyone they wish, whenever they wish, and in whatever way they wish. This changed the original idea of protecting women from violence into an affirmation of total liberty. Together with the concepts of reproductive health and reproductive rights in the debate at Cairo, there eventually emerged the concept of “sexual health”, which might have been construed as a harmless affirmation of the capacity to maturely develop one’s own sexuality. But in reality, sexual health meant sex as entertainment, and having sexual relations whenever and however one wishes to. This marked a further

step forward towards the total individualisation of sexuality, removed even from the context of stable relationships.

Another important issue that emerged from the debate had to do with *language*. The wording used became extremely important, because the culture of the English-speaking world today hinges around language. It is a “linguistic” philosophy. Language signifies reality, and English is a very creative language: you can change, alter, and force words to produce a “politically correct” meaning. For the politically correct, English is seen as *the* language, the model for a process that has now become widespread, in which language is a way of twisting words and communication towards ideological objectives.

One of the results of this process has been the masculinisation of female culture. What, for example, is the meaning of the word *empowerment* when talking about women? What exactly does the word *empowerment* mean? It certainly does not mean “enhancing” or “improving” the capacity of women to be different, or to fulfil themselves. Empowerment means “giving power”. In other words, its aim was not to enable women to better fulfil themselves, but to obtain power just as men had always held and exercised it.

One of the issues that created difficulties in Beijing, also when drafting the final document, was the language used in reference to human rights. When, at a certain moment, someone said that the Holy See was holding up the negotiations alleging that it did not believe in human rights, this created a truly embarrassing and quite unacceptable situation. The real problem lay in the way these rights were being interpreted. For the construction placed on them was so individualistic that it was a caricature of the general notion of human rights, human responsibility and responsibility towards the world.

In Beijing there was also an attempt, piloted by the delegation of one Western country, to incorporate a paragraph to make “objective human rights standards” as criteria by which to judge the legitimacy of religious expression. But what exactly is meant by “human rights”? and in this specific case, “objective human rights standards”? These standards obviously included the possibility to criticise a religion which authorises female

genital mutilation, on the grounds that it is not based on a true concept of dignity, but did not include the right to use religious arguments to challenge such things as abortion or family planning programmes.

Another word that generated heated debate was *gender*, on which the delegation of the Holy See circulated a note clarifying the meaning of this term, reaffirming that there were only two genders, rejecting a world vision that allows sexual identity to be adapted indeterminately for new and different ends. It emphasised the degree to which cultural conditioning had affected human progress, and how a wholly biological understanding of gender was often deviating from this. The term *gender* is a classic example of how word meanings can be changed, leading to transformations that are not always sound.

Then there was the question of the family, which unleashed a pandemonium. It was especially the Western countries that refused to talk about “family”, putting forward the expression “family in all its forms”. Arguing that there were various forms of family, it was possible to say anything and everything, except to speak about *a* family. Since I used to goad them about this type of “sensitivity”, I remember that on one particular occasion when negotiating at the Cairo Conference I personally suggested the inclusion of the wording “the family in all its forms”. Not only did this catch everyone by surprise, but it caused panic because it was in the paragraph on immigration, a context in which “family” is extremely narrowly defined, leaving no room whatsoever for flexibility.

Among the groups with the greatest influence on this process and which play a decisive role in society in general, there are the huge international foundations – enormous think tanks with vast amounts of money at their disposal. Even though they claim to act in the name of scientific research, their aim is to change public opinion on specific issues. At those Conferences I was able to see for myself what a non-governmental organisation really is, and what a great variety of them there are. Let me give you two examples of the type of organisations that were hostile to the Holy See. One was the *International Planned Parenthood Federation*, one of the world’s largest NGOs currently working on reproductive health and changing abortion legislation, which

receives up to 95% of its funding from governments. You may well ask whether it is truly ‘non-governmental’ or rather the “privatised arm of governments”, or a consortium between governments and different schools of thought. It is as if governments say to them, “We like your ideas, and we will pay you to push your ideas forward”, without knowing where this is likely to lead.

At the opposite extreme there was the *Catholics for a Free Choice*, an organisation funded by foundations to change the stances of the Catholic Church. Its constitution describes it as a *non-member organisation*. And a non-member organisation means a small group of people who join forces to change public opinion.

In all this, a new factor came into play: Islam. You will remember all the comments about the “unholy” alliance that some people claimed had been forged in Cairo between the Catholic Church and Islam. I remember the first time it appeared in the newspapers: a detailed report on the way the Vatican has sent special envoys to Libya and Teheran to pave the way. There was absolutely no truth in any of this, but when I read it I realised that the story would never go away, because false though it was, it was far too good to be true and would be constantly brought up time and time again. This was also an attempt to destroy a different type of alliance: the alliance between people with points of view that differed from those of certain Western countries regarding the importance of religion and values in society, and the distancing of society from the very concept of religious values.

One final example to show the cultural changes that were taking place in that particular period, and which ultimately influenced the drafting of the documents, is the concept of choice. The term “choice” became the essential definition of “freedom”, but it expressed a very specific, individual idea of what choice meant, leading in both a positive and a negative way to a movement within the birth control or family planning ideology: the shift away from family planning dictated by eugenics to family planning based on individual choice. This shift came close to our conviction that family planning has nothing to do with governments but to parents.



And so it was that the expressions “birth control” and “population explosion” nowhere appeared in the documents of the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population: the former was rejected by the proponents of free choice, and the latter was rejected by the demographers, who said that they were not the dynamics at issue. And so “birth control” became “family planning” and “reproductive choice”, before returning again to “individual reproductive rights”.

One of the most hotly debated issues was the question of parental rights over their children: at a time when, for example, parents in the United Kingdom were being fined if their children played truant from school, or missed classes, attempts were being made to provide children with family planning and reproductive health services without giving their parents the chance to become involved. This is the only area in which they tried to reduce the scope of parental rights and responsibilities by giving total confidentiality to the medical profession or other parties.

Violence was another issue that was very much in people’s minds at the Beijing Conference and in the negotiations and debates. The Holy See repeatedly condemned violence against women, because far too many women have to endure violence in the family and in society. But even violence was used for ideological ends. How do you define violence? In the debate on abortion, for example, the foetus might be defined as “an aggressor” against the woman, giving women the right to reject this “aggression” against them. Women would also have the right to reject the “aggression” of limiting her right to choose – the most important right of all. I even heard a number of Catholic theologians using these arguments. But both at Cairo and at Beijing the Holy See, free of any ideological conditioning, always sought to emphasise the real disadvantages experienced by women, and the harsh conditions in which so many women in the world still live today. The statistics speak eloquently: sixty per cent of all the children who do not go to school are girls, and over seventy per cent of girls leave school earlier than boys. Almost seventy per cent of illiterate people today are women. In the poor countries, the mere fact of being a woman can decide whether they are allowed to eat, and in male-dominated

societies, girl babies are treated differently from boy babies as far as the fundamental rights of the person are concerned. The preference for boy babies in some societies even leads to the infanticide of newborn baby girls, which is still widely practised in the world. Another huge difficulty for women is fitting in their work outside the home with their family responsibilities. This is not only a problem in the West but also in the developing countries, where women bear the brunt of the domestic work and most of the work in the fields, while the men pass their time away chatting, or talking about village politics.

All this must be borne in mind, not forgetting that while we can enjoy the luxury of reflecting on which schools of feminism are preferable to others, many women throughout the world are suffering from serious discrimination. If we really believe in empowerment, and in improving people, and if we really believe in justice, we must believe in education, particularly for young women in the world's poorest countries. The Catholic Church, which has an extraordinarily rich tradition with regard to educating girls and combating all forms of discrimination, must once again take up the leadership role that she has always played in the past in this sphere. The impetus which the Catholic Church has given to education has been extremely important, but in many respects I believe that we have not managed to keep up the impetus. This being so, and in order to be able to identify the disadvantages from which women suffer today, we need people with the far-sightedness of the 19<sup>th</sup> century foundresses, whose Religious Congregations were often established specifically to cater for social needs.

In conclusion, at this time of a changing cultural situation, how can the Holy See affirm everything that is positive and denounce everything that is contrary to the good of the person in the international debate? Our challenge is to discern the new concepts that are being put forward today, and to voice our dissent without eschewing debate, while making sure that we are capable of shedding light on the essentials of the issues under debate. This is a difficult process, of course. But it is essential if we are to make the voice of the Church heard in a pluralist and secularised world.

# Current proposals and the state of the debate

MARGUERITE A. PEETERS

*Journalist, founder and director of the  
Institute for Intercultural Dialogue Dynamics(2ID), Brussels, Belgium*

## INTRODUCTION

The West's feminist revolution that was launched at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by such prominent leaders as Margaret Sanger (1876-1966)<sup>1</sup> and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986),<sup>2</sup> spread rapidly after the 1960s. The invention of the contraceptive pill<sup>3</sup> gave them the technical resources they needed to achieve their ideological objectives. For it was almost immediately after contraception became available on the market that the West went through the May 1968 cultural revolution.

Margaret Sanger wanted to enable women to own and control their bodies, to enjoy their own rights, control their own lives by freeing them from what she considered to be the bondage of procreation. In order to liberate women they had to rebel against everything which, according to Sanger, kept them in a state of "oppression": civil, moral and religious

<sup>1</sup> M. SANGER was the founder of Planning Parenthood International. In 1914 she launched the weekly New York magazine, *Woman Rebel* to promote birth control. In 1916 she opened the first American birth control clinic. In 1921 she founded the *American Birth Control League* which, in 1942 became the *Federation of Family Planning of America*.

<sup>2</sup> In 1948 Simone de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Betty Friedan, Jane Fonda, Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, Kate Miller, Susan Brownmiller were other feminist leaders who exercised a considerable influence.

<sup>3</sup> Encouraged by Margaret Sanger, Dr Gregory Goodwin Pincus invented the contraceptive pill which he first tested on rabbits and then on Puerto Rican women beginning in 1956. The pill was first marketed in the United States in 1960.

law, dogmas, cultural values, patriarchal systems, the Catholic Church, male domination, social and economic injustice, poverty, the lack of education and information, the lack of access to contraception,<sup>4</sup> and abortion.<sup>5</sup> Women had to join in the revolution and *seize power* without waiting for it to be given to them. Children, from now on, had to be “wanted”, “planned”, “chosen”. Simone de Beauvoir, meanwhile, proclaimed that “people are not born, but become, women”.

The radical feminist school has had an immeasurable influence in the West, provoking nothing short of an anthropological cataclysm. In its radical form, feminism shifted Western culture away from the family to the couple, from the spouse to the partner, from the person to the individual, from love as a gift to egotistical self-seeking, from happiness to pleasure, and from free-giving to possession.

Possession, enjoyment, control, liberation, power, rights, freedom of choice, and the individual – these are the keywords of this form of feminism which has done so much to forge a new culture which is now spreading far beyond its borders today. Arbitrary individual choice, or the radical autonomy of the individual, is the absolute value of this culture. It was the atheist existentialist philosophers like Simone de Beauvoir or Jean-Paul Sartre who made freedom of choice, radically defined, the criterion for the new morality.

The rebellious right to choose opened up Pandora’s box from which an endless stream of new rights and paradigms emerged, all of which are well known in the West, ranging from *in vitro* fertilisation to lesbian and homosexual rights, the pill and euthanasia, through to the debate on cloning and other bioethical aberrations.

At the beginning of the 1990s, immediately after the end of the Cold War, the Western feminist revolution, in all its forms,<sup>6</sup> immediately became a worldwide phenomenon. This globalisation of feminism

<sup>4</sup> For Sanger, contraception was a question of “social justice”.

<sup>5</sup> Since women are the owners of their own body, they may use it as they wish.

<sup>6</sup> Feminism has taken an enormous variety of forms: libertarian feminism, autarkic feminism, socialist feminism, gender feminism, eco-feminism, the first, second and third wave of feminism...

had obviously begun back in the 1960s, but it was given a massive boost following the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Within the space of only a few years, the key concepts of feminism spread to the four corners of the globe: the offices of the United Nations in New York, the European Union in Brussels, the Department of State in Washington, the Duma in Moscow, non-governmental organisations, dispensaries in Africa, local authorities; not only in the language of politics and development policy but also of education, health care, human rights, the media, business ethics, and world culture.

The worldwide feminist revolution has used many and varied channels to propagate itself: the series of major United Nations Conferences in the 1990s, particularly Cairo (1994) and Beijing (1995); the enlargement of the European Union; the exponential growth of the influence on legislation exercised worldwide by such powerful non-governmental organisations as the *International Planning Parenthood Federation* (IPPF), *Marie Stopes International*, or the *Women's Environment and Development Organisation* (WEDO); the Internet revolution, which makes it possible to instantaneously disseminate a new language worldwide; the worldwide power of the Western media, and world policies for reforming education – in short, globalisation in every shape and form.

The feminist revolution spearheaded a global cultural revolution. The part played by the feminist movement in the widespread adoption of new concepts, such as consent, sustainable development, people-centredness, participatory democracy, the “civil society” movement and the right to choose, proved decisive, and that role is still not sufficiently well known.

Even though the people behind the revolution are always dissatisfied and are demanding *more and more*, we may fairly say that the feminist revolution has already achieved its objectives. It began in the West, and has now spread worldwide. Radicalism is now having to deal perseveringly with the last bastions of resistance, and the cultures that are the most unyielding and reluctant to take on Western programs, particularly in Africa. The driving forces of the revolution,

such as the IPPF and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) have done their utmost to try to change the mentalities even of religious leaders.<sup>7</sup>

The anthropological radicalism of the global feminist revolution is unprecedented. For what it is seeking to do is to deconstruct the structure of the human personality – a theological and trinitarian structure – to destroy the identity and the ontological unity of man and woman, interpersonal communion and the likeness of the person to the Trinity, in order to draft a new social contract between radically equal world citizens, guaranteeing every individual the maximum *prosperity* and *quality of life* in a *culture of tolerance*.

Discernment, however, is called for here. For the revolution coexists, by taking them hostage, with healthy and spontaneous cultural changes that are also being universally disseminated, to achieve a better recognition of the vocation of women, their place in society, their dignity and specific vocation, their personal development and that of their personality, and to redress situations of genuine injustice being committed against their dignity, and to prevent abuse and discrimination being practised against them. These positive developments are an extremely powerful sign of the times.

The purpose of this paper is to heighten an awareness of the breadth and the depth of the global feminist revolution, in its most radical aspects. It is the responsibility of every individual person to carry out discernment in order to extract from radicalism everything that is genuinely consensual and which can therefore be used as the basis for building up a just international order which is authentically human and moral.

<sup>7</sup> It was for this purpose that, in March 2004, a meeting was convened in Amsterdam by the United Nations Population Fund and the Netherlands Ministry of Development Cooperation.

THE KEY CONCEPTS OF THE DECONSTRUCTION PROCESSES

Vagueness, semantic manipulation, and the lack of clear definitions are typical features of the language of the feminist revolution, and indeed by the worldwide cultural revolution.

*Sexual and reproductive rights*, the *family in all its forms*, the concept of *safety* (safe motherhood, safe abortion, safe sex), the theory of *gender* and its many offshoots,<sup>8</sup> *informed choice*, *equality*, and the *empowerment* of women: these are a few of the main concepts disseminated worldwide at the United Nations conferences in the 1990s, all of them linked by an internal rationale.

Let us note at once that such words as husband, spouse, love, virginity, family, mother, father, complementarity, identity and service are all absent from this new world language.

These new concepts that have now gained worldwide currency are put across as *global ethical norms*, admitting of no possible alternatives, standards to be imposed not only on governments but also across the board on all the world's citizens via the media and education. We are confronted by a new cultural system, a *worldwide ethos*, in which the feminist programme is only one of many elements.

The new concepts are above all *processes of cultural change* without any real substance.

Change consists of *deconstructing* everything that is given, that is to say matter, nature, reality, the unity of the body and soul, the ontological unity between man and woman, the order established by God, divine Revelation on which numerous ages-old cultural traditions have been based, although certainly imperfectly. Deconstruction even attacks what has been built up on the basis of everything that has come from healthy and authentic traditions and cultures. In the second phase, the revolution seeks to *reconstruct* a pseudo-reality, a new and

<sup>8</sup> Such as gender equality, gender balance, gender mainstreaming, gender bias, gender disparity, gender neutral, gender perspective – all English terminology which is extremely difficult to translate into other languages.

unique world order, standing on purely immanent foundations, based on arbitrary individual choices.

The new concepts are “constructed” by including all the decisions which individuals arbitrarily make without reference to any moral or theological order, decisions that are as variable as the numerous individual liberties, and as changeable as an individual’s moods. The new concepts constitute a holistic whole, including all possibilities of choice, which explains why they lack stable and objective substance, and while claiming to be “neutral” in reality they are empty concepts. For the process of reconstruction actually constructs nothing at all, because evil does not exist in itself: it is only possible to rebel against something that is there. Reconstruction empties reality of its substance, denying it and rejecting it.

As a deconstruction-reconstruction process, the feminist revolution is linked directly to the structuralist and postmodern school of philosophy (deconstructionism) whose leading proponents include M. Foucault, M. Heidegger, H. Marcuse and J. Derrida. The cultural revolution has carried us into *the post-modern age*.

The French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, fiercely attacked and broke down the binary oppositions (man-woman, truth-lies, day-night, ruler-ruled, young-adult, poor-rich...) to demonstrate that all realities (human, social, historical, cultural, political, economic, racial...) are artfully created and therefore have no universal, natural and God-ordered ontological basis.

## GENDER

The ideology of *gender* eloquently illustrates the post-modern process of deconstruction-reconstruction. It is the key concept of contemporary feminism.<sup>9</sup> Considering its importance we should spend a

<sup>9</sup> Some current schools of feminism, however, claim that gender feminism is already disappearing because of its “dogmatism”, and has been superseded by such new developments as feminism oriented towards a closer partnership with men, a new covenant which



short time examining it. The 1995 “Beijing consensus” was a decisive stage in the rapid global dissemination of the *gender perspective*.<sup>10</sup> Now widespread in most Western countries and sectors, the gender consensus that emerged from Beijing is being subtly but resolutely imposed by *awareness-building campaigns*, in places where intellectual opposition is strongest.

The term “gender” was used by Ann Oakley and other feminists in the 1970s.<sup>11</sup> *Gender feminism* defines gender in terms of socially created male and female characteristics taking no account of the biological sex differences.

The gender ideology separates the sexual functions of man and woman, which are unchangeable, from their social functions which, according to this new perspective, can be continuously deconstructed and reconstructed according to cultural trends, arbitrary individual choices, and above all on the basis of the criteria of the new ethical system that it sets out to create.

Everything that men and women do, everything that is expected of them in society, and the roles they play, everything that is socially permitted and considered to be of value in a man and in a woman, changes between one social group and another, based on race, social class, economic status, as well as the period of history and cultural development.

The gender thesis affects motherhood in particular. The new ideology, with its Marxist anthropological foundations, reduces the woman’s maternal role and man’s paternal role in terms of their “social functions”. Motherhood and fatherhood are functions that can and must be deconstructed in order to enable individuals to freely “choose” their role in society. By denouncing their “reproductive role” as an injustice

is more respectful of all the individual choices, and which would reduce the power of the state to regulate them.

<sup>10</sup> The gender perspective considers that every problem in society must be reviewed and addressed again through the prism of gender and its subversive values.

<sup>11</sup> It was in the 1970s that the world cultural revolution was being prepared. The concepts of participatory democracy, sustainable development, world government, and holism were being fashioned in western Left-wing circles during those cultural revolution years.

committed against them, women revolt against motherhood and therefore against their own femininity. Women must therefore be able to “liberate themselves” from biological constraints. Having a feminine sexual identity by nature, women must be free to adopt male *forms of conduct* and *roles*, and whenever they wish, return to a female role, or adopt both roles at one and the same time.

The concept of gender breaks the ontological unity of the human person by separating the body from an individual’s personal vocation as a man or a woman, a father or a mother, a husband or wife, a son or daughter; it breaks down the Trinitarian image of the human person. It therefore opens the floodgates to every type of possible choice regarding sexual orientation: bisexuality, homosexuality, lesbianism, heterosexuality, all of which are choices that the new ethical system places on the same plane in a form of radical moral relativism.

Whereas femininity and masculinity are, according to the order established by God, made interdependent by sexuality, in terms of gender they are subjective sentiments or feelings, independent of an individual’s sex. By rejecting the unity of their being, created in the image of God, people find themselves divided against themselves, against others and against God. Women who refuse to be women cannot be the helper given to man by God. Gender makes love impossible, by replacing it with a *contract*.

The deconstruction of the person as a man or as a woman leads to a sexless society, a society without tenderness, a “neutral” society without men and without women.

Gender is a materialistic concept that paradoxically relates everything to biology. For only the biological differences between men and women are considered to be real, certain, stable and unchangeable. Everything else is in a state of flux and does not exist as part of the essence of man and woman. Biology becomes the only universal value.

Gender is a *constructivist* concept. It does not begin on what is given, indeed it rejects it: it therefore rejects the specific features of femininity and masculinity which are written not only into the human body but also into the psychological and spiritual configuration of the

person as a man or woman. The concept of gender is a product of the *social sciences*. By taking the place of divine Revelation, science is claimed to “reveal” that behavioural differences between men and women are *only* social constructs. Any affirmation of identity, any affirmation of differences between men and women in education and culture are therefore claimed to be discriminatory. Any discrimination between one or other choice of sexual orientation is therefore intolerable.

The monotheistic religions are accused of having very largely contributed to the construction of patriarchal societies and to the social role of the woman as a “victim”, an inferior being or subordinate to man, a mother and a wife.

Like other concepts and values produced by the new global ethos, gender claims to be *holistic*, which means all-embracing, all-inclusive. Gender sets out to give *everyone* access to *all the possible choices* of identity, regardless of natural, anthropological, ontological or theological determinations. Gender is put forward as the whole, which includes all the arbitrary choices of a rebellious humanity. Choices are said to be linked by a *culture of diversity*.

Yet gender does exactly the opposite to what is claimed for it. It is reductionist. Morality, conjugal love, maternal/paternal love, individual conscience, and post-abortion traumas are quite absent from the gender philosophy. The gender rationale leads to the destruction of fundamental and universal human choices (motherhood or fatherhood as a vocation) and standardises the world according to Western feminist patterns, imposing a single choice on everyone.

In its non-radical aspects, one of the positive effects of the gender revolution has been the decoupling of culture from formalism, from preconceived ideas, from pre-determined rules for the man and the woman, from machismo, clericalism, paternalism, and from the cultural acceptance of women’s underdevelopment. Paradoxically, the depth of this debate forces us to return to the original plan of the Creator. The mystery of the unity of man and woman and the dignity of woman have been placed in the spotlight more clearly than ever before. One might

even go so far as to say that the culture of choice has thrown down the gauntlet to personal responsibility and emphasised the dynamic aspect of the development of the person, and of women in particular.

## EQUALITY AND POWER

The philosophy of gender underlies the quest for *equal power*. Women wish to become equal to men in terms of power. In reality, women want to be masculinised. To achieve this, women must deny their specific attributes. In its most radical aspects, feminism is therefore anti-woman. But it is also anti-man, because it draws its inspiration from a hatred of men and rebels against “male oppression” and the “power” of men.

Postmodern existentialism is atheistic. The equal dignity of men and women which has been given by God and constitutes the object of Judaeo-Christian Revelation is ignored. Equality is only viewed in terms of an equal *possession of power* which has to be conquered by a loveless power struggle, a long and patient battle against all religious, cultural, economic or political determinations which “oppress” women.<sup>12</sup>

According to the United Nations, women have a threefold task: “reproduction”, “production”, and what it calls “social reproduction”, that is to say, running the home, bringing up infants, the socialisation of the children, fetching water and fuel in the developing countries, etc. Let us note in passing that these are Marxist categories. Not only do women work much harder than men, but the type of work they perform is fundamentally different. In most cultures, relations between men and women are considered to be characterised by a social injustice.

A *general cultural adjustment* must therefore be made, a global redistribution of power which entails removing the social and cultural constraints that limit women’s choices. In the developing countries,

<sup>12</sup> The United Nations claims that the term “equality” does not mean “becoming identical”, but parity, balance, the fair representation of women (the quantitative aspect) and equitable influence on development priorities (the qualitative aspect).

social engineers proclaim that the inequality of men and women is one of the main factors holding up economic development.<sup>13</sup> This is the way they justify giving priority to gender in development policies.

In order to achieve equality, women have to conquer access to decision-making *power*, not viewing power as a *service* but as the means of *controlling* their own lives, and as *ownership*.

Women's *empowerment*<sup>14</sup> in the culture of the United Nations is indissociable from equality and gender. *Empowerment* was defined as the possibility for women to take decisions and exercise negotiating powers, make their voice heard, be able to organise and influence the direction of social change, and create a just social and economic order, at the national and international level.<sup>15</sup>

Social change is the collectivist aim of the empowerment of women taken individually.

Chapter IV of the Cairo Plan of Action considered the empowerment of women to be an important end in itself, and an essential condition of sustainable development.

Empowerment is a process of social engineering, a process that begins by *sensitising* women to the inequalities of which they are allegedly the victims and to the power to which they are entitled and which they do not yet enjoy. Little by little, women become aware of their "rights". They "wake up" to a new "liberating" reality. Their choices are broadened. They acquire self-confidence. They begin to *demand* their rights, and are then co-opted by the political objectives of the feminist movement of which they become direct and active partners. At the end of the process they will be committed to transforming the structures and the institutions which heighten and perpetuate "discrimination" and "inequality".

<sup>13</sup> Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden are claimed to be the most advanced countries.

<sup>14</sup> A term which is virtually untranslatable into other languages, meaning the process through which power is given to women, thereby making them "powerful".

<sup>15</sup> See *Progress of the World's Women*, United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), 2002, 63.

Empowerment is a revolutionary process. Power is not given to women; women have to take it for themselves. But the seizure of power by women is not without consequences to society. The feminist revolution is *transforming* society as a whole and this cultural transformation requires the active participation and cooperation of men. More and more international policies today speak of the need to turn men into women's partners in the quest for equality. The feminist movement wants to mobilise men. Just as women have to become aware of their rights, so men must also become aware of the need to change their attitudes to women and the way they treat them.

The empowerment process must lead to a global consensus between men and women around common objectives, a consensus which is even more important than the objective of empowerment, and contains the subversive values of the United Nations: autonomy of conscience regarding Revelation, and the radical freedom of individual choice.

One positive aspect of post-modernity is its abandonment of the modern paradigm of the *power of loveless domination* which could occur in relations between man and woman, man and the environment, the rich and poor, in *Realpolitik*, authoritarianism, in the pursuit of national interests pure and simple, etc.

The Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women of the United Nations presents the empowerment of women as a *mutual gain* for women and for men: what postmodernity defines as a win-win situation. It "does not refer to *power over*, or *controlling forms of power*, but rather to alternative forms of power: *power to*; *power with* and *power from within* which focus on utilizing individual and collective strengths to work towards common goals without coercion or domination".<sup>16</sup>

This new concept of power might seem to be moving in the direction of love, but it can never be love so long as it denies the identity of

<sup>16</sup> Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women, United Nations (CH rev. August 2001).

man and woman, their specific natures, and the unity of the two. The role of the Church is to steer postmodernity towards love, reconciling it with reality, with truth and with Revelation.

## HISTORICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As an international organisation with a mandate from its Member States, entailing among other things global socio-economic development, the United Nations has addressed the issue of women, particularly since the 1970s, and has played a leading part in spreading the feminist revolution planetwide. Let us now briefly examine the stages in this process.

The 1968 Teheran Conference on Human Rights recognised the right to family planning *for parents*. Reflecting the growth of Western individualism, the 1974 Bucharest World Population Conference affirmed that family planning was a right of all *individuals and couples*.

The first United Nations Conference on Women was held in Mexico City in 1975, the International Women's Year, followed by the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985). In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the "Convention for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women",<sup>17</sup> considered to be the Charter of Women's Rights. After Mexico City three more conferences were held on women: Copenhagen (1980),<sup>18</sup> Nairobi (1985)<sup>19</sup> and lastly Beijing (1995). At Beijing most of the United Nations Member States, that is, 189, adopted the *gender perspective* by consensus as an international development priority in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>17</sup> This Convention, which was adopted on 18 December 1979, enshrines the commitment to foster equal rights of women in every area (political, social, economic, cultural and civil), and the equal responsibility of men and women in family life. This Convention became effective on 3 September 1981 and has since been ratified by 173 countries.

<sup>18</sup> This conference added health and education to the programme for women.

<sup>19</sup> This conference introduced the equal rights of women to divorce.

One year before Beijing, the Cairo conference imposed a Copernican revolution of enormous importance on world population policies, moving away from *population control* (policies imposed on individuals by governments) to *reproductive rights* (the appropriation, or internationalisation, *by individuals* of hedonistic and collectivist policies, and hence a cultural revolution, changing mentalities).

An institutional approach to development was replaced by an approach defined as “people-centred”. But the new development culture is characterised by abstraction and by the lack of a sound anthropology.<sup>20</sup> Women are viewed as abstract individuals, detached from their relationship with men and their children.

The aim now is to make “people” – women, children, young people, the disabled, *everyone* – aware of their sexual and reproductive rights, to *sensitise* them, *educate* them and teach them to claim their rights by becoming *active citizens* engaged in politics and *capacity-building*, have the power to control their own lives (empowerment) and have access to information on, familiarity with and the use of reproductive health services. The individual becomes a direct partner of the new world ethos.

At the Cairo, Copenhagen and Beijing Conferences, governments undertook to facilitate, by 2015, access by all individuals of “appropriate age” (a vague concept) to high-quality reproductive health services, through *primary health care*.

The Beijing *gender perspective* reflected the objectives of the *gender feminism* of the 1970s. In the meantime, however, the advocates of that school of thought had organised themselves into powerful international non-governmental organisations, such as the *Women’s Environment and Development Organisation* (WEDO). At the United Nations conferences in the 1990s, the feminist NGOs formed a collective, the *Women’s Caucus*, headed by the legendary and very charismatic Bella Abzug. The

<sup>20</sup> The experts of the “people-centred” approach ignore everything about the human person, love, happiness, predestination, or eternal life. For their approach takes no account of the mystery of the person. Global culture has created an enormous void which must be filled by the new evangelisation and the civilisation of love.



feminist NGOs worked closely with the United Nations Secretariat and its agencies on the drafting of the Beijing document even before the Conference convened. We can safely say that they were the first United Nations partners, even before the governments, in conceptualising the objectives of the new global gender consensus. Without the genius of Bella Abzug, incidentally, the United Nations Conferences in the 1990s would have been very different, perhaps even a complete fiasco for radical feminists. A revolution often succeeds thanks to a few powerful personalities.

After the Beijing Conference, and having laid down the objectives, the United Nations focused on implementing them, a process which is monitored yearly by the Commission on the Status of Women, an inter-governmental organisation. Even though a consensus is never mandatory and is not binding on the Member States, the United Nations, its agencies and partners exploit their purported “moral authority” to bring unrelenting pressure to bear on governments to ensure their compliance with their commitments and to apply the aforementioned consensus. So, little by little, this consensus spread as a world culture.

The United Nations speaks about the “Beijing mandate”. This so-called mandate does not have the force of law, but is constantly being restated, for example in the 1997/2 conclusions of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (Ecosoc),<sup>21</sup> and at the “Beijing plus 5” intergovernmental conference convened in 2000 to verify the implementation of the Beijing Conference Resolutions.

About 120 countries have already prepared national plans of action to incorporate the *gender perspective* into all their activities. Many countries have drafted *progress reports* on their implementation of Beijing. Civil society organisations have worked at the grassroots level to change mentalities through educational programmes. They have activated their “monitoring” agencies to keep track of their governments,

<sup>21</sup> The 1997/2 Ecosoc conclusions defined gender mainstreaming as “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels... The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality”.

and act as “watchdogs” to ensure the application of the consensus. The United Nations partnership with business, which Kofi Annan launched at the Davos Economic Forum in 1999,<sup>22</sup> sometimes provides huge resources for these objectives.

The conclusions of the main United Nations conferences of the 1990s are implemented in an “integrated and coordinated” manner. In practice, this means that for the United Nations, the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive rights (the outcome of the Cairo Conference) is a prior condition for gender equality (the outcome of Beijing). Gender is a priority of sustainable development (the Rio consensus). The Vienna consensus (1993) required the rights of women and young people to be deemed to be an integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. It also stipulated that women’s rights must become an integral part of the work of the United Nations, governments and NGOs. Food security (the 1996 Rome Food Summit) is to be achieved through reproductive health (“overpopulation” is considered to be the cause of malnutrition). Everything can be found in everything else. The consensus of the 1990s is “a single whole”. A *system*.

## THE “MILLENNIUM GOALS”

An Extraordinary Summit, attended by an unprecedented number of Heads of State was convened in New York in 2000. One hundred and ninety-one governments adopted the *Millennium Declaration*, together with eight development goals, to be attained by 2015, defined as the *Millennium Goals*.<sup>23</sup> The declaration and the goals

<sup>22</sup> In 1999, at the Economic Forum in Davos, Kofi Annan launched a Global Compact with the private sector, asking business to internationalise and implement the sustainable development objectives.

<sup>23</sup> *The Millennium Development Goals*: 1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; 2. Achieve universal primary education; 3. Promote gender equality and empower women; 4. Reduce child mortality; 5. Improve maternal health; 6. Combat HIV-AIDS, malaria and other diseases; 7. Ensure environmental sustainability; 8. Develop a global partnership for development.

summed up the priorities of the world consensus of the main conferences of the 1990s, particularly Cairo (1994), Copenhagen (1995) and Beijing (1995). According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) “Governments, aid agencies and civil society organisations everywhere are reorienting their work around the Goals”.<sup>24</sup> Most of the governments which signed the Millennium Declaration prepare national reports on the progress towards attaining these goals.

Gender equality is considered not only to be a goal in itself (goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women) but also as “a path towards achieving the other goals”.<sup>25</sup> The United Nations wishes to avoid the “ghettoisation” of gender issues;<sup>26</sup> indeed, it wishes to make it an absolute development priority and incorporate it into the new global social consensus. The Millennium Declaration commits the member countries of the United Nations “to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, as effective ways to combat poverty, hunger and disease and to stimulate development that is truly sustainable”.<sup>27</sup> Gender has become the necessary means of combating poverty. This new approach gives development cooperation a subjective and arbitrary dimension, by attributing priority to ideology over real life and over the real needs of the poor nations.

Goals 4, 5 and 6 also relate to women: the reduction of child mortality by two-thirds by 2015, and the reduction by three-quarters of birth-related mortality rate by 2015, and by 2015 to put an end to, and to seek to reverse, the AIDS pandemic. The United Nations Development Programme reports that abortion performed under unhealthy conditions (*unsafe abortion*) is responsible for 13% of all childbirth-related deaths, that is to say 78,000 women a year. “Thus,

<sup>24</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report*, 2003, Foreword.

<sup>25</sup> WORLD BANK, *Gender and Development Group*, April 2003, *Gender Equality and the Millennium Development Goals*, Introduction.

<sup>26</sup> UNDP, *Millennium Development Goals, National Reports. A Look through a Gender Lens*, 2003, 3.1.

<sup>27</sup> WORLD BANK, *Gender and Development Group*, cit. Introduction.

achieving Goal 5 will require rapidly expanding access to reproductive health care”.<sup>28</sup>

## THE GENDER INSTITUTIONS

The machinery put into place to carry through the gender revolution is gigantic, and includes so many of these organisations that it is impossible to mention them all. One of the main ones is the United Nations system.

On the subject of health and gender issues, the United Nations speaks with only one voice, according to the policy set out in the Cairo and Beijing consensus, whose rules were laid down by experts from the World Health Organisation and UNFPA, working in collaboration with the leading Western libertarian NGOs. As soon as he was appointed in 1996 Kofi Annan set about reforming the organisation, with the main purpose of improving the effectiveness of its commitment to sustainable development and of implementing the process of the great conferences that had just been held.

We shall now rapidly look at a few of the main United Nations agencies concerned with women's issues. The Commission on the Status of Women is one of the intergovernmental agencies of the Economic and Social Council (Ecosoc), which is responsible for monitoring the achievement of the Beijing objectives. The Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) at the United Nations Secretariat (the catalyst for promoting the global feminist programme) “helps” the Commission on the Status of Women. UNIFEM, the United Nations Fund for Women, is specifically charged with promoting gender. This Fund, which has developed considerably in recent years, drafts a women's global advancement progress report every two years. UNIFEM sees to it that the *gender perspective* runs throughout all the intergovernmental processes. The Beijing document asked UNIFEM to

<sup>28</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report*, cit., 99.

incorporate a woman's dimension into development at every level, and to pursue multilateral dialogue on women's empowerment. The United Nations work on behalf of women is assisted by the International Institute for Research and Training for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW).

There are many other United Nations agencies, funds and programmes with a department, or with major programmes devoted to women and gender. For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Health Organisation (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), the World Bank (Gender and Development Group), and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). In addition to these there are other inter-agency organisations such as the *Inter-agency Task Force on Gender and the MDGs*, or the *Millennium Project Task Force on Gender Equality and Education*, IANWGE (to which 25 United Nations agencies belong), and lastly the United Nations Regional Commissions. A large number of these organisations have close relations with certain ministries of the Member States (Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Health, Development, Planning, Education) and with Development Cooperation agencies.

While the United Nations, the Clinton Administration and the European Union played a leading role in the first half of the 1990s, the other international organisations very rapidly followed suit, and at the present time they have completely and comprehensively taken up the gender perspective. We could mention, among others, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the G8, the Commonwealth, Francophonie, etc.

Their influence on changing the thinking of NGOs, NGO federations and the powerful informal partnership networks (to which companies, NGOs, experts, local authorities, United Nations

agencies, etc., belong) which work directly with the local populations is perhaps even greater than the influence of the international organisations themselves.

#### THE GENDER MAINSTREAMING STRATEGY

*Gender mainstreaming* is the name given to the current strategy of the United Nations and other agents of the global feminist revolution designed to push forward their action programme. This strategy was adopted and, so to speak, “globally accepted” at Beijing. The gender propagandists say that after 30 years of feminist militancy, at Beijing the whole world finally realised that it is inequality, according to the view adopted by the feminist school of thought, that lies at the heart of social development and must necessarily be addressed in the pursuit of socio-economic development.

Gender mainstreaming is a term expressing the incorporation of the gender perspective into every area of society and its institutions. It entails the incorporation of the *gender perspective* into every aspect of the theory and practice of development, in every area of society, and the reform of education. Gender mainstreaming must become a “vast national undertaking in favour of women’s rights and gender equality”.<sup>29</sup>

Gender mainstreaming is a strategy, not an end in itself. Its purpose is to reach equality between the genders (a “*gender balance*”) by transforming the structures of society and institutions. The structures that perpetuate inequality must be transformed, to become structures that treat women and men in a radically equal manner and promote the values of the new ideology.

Gender mainstreaming is only interested in the *system* (the educational, health care, political, economic, legislative, cultural, social and religious structures, rules and practices, etc.) which establish and institutionalise the male role and the female role in a society, a system that

<sup>29</sup> UNDP, *Millennium Development Goals*, *op. cit.*, 2.

has to be *changed* very often. Woman as such, woman as a person, is absent from the strategic goals of gender mainstreaming. The gender perspective is not only systemic but also collectivist. Women are of interest only as a generic group within society, as a deprived social category.

Gender mainstreaming means much more than adding a feminine component or an equality component to, or superimposing it on, a given activity in society, at work, or in schools, for example. It goes even further than the aim of guaranteeing women greater participation in society. It is aimed at inculcating gender values in every social activity. Gender culture is transforming society.

Gender mainstreaming is creating a new culture, bringing into society the values underlying the philosophy of gender, in which radicalism and common sense mingle: the culture of equality, equal powers, the ownership and control of one's own life, free choice and tolerance, well-being and quality of life for all, men and women alike, under a new social compact. Gender mainstreaming is one of the highways of the global cultural revolution.

Gender is considered to be a more fundamental socio-cultural variable than others, such as age, race, class, ethnic group, etc. Gender must therefore be incorporated not only into every area of social life (health, education...) but also into all the other socio-cultural variables. Gender is an inter-sectoral objective (a *cross-cutting goal*) of all the international organisations.

A gender mainstreaming perspective admits of no such thing as a gender-neutral situation or issue. Gender mainstreaming takes into account the perceptions, experiences, knowledge, rights and interests of women – or more accurately of the feminists – who are demanding their right to radical equality with men. These factors must be able to influence the drafting of policies and decisions taken at higher levels even before any decisions are actually taken, for otherwise the structural and systemic changes being pursued by the feminist movement can never be as wide-ranging as they want them to be. Mainstreaming therefore places gender at the heart of political decisions, medium-term planning, evaluation, institutional structural reform, development

policies, research, lobbying, legislation and planning: in short, every social process.

Gender mainstreaming is a process of *incremental change*, in which women and men are to be made aware of the need to change political goals, development strategies, actions, organisations and structures, and above all, cultures and traditions.<sup>30</sup>

The first stage in the process consists of diagnosing the situation that the social transformation agent proposes to change: it entails identifying exactly where the inequalities lie.<sup>31</sup> In most countries, the United Nations agencies take part in creating “National Statistical Systems”. The United Nations provides local statisticians with the facilities they require to incorporate gender into all the indicators. The social transformation agent identifies the access pathways and the possibilities for implementing mainstreaming in specific situations and, lastly, designs a methodology. These three phases of gender mainstreaming require the intervention of experts. From the beginning to the end, the whole process is run by experts.

In order to ensure that the gender perspective circulates as part of the life-blood of the reformed organisation of the United Nations following the Beijing Conference, Kofi Annan appointed a *Special Adviser on Gender Issues* at his Secretariat, whose office is called OSAGI. The mandate of this Special Adviser covers the whole of the United Nations system. OSAGI invites all United Nations agencies to use gender mainstreaming by organising high-level consultations, designing methodologies, and procuring resources and information for the whole system.

<sup>30</sup> In this process of “awareness-building” or “sensitisation” there is an affinity with the New Age movement. Awareness replaces divine Revelation with a Promethean liberation of man.

<sup>31</sup> UNICEF educates countries through *capacity-building* programmes. The United Nations begins with an appraisal of the state of children in a country, clarifying the role played by gender in education. The United Nations agencies and the government then jointly prepare a *Community Country Assessment*, which constitutes an important phase in the framing of a new cooperation programme. The United Nations subsequently creates a *Development Assistance Framework*.



OSAGI also monitors the progress being made in applying gender in every part of the Secretariat, the Regional Commissions and the United Nations offices worldwide.

In a letter addressed to the heads of the United Nations agencies in October 1997, Kofi Annan pointed out that the whole United Nations system was responsible for gender mainstreaming, particularly at the most senior levels of the agencies, departments, funds and commissions: the change had to take place within the United Nations from top to bottom.

Change is also being brought about through educational schemes run by experts for other United Nations officials. Many *gender focal points* or *gender units* have been created in various parts of the United Nations system to “help” the upper echelons to “take on their responsibilities”, to “enhance their skills”, sensitising them by educating the personnel from within. These units have been created by gender specialists and experts whose global norm-setting powers are unprecedented, and threaten the operation of democracy.

The United Nations also encourages governments to address the problem top-down, from the executive levels. Specialised United Nations organisations “help” governments to develop gender-sensitive policies – policies which, in reality, are the ones laid down by the experts, and by a feminist minority.

## THE ROLE OF EXPERTS

In the gender revolution, the real power is wielded by experts: a handful of men and women whose global rule-setting powers are so disproportionate that they become aberrant, particularly because they exercise their influence surreptitiously, indirectly, subject to no controls whatsoever. The United Nations requires the experts to be given direct access to senior civil servants and all the real decision-makers in every country, in order to be able to exert their influence without hindrance.

But how does the ideology of a few experts become a global cul-

ture? Because it is the case that the agents of this revolution intend to create a global gender culture. The strategy takes many different forms.

One of the models they use is the *pyramid* model, which consists of gradually transferring the rules and values of the experts to the heads of enterprises, schools, governments, bureaucracies, and to development agents, and so on, who then percolate it through to “the people”. Another model is the *horizontal* model, which sets out to educate the masses by reforming education, re-writing school textbooks and establishing an active partnership with the mass media. As we have seen, the United Nations model is to give experts the resources they need to train the heads of agencies and the senior civil servants in all the different parts of the organisation. The United Nations agencies then advise the governments of the Member States. Then the pilot NGOs, working from the bottom-up worldwide, educate other NGOs, “civil society” and local communities.

Once local communities have reneged on their traditions by taking up the values of the experts, the revolution is complete. Even though these experts are very often concealed in the institutional labyrinths, they play key roles as catalysts, advisers and assistants, providing intellectual and ethical leadership.

This is how things work, and this is how they will continue to work. The gender revolution is spreading like wildfire, albeit silently, without any form of public debate, and without anyone feeling the need to give it any democratic legitimacy. Very often, governments and populations unthinkingly accept the help of the experts in applying the conclusions of the various United Nations conferences, because the experts are the only people who know the implications of the rules they themselves have drawn up, and whose language remains obscure to the majority of the citizens.

In the West, the ideology of the experts has found fertile soil, the result of years of apostasy.

Let us now look at a few examples of the power these experts hold. Intergovernmental meetings at the United Nations are usually preceded by meetings of experts who lay down the main thrusts. For example, a

meeting of experts on the role of men and young people in creating gender equality preceded the meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women on this theme in 2004. The Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) at the United Nations Secretariat “helps” the same Commission by providing its “expertise” to define its policies and priorities. The DAW is considered to be a catalyst for pursuing the global feminist programme. It sets out to promote dialogue between international and national policymakers by promoting worldwide standards and norms, through sensitisation, and sharing “best practices”. The DAW also supports gender mainstreaming at the United Nations at every level – international, regional and national – and also provides advice to the developing countries.

UNDP recommends that states cooperate with groups of gender experts when drafting their national reports on the application of the Millennium Goals. It also encourages the publication of independent surveys to gather information for the drafting of the national reports which are subsequently revised by groups of experts. It is planning to create a team with the task of drafting the national reports on the implementation of the Millennium Goals, which will naturally focus on the priorities of the United Nations. Already, United Nations national teams are assisting teams in the Member States to draft their national reports on the application of the Millennium Goals.

On 19-21 January 2004 a seminar was held in Paris to provide capacity-building for the UNESCO national offices in respect of gender. This seminar trained the UNESCO offices personnel to better understand gender, teaching them to analyse gender and design a gender-led approach to rights.

## CONCLUSION

The vastness of the feminist revolution, its worldwide dimensions and the multiplicity of its ramifications and repercussions on society, as well as the radical nature of its programme, are quite amazing. The

United Nations' concepts have created a worldwide culture and have unified the world. This is something of which we are not yet fully aware.

This process of worldwide cultural transformation is not yet over. When it is, humanity will find itself faced with a fundamental choice: to enable God to resume all things in Christ through the Holy Spirit, or to decide to become part of a diabolical project designed to take Christ out of society and creation. This is a choice that every one of us has to make personally even now: whether to open ourselves up to that "all" which is Christ, or to seek a wholly and all-encompassing new "all" outside Christ.

I recently heard a Rabbi noting that our age is experiencing a return to the great issues of *Genesis*: relations between man and nature, relations between man and woman, their equality, freedom of choice, individual responsibility, the yearning for universality and fullness, as if contemporary humanity were, despite itself, being imperceptibly transported back to the fundamental and simple choice that Adam and Eve were given: to take a stand for or against God's love.

Christians are expected to evangelise world culture, which has been taken hostage, and to steer it in the direction of the civilisation of love. They are called to carry out discernment.

A Christian reading of the status of women in the world today reveals – like the gender agents – the inequalities and the situations that need to be changed, and the disorder created by local customs and traditions. But the Church also knows how to discern the signs of the work of the Holy Spirit within local traditions, and does not reject everything out of hand, as the agents of radical feminism do. For the latter annihilate not only the religious, but also the human, values which the Church, in her evangelising mission, intends to reawaken and enhance.

**III. SIMILARITIES, DIFFERENCES  
AND MUTUAL RELATIONS:  
THE CHURCH'S TEACHING**



# The identity of women and men according to the teaching of the Church

MARIA TERESA GARUTTI BELLENZIER

*Graduate in Education, and University Assistant,  
she has had various local and national responsibilities in Catholic Action  
and currently heads the "Progetto donna" cultural association*

A few introductory remarks are needed to explain the terms I shall be using, and the way I intend to approach the subject of this paper. It is a multifaceted subject, touching on every area of human experience, and must be examined, although in a necessarily summary manner, over a long historical timeframe.

My first consideration refers to the way the Church's teaching has unfolded. Although based on Revelation, it is expressed in historical cultural words and forms. It is an unchanging message, but one that must speak and be meaningful to people of every age whose features, potential, demands and expectations differ in every age. The theological formulation and the pastoral value of the message must therefore be taken together, because if it is intended to be doctrine, it has to have an audience and the capacity to educate the People of God.<sup>1</sup>

With respect to our subject, we shall see the nature and the

<sup>1</sup> In his address on the occasion of the presentation of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (23 April 1993), John Paul II spoke of the two processes needed for the proper interpretation of the Word of God: "a constant process of *actualization* [which] adapts the interpretation to the contemporary mentality and language" and a process of "inculturation according to the genius proper to each people" (*L'Osservatore Romano*, weekly edition, n. 17, 28 April 1993, 6). These ideas were taken up again and further developed in the document which states, among other things, that "...the interpretation of Scripture involves a work of sifting and setting aside; it stands in continuity with earlier exegetical traditions, many elements of which it preserves and makes its own; but in other matters it will go its own way, seeking to make further progress" (cf. PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, III, A, 3).

magnitude of the influence of an interpretation of the Word of God, for which today we have much more adequate exegetical instruments available, and the far-reaching changes that have affected the status of men and women, especially the latter.

The debate must therefore be approached in terms of this complex, but extremely dynamic and productive interplay of different factors, which is quite consistent with the nature of Revelation itself, which has been given to us by God in forms that are strictly bound up with history.

This Seminar is debating the identity of woman and man. The decision to consider both human realities together was an important one. Yet when looking at all the research that has been conducted into these two identities, it becomes clear that although a great deal has already been, and is still being, said about women, it always deals with how far the identity of women differs from the identity of men, which is never actually defined – except in terms of its functions – because man’s identity is taken as the yardstick. This is not only the case in the Church’s teaching, but is a typical feature of the whole of our culture and history.

We shall therefore be talking about women mainly in terms of the aspects that they share with men and which can shed light on their identity. We shall not be referring to many documents of the Magisterium dealing with women, because they deal with women in terms of other dimensions of their life.

#### THE IDENTITY OF WOMAN AND MAN IN GOD’S PLAN FOR CREATION

Any discussion of the identity of women and men from a Christian point of view must obviously begin with an interpretation of the first

Conversely, it criticises all forms of fundamentalism, which “for all their very laudable concern for total fidelity to the word of God, they proceed in fact along ways which will lead them far away from the true meaning of the biblical texts [...]. Addressing men and women, from the beginnings of the Old Testament onward, God made use of all the possibilities of human language, while at the same time accepting that His word be subject to the constraints caused by the limitations of this language” (*ibid.*, Conclusion).



three chapters of *Genesis*. That is to say, what was God's intention behind the creation of the human couple (that God acknowledged to be "very good")? How did God establish the relationship between the two? and how and to what extent did the Fall of our first parents modify the original plan? All the early interpretations of the Fathers of the Church, and until St Augustine, were based on these chapters, but more particularly on Paul's interpretation of them. A number of key-words can be identified in their reflections: *image and likeness* of God, *dominion* over creation, *fit helper*, *glory* and *fall*. The existence of two accounts of creation makes the interpretation even more complex, and explains the historical differences between them.

In the priestly account (*Gen* 1:26-31) the creation of the human being as male and female, in the image and likeness of God, is closely linked to their dominion over all other creatures.

In the Yahwist account (*Gen* 2:7; 15-24) God formed Adam from the dust of the ground, put him in the Garden of Eden and made him name all other living things; and it was only after noting that he had "no helper suitable for him" that God created woman, "called woman (*ishsha*) because out of the man (*ish'*) she was taken".

### *The traditional interpretation*

It is this second account (the first, chronologically speaking) which, until recent times, had influenced the formation of the dominant theological anthropology in the Church's teaching. Paul (*1 Cor* 11:7-10) explicitly states that man is made in the image and for the glory of God, while woman is made in the image of man, coming from him and being created for him. Some Fathers, referring to this text, therefore denied that woman was created in the image of God, and some accepted it only in spiritual terms, which ignored the sexual element. The image of God, in other words, referred to the rational and therefore nonsexual human soul, because sexual differentiation was considered to be limited to the bodily sphere.

The prevalent idea, however, was to deny the theomorphic nature of women, partly because the *image* was always linked to *dominion* over creation, which was unanimously considered to be the prerogative of the man. Paul was once again the main authority they relied on,<sup>2</sup> with a text that still forms part of the liturgy of the sacrament of matrimony, reiterating dutiful submission by the wife to the husband as her head just as Christ is the head of the Church.

The exegesis of the Fathers was also based on *1 Tim 2:11-15*, of which Paul's authorship was not in doubt at the time (as it is today).<sup>3</sup> Submissiveness was required of women because the woman had been created after the man, and above all because of her responsibility for the Fall. It was she who deceived him, and made him transgress, and the way for her to obtain redemption was via motherhood and living a holy life.

Which brings us to the question of the *Fall*, with Eve as the prototype of the moral weakness of women, and of seduction. For according to some Fathers, Adam sinned to please Eve, out of the affection he felt for her, in order not to leave her alone.<sup>4</sup> Others (such as St Ambrose) judged Eve's guilt to be less serious because she had been deceived by an angelic individual, whereas Adam broke the Divine command at the

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Eph 5:22-24*: "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church [...] As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands" (reiterated in *Col 3:18*).

<sup>3</sup> "Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty" (*1 Tim 2:11-15*).

One quotation that is often used to defend Paul from the charge of anti-feminism, *Gal 3:28* is "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus". But this can hardly be given a social normative value, because the same would apply to "neither slave nor free", and Paul does not object to the existence of slaves. His "neither male nor female" once again refers to the sphere of grace, of being "all one in Christ Jesus": and there, women's equality is never placed in doubt.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. DIDIMO, *Commento alla Genesi*, 57, 100, 234ff; 83-84, 196ff; AUGUSTINE, *De Genesi ad litteram*, XI, 42, 59; *De Civitate Dei*, XIX, 11, 2.

instigation of a being who was inferior to him (the woman). A means of redemption for women would come about through child-bearing.<sup>5</sup>

However, although Eve was held to have the primary responsibility for the Fall there was also a need to safeguard the superiority of man, and his active role in procreation. Both Augustine and, later on, Aquinas, said that if only the woman had transgressed, her sin would not have been transmitted to the whole of the human race. Adam's sin was to have obeyed the woman rather than making her obey him, consistent with the order of creation.<sup>6</sup> The woman was chosen by the tempter as its instrument because of her intellectual weakness.

And the sin – which was lust – was transmitted through the male seed in the act of procreation, in which the father alone (so people inevitably believed at the time) was the agent.

This, in broad terms, is the framework within which to interpret the Patristic tradition regarding the creation of man and woman.

As far as the Scholastics were concerned, and taking Aquinas as our example regarding the reason for the creation of woman according to the *Summa Theologiae*, the assistance that woman gives to man is solely to procreate “because any other function could be better assisted by another man”.<sup>7</sup> However, as a human being (*homo*) woman must also achieve conformity with the likeness of God, and therefore has an identical end or purpose to man's (*vir*), which will be fully accomplished in the Beatitude of glory. Her subordination to man in her earthly life is due to her nature as a member of the “second” sex, because due to her particular nature she is a defective and misbegotten male (*mas occasionatus*).

These were theological foundations of the Church's view of the male and female identity (which coincided with, and largely derived from the secular socio-cultural environment) which remained basically unchanged for centuries. This view was not expressed so much in explicit declarations of the Magisterium, but through the practice of

<sup>5</sup> Cf. AMBROSE, *De institutione virginis*, IV, 25-31.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. AUGUSTINE, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, II, 17, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 92, article 1; I, q. 98, 2 sed contra.

the Church as a whole, forever full of reservations and diffidence regarding women, while acknowledging and sincerely appreciating the gifts and exemplary testimony of life of so many women throughout the course of Christian history.

But this issue has explicitly been taken up again in recent times, undoubtedly driven by the far-reaching changes that have occurred in the status of women and the increasing awareness – on the part of men and women, inside and outside the Church – of the need to review the mindsets and stereotypes that history is now showing to be superseded and at all events anachronistic.

### *The catechesis of John Paul II*

In the Magisterium of recent popes, the question of women has been repeatedly addressed, but until the Pontificate of John Paul II they related mostly to problems regarding women's work outside the home, and their entry into social and political life. John Paul II, from his very first catecheses, focused specifically on that "principle" from which the identity of women and men derive.

In his catechesis at the Wednesday audiences between September 1979 and October 1980, while focusing on marriage and the family, he began specifically with the two accounts of creation, drawing a distinction between their features and their timing, pointing out the theological nature of the first, priestly, account. Even though man was closely linked to the visible world, the account did not speak of his similarity with the other creatures: "Man is not created according to a natural succession. The Creator seems to halt before calling him into existence, as if he was pondering within himself to make a decision: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...' (*Gen 1:26*)".<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Analysis of the Biblical Account of Creation*, general audience of September 12, 1979, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body. Human Love in the Divine Plan*, (Boston: Pauline Books Media, 1997), 28.

The second account is above all subjective and psychological in character. “In a certain manner, [it is] the most ancient description and record of man’s self-knowledge. Together with the third chapter it is the first testimony of human conscience”.<sup>9</sup>

The Pope then dwelt at length on the question of the solitude of created man, according to the Yahwist account. This appears to be the basic anthropological problem, proceeding, not only chronologically but also “from Man’s very nature”, the fact that the human creature is either male or female. The man found himself before God, in search of a subjective definition of himself: his loneliness expressed what he *was not*. He was alone, in that he was different from all other living beings.<sup>10</sup> He would emerge from his solitude with the creation of the woman, which took place while Adam was in a deep sleep.

“The analogy of sleep indicates here [...] a specific return to non-being... to the moment preceding the creation, that through God’s creative initiative, solitary *man* may emerge from it again in his double unity as male and female”.<sup>11</sup>

“In this way, the meaning of man’s original unity, through masculinity and femininity, is expressed as an overcoming of the frontier of solitude” and hence “the discovery of an adequate relationship *to* the person, and therefore as an opening and expectation of a *communion of persons*”.

It is in the communion of persons that man becomes the image of God. In this way, “the second narrative could also be a preparation for understanding the Trinitarian concept of the *image of God*”.<sup>12</sup>

As this shows, the Pope’s interpretation of this account differs

<sup>9</sup> Id., *The Second Account of Creation: the Subjective Definition of Man*, general audience of September 19, 1979, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body*, *op. cit.*, 30.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Id., *The Meaning of Man’s Original Solitude*, general audience of October 10, 1979, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body*, *op. cit.*, 36-37.

<sup>11</sup> Id., *The Original Unity of Man and Woman*, general audience of November 7, 1979, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body*, *op. cit.*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Id., *By the Communion of Persons Man Becomes the Image of God*, general audience of November 14, 1979, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body*, *op. cit.*, 45-46.

considerably from the arguments used across the centuries to prove male superiority and female subordination, based on the creation of the woman from the rib of the man. Indeed, it was precisely the fact that Adam recognised Eve to be “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” that emphasised their homogeneity, which while being somatic in character, namely, relating to the body, relates to the whole of their being. “The presence of the feminine element, alongside the male element and together with it, signifies an enrichment for man in the whole perspective of his history, including the history of salvation”.<sup>13</sup>

But even these comments by John Paul II on the original fall of the human couple say nothing whatsoever about the issue of their respective responsibilities. But they do address the shame that they both felt before God, finding themselves naked. In the state of innocence preceding the fall, nakedness was not a manifestation that something was lacking, but “represented full acceptance of the body in all its human and therefore personal truth”. But with sin “man loses, in a way, the original certainty of the image of God expressed in his body”<sup>14</sup> and this creates what is almost a division in the original spiritual and somatic unity of the man “especially in what determines its sexuality and is directly connected with the call to that unity in which man and woman ‘become one flesh’ (*Gen 2:24*)”.<sup>15</sup>

The sense of shame at their nakedness was mutual, signifying that their capacity for full mutual communion was at an end: the man and the woman were therefore divided, or even placed in opposition to each other by their masculinity and femininity.

The adjective, “*fitting*”, which is normally used in most English translations to indicate the woman as the man’s partner and helpmate, reveals the ambiguity. The Hebrew term *ke-negddo* more accurately

<sup>13</sup> ID., *In the First Chapter of Genesis Marriage Is One and Indissoluble*, general audience of November 21, 1979, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body*, *op. cit.*, 49.

<sup>14</sup> ID., *The Real Significance of Original Nakedness*, general audience of May 14, 1980, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body*, *op. cit.*, 113.

<sup>15</sup> ID., *A Fundamental Disquiet in All Human Existence*, general audience of May 28, 1980, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body*, *op. cit.*, 116.

expresses it, meaning standing “before him”, and even to possibly standing against him.

The question of the biblical *beginning* relating to man and woman was taken up by John Paul II in part III of his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, where we find a series of statements that update the traditional views, distancing himself from them often to a remarkable degree. There, he stated (as many Fathers and Doctors of the Church had affirmed, but without distinction of status or level) that “both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God’s image”. Furthermore, (and it is here that the difference becomes evident), “The Creator entrusts dominion over the earth to the human race, to all persons, to all men and women, who derive their dignity and vocation from the common ‘beginning’”.<sup>16</sup>

Man can exist only as a *unity of the two*, and hence in relation to another human person. This is a reciprocal relationship. Men and women “are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life”.<sup>17</sup> John Paul II therefore takes up and reaffirms this interpretation of the human couple as being made in the *image* of God, not so much in terms of the rational and spiritual component of the human being, but rather because of their fundamental and radical need for a relationship, just as the relationship between the Divine Persons constitutes the essence of the mystery of the Trinity.

“*God too is* in some measure ‘like man’, and precisely because of this likeness, he can be humanly known. At the same time [...] the ‘non-likeness’ which separates the whole of creation from the Creator is *still more essentially true* [such that] God does not cease to be [...] the ‘totally Other’”.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Id.*, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 6.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* no. 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* no. 8.

### *The current teaching*

By examining the keywords used in the theological debate and the Magisterium regarding the male and female identity in God's plan for creation, we have a clearer picture of the developments that have occurred, particularly with John Paul II, whose thinking has been fuelled by all the theological developments that emerged largely in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

These developments from the earlier tradition should not be put down to an uncritical adjustment to contemporary culture and sensitivities, but to a total and absolute fidelity to Revelation, which is now more thoroughly understood, because the Holy Spirit also reveals God's plans through human awareness and the events of history. This is the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes*<sup>19</sup> and this was the insight of John XXIII when speaking of the emergence of the new "awareness of women" as a "sign of the times".<sup>20</sup>

This basically sums up present-day Church teaching.

With regard to *the image*: men and women are both created in the image of God, because this image consists precisely in their radical capacity/duty to be in a relationship, like the God-Trinitarian relationship.

With regard to *dominion* over creation: God entrusted this dominion to both genders.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> "The People of God motivated by this faith, labours to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age". SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church on the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, no.11). And again, "It is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage" (*ibid.* no. 44).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. JOHN XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris*, no. 41: "Women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons".

<sup>21</sup> "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (*Gen* 1:28).



With regard to woman's *fitness to be the man's helper*: the idea that a woman is subordinate to man, such that man was created merely for instrumental purposes, has been superseded. The now frequent use of the literal translation of the adjective ("as before him") shows the equality between the two: they are placed one before the other, not one below the other. It is due to this status of equality that both of them are the *glory* of God.

Lastly, with regard to the original *Fall*, both have equal responsibility, without any excuse for Adam. This excludes the view of woman as the source of deception and temptation.

John Paul II has no hesitation in declaring the teaching of the Fathers and the Doctors and the Magisterium until the time of Pius XII to be *ancient*. But even John XXIII had already relegated the traditional teaching to be among the *outdated opinions*.

## SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE

Closely bound up in the first point is considering the human couple from the point of view of sexuality, conjugal union and procreation. Many elements from the traditional approach linked to this subject have already been discussed in the previous section, and will only be briefly referred to here.

In that tradition, sexuality was considered solely from the functional point of view, as a means of responding to the divine command to "grow and multiply". There were even some Fathers, and primarily Tertullian, who considered marriage, and hence the sexual union between the man and the woman, to be a concession made to the man who had fallen from his original state of perfection, as a remedy for the lust which was already rooted in his nature. Until Vatican II, the secondary purpose of marriage, after the primary purpose of procreation, was as the "*remedium concupiscentiae*".

A philosophical view, largely borrowed from Plato, drove this negative, or at least highly suspicious, approach to sexuality, which set

up the physical and the spiritual components of the human being in sharp contrast to each other, and eventually supplanted the much more unitary biblical view. The negative repercussions of this dichotomous view were much more damaging to women. For her physiology, her monthly cycles, pregnancy, birth and breast-feeding, quite clearly placed woman in the sphere of corporeity. And so long as the average lifespan of women coincided with her fertility life, it was an approach that appeared to be more or less self-evident.

The words “in pain you shall bring forth children” when God cast the woman from the Garden of Eden therefore seemed to be the logical consequence of a sin which was the fruit of lust, and which could only be redeemed by painful childbirth. For the man, on the other hand, the punishment was the “toil” of working the land.

Ambrose took a less negative view of marriage, and the status of the woman in marriage. Even though he was a fervent advocate of the ascetic ideal, he was careful not only to safeguard the intrinsically positive nature of the practice of marriage, but also the complementary union of both members of the couple. But even Ambrose considered that Eve (the woman) could only be saved by bearing children, one of whom was Christ.

The devaluation of sex was also due to the prevalence of a monkish spirituality, particularly after the 4<sup>th</sup> century, which for a long time considered the state of matrimony to be of lesser spiritual value than consecrated virginity.

### *The reappraisal of sexuality*

The words used by the Second Vatican Council regarding sexual relations in marriage were therefore a great innovation, describing them as “noble and worthy”.<sup>22</sup> It even went so far as to speak of “a joyful and

<sup>22</sup> “[Conjugal] love is uniquely expressed and perfected through the appropriate enterprise of matrimony. The actions within marriage by which the couple are united intimately and chastely are noble and worthy ones. Expressed in a manner which is truly human, these actions promote that mutual self-giving by which spouses enrich each other with a joyful

a ready will” regarding sexual pleasure, whereas sex had always previously been viewed in terms of guilt, and even demonised.

In his catechesis at the Wednesday Audiences cited above, John Paul II developed the theme of the “nuptial meaning” of the human body at great length, stating that the human body “expresses the person in his ontological and existential concreteness, which is something more than the individual. Therefore the body expresses the personal human *self*, which derives its exterior perception from within”.<sup>23</sup> In its masculinity and femininity, the body “manifests the reciprocity and communion of persons [...] by means of the gift as the fundamental characteristic of personal existence”.<sup>24</sup> Sex has therefore entered the theology of the body whose original significance and meaning needs exploring. But even though after the fall, “the discovery of the nuptial meaning of the body will cease to be for them a simple reality of revelation and grace. However, this meaning will remain as a commitment given to man by the ethos of the gift, inscribed in the depths of the human heart, as a distant echo of original innocence”.<sup>25</sup>

The approach heralded in by the Second Vatican Council and the teaching of John Paul II have also influenced other documents of the Magisterium. For example, *Educational Guidance in Human Love*, of the Congregation for Catholic Education, (1983) and *Human Sexuality: Truth and Meaning*, of the Pontifical Council for the Family (1995).

The first document recalls the positive understanding of current educational theory regarding sexuality, and sets out the purpose of education which must not only promote “accepting sex as part of the

and a ready will” (SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 49).

<sup>23</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *The Fullness of Interpersonal Communication*, general audience of December 19, 1979, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body*, *op. cit.*, 56.

<sup>24</sup> ID., *The Nuptial Meaning of the Body*, general audience of January 9, 1980, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body*, *op. cit.*, 61-62.

<sup>25</sup> ID., *Man Enters the World as a Subject of Truth and Love*, general audience of February 20, 1980, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body*, *op. cit.*, 75.

totality of human values, but also seeing it as giving a possibility for ‘offering’, that is, a capacity for giving pure love, altruistic love”.<sup>26</sup> The second document also draws on similar considerations.<sup>27</sup>

Sexuality is therefore clearly positive, provided that it is performed within conjugal love and is never separated from the possibility of procreation. The rules of conduct have therefore remained unchanged across the ages: indissoluble conjugal union, the prohibition of all forms of contraception, and *a fortiori* of abortion, the condemnation of homosexuality if accompanied by sexual activity, and of any sexual activity whatsoever outside marriage.

### *The subordination of women*

Returning to the traditional view of marriage, the position of the woman has always been distinctly subordinate to that of the man, not only as a consequence of sin but also by the very constitution of the family which, being a society, necessarily requires a hierarchical ordering of relations.<sup>28</sup>

Until modern times, this view of relations between the husband and wife was by no means a problem. But even in the writings of Paul, bearing in mind the legal and social status of women in his time, there are also signs of a number of innovative elements in comparison with the traditional view, such as when he recommends that husbands love their

<sup>26</sup> CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Educational Guidance in Human Love*, no. 36.

<sup>27</sup> “Human love hence embraces the body, and the body also expresses spiritual love. The use of sexuality as physical giving has its own truth and reaches its full meaning when it expresses the personal giving of man and woman even unto death” (PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE FAMILY, *Human Sexuality: Truth and Meaning*, no. 3).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 92, article 1, ad 2: “Subjection is twofold. One is servile and began after sin. There is another kind of subjection whereby the superior makes use of his subjects for their own benefit and good; and this kind of subjection existed even before sin, and by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates”.

wives “as Christ has loved the Church”, or when he says that “the man who loves his wife loves himself”.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, referring to the words of Christ regarding marriage, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder” (*Mk* 10:9) the Church, from the beginning, has always insisted on the indissoluble unity of marriage. Translated into the practice of each age, this has provided a form of protection for women who were otherwise exposed to repudiation and divorce.

More importantly still, the Church has always maintained the need for both spouses to give their free consent to marriage. Although for centuries customary practice ignored this (arranged marriages continued until quite recent times) this did not take away the value of the Church’s precept.

The present focus of the Magisterium on marriage has been strongly driven by the social and cultural changes brought about by modernity, and in particular by the Industrial Revolution. It led to huge numbers of women going out to work instead of being free merely to do handicraft and agricultural work in the home. This certainly had many negative repercussions, not only because of the precarious conditions under which they worked outside the home, but also because it was easy to consider this to be the first step towards prostitution. In the case of married women, there was also the danger of suffering moral and emotional harm, as a result of being uprooted from their traditional environment, which often meant having to leave the children to their own devices in the absence of care. The damage to the family was evident: the instability of the marriage bonds, higher divorce rates, a declining birth rate, and generational crises with delinquent and rebellious children.

<sup>29</sup> “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her [...] husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself” (*Eph* 5:25-28). And again, “For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does. Do not refuse one another except perhaps by agreement for a season, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, lest Satan tempt you through lack of self-control” (*1 Cor* 7:4-5).

The Magisterium therefore stepped in to reiterate the Christian vision of marriage, obviously emphasising its indissoluble unity, and emphasising two other fundamental aspects: the authority given to the husband as the head of the family, and procreation as the primary end of the institution of marriage. In 1880, Leo XIII stated in *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae*, that the wife “must be subject to her husband and obey him; not, indeed, as a servant, but as a companion”.<sup>30</sup> The same Pope, in *Rerum Novarum* (1891) lamented the fact that women worked outside the home because “woman is by nature fitted for home-work, and it is that which is best adapted at once to preserve her modesty and to promote the good bringing up of children and the well-being of the family”.<sup>31</sup>

And in *Casti Connubi*, Pius XI (1930) reiterated the authority of the husband over the wife and their children, while making it clear that “This subjection, however, does not deny or take away the liberty which fully belongs to the woman... nor does it bid her obey her husband’s every request... or put her on a level with those persons who in law are called minors”.<sup>32</sup>

Pius XII clarified the fact that, although when freely giving their mutual consent to the marriage they do so under conditions of “perfect equality”, once the couple have founded the family it requires a head.<sup>33</sup>

### *Equal dignity*

Forty years later, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, instead of speaking of the subordination of women, John Paul II affirmed “the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men”.

<sup>30</sup> LEO XIII (1878-1903), Encyclical *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae* of 10/2/1880, no. 11.

<sup>31</sup> ID., Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, no. 42.

<sup>32</sup> PIUS XI (1922-1939), Encyclical *Casti Connubi*, no. 27.

<sup>33</sup> PIUS XII, addressing married couples on 10 September 1941, added: “Christian wives and mothers never be taken off guard by the desire to usurp the sceptre in the family...”.

He spoke of the natural complementarity between women and men, and called on men to live their gift and role as husbands and fathers.<sup>34</sup>

John Paul II also interpreted the fundamental text which powerfully emphasises the submission of wives to their husbands, *Ephesians* 5:22, in a way that is much more consistent with contemporary sensitivities (as well as Italian legislation, as evidenced from Family law). In *Mulieris Dignitatem* he sees no contradiction between Paul's exhortation to husbands to love their wives and his statement that the wives must be submissive to their husbands. He interpreted this indication to be "mutual subjection out of reverence for Christ".<sup>35</sup>

John Paul II then touches on the symbolic meaning of spousal love as image of Christ's love for the Church and, even prior to that, the love of the Creator for his creatures. It is this approach which enabled him to offer definitions of masculinity and femininity, even though they do not sound entirely consistent. For while in various parts of *Mulieris Dignitatem* he says that Christ's divine love is the love of the Bridegroom, as the model of all human life, and "men's love in particular"<sup>36</sup> and that therefore "the Bride (the Church) is loved: it is she who receives love, in order to love in return",<sup>37</sup> it is above all to women that

<sup>34</sup> "It is important to underline the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men. This equality is realised in a unique manner in that reciprocal self-giving by each one to the other and by both to the children which is proper to marriage and the family" (JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 19). "This conjugal communion sinks its roots in the natural complementarity that exists between man and woman, and is nurtured through the personal willingness of the spouses to share their entire life-project" (*ibid.*, no. 22). "Within the conjugal and family communion-community, the man is called upon to live his gift and role as husband and father" (*ibid.*, no. 25).

<sup>35</sup> "The author knows that this way of speaking, so profoundly rooted in the customs and religious tradition of the time, is to be understood and carried out in a new way: as a 'mutual subjection out of reverence for Christ'. This is especially true because the husband is called the 'head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church; he is so in order to give 'himself up for her' [...]. However, whereas in the relationship between Christ and the Church the subjection is only on the part of the Church, in the relationship between husband and wife the 'subjection' is not one-sided but mutual" (JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 24).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, no. 25.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 29.

he refers this dimension of love, as both a gift and a vocation,<sup>38</sup> which confers upon it that “sensitivity for what is essentially human” which is “*characteristic of their femininity*”.

To conclude this point, I think it is worthwhile reiterating the reference to the Pope’s powerful appeal for the awareness that in marriage there is mutual “subjection of the spouses out of reverence for Christ, and not just that of the wife to the husband”.<sup>39</sup>

The Magisterium of the Church regarding the family is very wide-ranging and nuanced, and has been set out in Papal documents, and documents published by Synods, Bishops’ Conferences, individual bishops, Congregations and Vatican Commissions.<sup>40</sup> In this paper, we have merely considered the aspects relating to the relationship between man and woman, where we are able to identify the specific features of the identity of each.

<sup>38</sup> “Woman can only find herself by giving love to others... God therefore entrusts the human being to women in a special way... and this particular way determines their vocation” (*ibid.*, no. 30).

<sup>39</sup> This awareness “must gradually establish itself in hearts, consciences, behaviour and customs. This is a call which from that time onwards, does not cease to challenge succeeding generations; it is a call which people have to accept ever anew. Saint Paul not only wrote: ‘In Christ Jesus... there is no more man or woman’, but also wrote: ‘There is no more slave or freeman’. Yet how many generations were needed for such a principle to be realised in the history of humanity through the abolition of slavery!” (*ibid.*, no. 24).

<sup>40</sup> One particularly important document is the *Charter of the Rights of the Family* (1983), presented by the Holy See as a text that would receive the support of all those who are concerned with the good of the family and society. It refers to the common values of all humanity. Article 2 in particular states that “Marriage cannot be contracted except by free and full consent duly expressed by the spouses. [...] The spouses, in the natural complementarity which exists between man and woman, enjoy the same dignity and equal rights regarding the marriage”.

Equally interesting are the statements of the then-Archbishop of Munich, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, commenting on the Synod on the Family. He wrote, “Women should be given access to public office in the same way as it is given to men, but society must be organised in such a way that the double income of the man and woman does not become a constraint, but that women must be allowed, in total freedom, to opt for the profession of motherhood” (unofficial translation of J. RATZINGER, Pastoral Letter *Una valutazione globale del sinodo sulla famiglia*, in “Il Regno-Documenti” 5/1981, 165).



## THE PRESENCE AND THE ROLES OF MEN AND WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

Another area in which relations between women and men can be examined is in the life of the Christian communities. As far as the status of men is concerned, the situation appears to be fairly clear: Jesus chose twelve men as his Apostles, giving them the task of announcing the Gospel, celebrating the memorial of his death and resurrection, and remitting sins, even though among Jesus' followers there were also many women, sometimes of quite high social standing, and it was often the women who played the leading part in particularly significant episodes and actions in his life. Suffice it to recall the news of his resurrection, which was entrusted to Mary Magdalene and the other women.

### *In the early Church*

The early Church therefore had no problem with women cooperating in various ways (providing hospitality, financial support, animating the communities, and performing liturgical duties) in spreading the Gospel. The list that can be drawn up based on the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul is quite long. But what is unusual is that this state of affairs, which has always been clearly documented in the New Testament, has only recently been rediscovered and reappraised, confirming that the Word of God must always be listened to and interpreted with the support of the ethical and spiritual awareness of any given moment in history.

In the apostolic letters attributed to Paul there is a tendency to delimit the tasks of women in the community, by referring more or less explicitly to their subordinate status (covering their head, remaining silent in the assembly) and to the negative features of femininity.

The first heretical movements in which women often held prominent positions drove the Church increasingly to restrict and exclude women from positions of responsibility within the Church.

But two typical phenomena of the early centuries of Christianity are important for an understanding of the identity of women: martyrdom and the rise of female monasticism.

During the Christian persecutions, the number of women martyrs was always high, and the courage to which they bore witness to the faith could never be doubted. Yet their courage was often defined as *virile*, and the expression “*becoming manly*” was often used, because it was only by superseding and moving beyond the congenital weakness of womanhood that they could withstand such terrible trials and, more generally, find salvation.<sup>41</sup> In other words, femininity was something that had, to some extent, to be denied, in order to reach the path of spiritual perfection. This was consistent with the view, that has been referred to extensively above, of equality between men and women at the level of grace and the supernatural life alone.<sup>42</sup>

### *The consecrated religious life*

A similar thing occurred with regard to the admission of women to the consecrated religious life. With the rise of monasticism, initially as hermits and then as cenobites, women soon began to aspire to join the

<sup>41</sup> The best known text in this regard is *loghion* 114 of the apocryphal gospel of Thomas, “Simon Peter said to them, ‘Make Mary leave us, for females do not deserve life’. And Jesus said, ‘See, I will draw her to me, to make her male so that she, too, may become a living spirit resembling us males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of Heaven’”.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. also *1 Pt* 3:7, “Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honour on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life, in order that your prayers may not be hindered”. The weakness of women was not always and only viewed as being inferiority, but as a feature that calls for protection and care by men. This, not necessarily negative, view was to have a positive influence on Christian Roman law under which women, while always being excluded from *virilia officia* (and above all this meant the ministerial priesthood), were increasingly more frequently considered in terms of their intrinsic value as persons, and protected in terms of the real needs that their nature entailed.

movement, even cross-dressing as men, according to a number of accounts, which while legendary nevertheless contain some element of historical truth, also because episodes of this kind were to occur in later ages.

Eventually this possibility was granted to them, and was to have a revolutionary effect in historical and social terms. For women were offered an alternative to the only social role to which they were otherwise destined, namely, the role of a wife and mother, or at all events to serve the sexual and social demands of a man. From then onwards, the nuns or sisters were given, and continue to have to this day, a prominent place and considerable weight in the Church's life, and not only in her ecclesial life. For it is impossible to write a history of women in the Western world without considering the saintly, mystical, literary, reformist, artistic, intellectual women who counselled the powerful, and embarked on charitable and educational enterprises, and so much more.

But also in relations with men, the life of consecrated women says much about the meaning of true equality, of productive cooperation, and a precious exchange of charisms. One only has to think of so many famous couples, such as Benedict and Scholastica, Francis and Clare, the intellectual circle in Rome around Jerome, and the relationship between von Speyr and von Balthasar. It is also interesting to recall the phenomenon of double monasteries (with a male branch and a female branch) sometimes headed by the Abbess, signifying Jesus' obedience to his mother. Significant in this regard are the judicial powers vested in the abbesses, who enjoyed the equivalent status of a bishop for centuries, and underwent an official investiture.

So we can see that it was not always and not in every sphere that the stereotype of female weakness (which ran through all the cultures prior to and contemporary with Christianity) belittled the value of women. Yet inevitably, particularly by reference to the biblical account of original sin, the weakness of woman was often extended from the physical and psychological to the moral plane, considering women to be much weaker when faced with temptation, and sometimes

temptresses themselves. Even John XXIII made a reference to the “natural frailty of women”.<sup>43</sup>

The rise of female monasticism led to the subsequent development of the whole issue of virginity, in this case as a permanent decision for life, in parallel with the male virginity to which the monks were vowed. But the consideration of virginity involves the interplay of many elements of high spirituality on the one hand, and cultural and social conditioning on the other. In many cultures, female virginity is held up as a value to be protected, sometimes even cruelly so, but always from the point of view of man’s domination over woman. In other words, the woman must remain a virgin until marriage, so that the husband can claim exclusive rights over her body. This idea of virginity therefore takes on a moral value, such that any attack on its integrity is deemed to be a grave sin, consistently with a hatred of sexuality which was dominant for so long. But for a man, even though sexual acts performed outside marriage were also deemed sinful, there was absolutely no social sanction or penalty attached to them (giving rise to the double moral standards that prevailed for so long).

Consecrated virginity, however, acquires a spiritual value, and reference to Mary had a great influence in this regard, as the epitome of virginity itself.<sup>44</sup> As both spouse and mother, Mary became the model of woman *par excellence*, at least until Paul VI made it clear in *Marialis Cultus* (1974) that Mary “has always been proposed to the faithful by the Church as an example to be imitated, not precisely in the type of

<sup>43</sup> JOHN XXIII, *The Apostolate of Women in the Family and the Workplace*, address to the 10<sup>th</sup> National Congress of Centro Italiano Femminile, [unofficial translation] in: *Discorsi, messaggi, colloqui del Santo Padre Giovanni XXIII*, Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1960-61, 69.

<sup>44</sup> The proclamation of the virginal conception of Jesus in Mary’s womb was due to the need to defend the divinity of Christ, who was born without any active human intervention, against the first Christological heresies (comparing the function of the woman with the function of soil in which the male seed germinates). But with time, and taking into account the interplay of so many meanings attached to female virginity, this aspect of Mary became paramount and created that recurrent and enduring view of chastity to be held up as the ideal, and even as a matter of duty, above all and *de facto* reserved exclusively for women.

life she led, and much less for the socio-cultural background in which she lived, but for the way in which, in her own particular life, she fully and responsibly accepted the will of God".<sup>45</sup> She is therefore the model for all believers, and not only for women. Obviously this is a question that deserves much more detailed examination.

### *The question of ministries*

On the question of Church ministries open to women, the debate is heated. There have been various and clashing interpretations of the word *Diakonia* attributed in many cases to women in the Acts of the Apostles and in Paul. And yet recurrent requests to review the possibility of conferring the diaconate on women have not so far found the ear of the official Magisterium.<sup>46</sup> The question of the ministerial priesthood, from which women have always been excluded, is much clearer. The main argument used against those wishing to change this uninterrupted prohibition is to distinguish between the sociological reasoning (based on the fact that women are now present in every area of social life) and the theological reasoning, which alone is valid in this regard. But it is precisely theological reasoning that fails to demolish the recurrent objections.

<sup>45</sup> PAUL VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, no. 35.

<sup>46</sup> The most recent documents (1989) on the theme of the diaconate, *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons*, of the Congregation for Catholic Education, and *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons* of the Congregation for the Clergy, make no mention of women at all, except indirectly. For deacons may be married already, but if they are not, they may not marry after ordination or remarry if they are subsequently widowed. And if they are already married, the wife is expected "to play their role with joy and discretion [...] they should be kept duly informed of their husband's activities, while avoiding any undue interference", and the deacon and his wife should practise "a certain continence". The officials of both Vatican Congregations have since made it clear that the theology of the diaconate must be comprehensively developed in terms of the Sacrament of Orders, and that the Holy See is not therefore envisaging, for the time being, the question of the female diaconate in order not to change a "holy tradition".

This question has only risen today, because it was unthinkable so long as the social status of women not only entailed their routine exclusion from the priesthood but denied them so many other civil, cultural and social rights and opportunities.

On 15 October 1976 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a declaration *Inter Insignores*, reiterating the fact that the ministerial priesthood is, and must remain, reserved only to men, because the priest operates *in persona Christi*, and Christ was incarnated as a male. Other arguments are that Jesus chose twelve men as his Apostles and “The practice of the Church conferring priestly ordination only on men has been and is still observed because it is considered to conform to God’s plan for his Church”. Paul VI used these arguments when women were being admitted to priestly ordination in the Anglican Church.<sup>47</sup>

On 22 May 1994, John Paul II signed the Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. In it, he took up and reiterated the teaching of Paul VI on the subject, and also cited what he himself had said in *Mulieris Dignitatem*.<sup>48</sup> “The fact that the Blessed Virgin Mary [...] received neither the mission proper to the Apostles nor the ministerial priesthood, clearly shows that the non-admission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity, and nor can it be construed as discrimination against them. Rather, it is to be seen as the faithful observance of a plan to be ascribed to the wisdom of the Lord of the universe. The presence and the role of women in the life and mission of the Church remain absolutely necessary and irreplaceable”.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> PAUL VI, *Rescript to the letter of His Grace, the Most Reverend Dr. F.D. Cogan, Archbishop of Canterbury, on the priestly ministry of women*, 30 November 1975, “Acta Apostolicae Sedis” 68 (1976), 599-600.

<sup>48</sup> “In calling only men as his Apostles, Christ acted in a completely free and sovereign manner. In doing so, he exercised the same freedom with which, in all his behaviour, he emphasised the dignity and the vocation of women, without conforming to the prevailing customs and to the traditions sanctioned by the legislation of the time” (JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 26).

<sup>49</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, no. 3.

And he concludes a letter saying that “I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful”.<sup>50</sup>

The papal text was accompanied by a Note of presentation by Cardinal Ratzinger in which he illustrated the reasons for the document and its doctrinal foundations on the nature of the ministerial priesthood, whose essence is not that of a decision-making power, and cannot be considered a form of social organisation, but a sacrament, in the sense that it is a reality belonging to the sphere of the mystery and the free and unfathomable will of God, who demands obedience.<sup>51</sup>

### *Other ecclesial tasks*

But as far as all the other ecclesial tasks and roles are concerned, the present Magisterium has considerably broadened the scope for women. In 1975, the document of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, *The Role of Woman in Evangelisation*, not only gave women the possibility to teach theology at University level<sup>52</sup> as well as to give

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 4.

<sup>51</sup> The theological arguments supporting the position of the Magisterium are certainly influenced by the work of the Swiss theologian von Balthasar, who maintains that in the work of redemption wrought by the God-man, Jesus Christ, when the emphasis is placed on the term ‘God’, Christ’s sacrifice is unique and cannot be repeated or completed. When the emphasis is placed on the term ‘man’, which is the only aspect of the sacrifice that can be renewed and re-presented, this can only be brought about by a man. But all baptised Christians share in the common, interior, priesthood of which the ministerial priesthood has a fully functional relationship.

Von Balthasar was the first to use the expression, that was also taken up by John Paul II, of a *Petrine* face and a *Marian* face of the Church, to indicate the institutional aspect and the charismatic and prophetic aspect of the Church, emphasising the essential nature and equal importance of both. The former is more consistent with man, and the latter with woman.

<sup>52</sup> The admission of women to theological studies in Pontifical faculties dates back to 1964, giving rise to an increasing scientific commitment to theology by women. This is a particularly important and meaningful phenomenon in relation to the issue that we are discussing here.

retreats, preside at paraliturgical celebrations, reserve and distribute the consecrated host, baptise and celebrate the sacrament of matrimony, and not purely to deputise because of a shortage of men to do it.

In *Christifideles Laici* the Pope recommended that women should participate in pastoral councils, synods and certain councils “without discrimination... and also in consultation and the process of coming to decisions”. They were also admitted to take part “in the preparation of pastoral and missionary documents and ought to be recognised as cooperators in the mission of the church in the family, in professional life and in the civil community”.<sup>53</sup>

In his address at the Angelus on 3 September 1995, the Pope listed the opportunities for the presence of lay people and women: teaching theology, permitted forms of liturgical ministry including serving at the altar, sitting on pastoral councils, synods, certain councils and various ecclesiastical institutions, ecclesiastical courts and curias, and taking part in many pastoral activities and new ways of helping to run parishes where there is a shortage of clergy, excluding the performance of priestly duties.

Furthermore, “above all the *acknowledgment in theory* of the active and responsible presence of woman in the Church *must be realised in practice*”.<sup>54</sup> John Paul II repeated this recommendation on various occasions, particularly in 1995 when he stepped up the number of speeches on women in view of the United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing.<sup>55</sup>

It is also significant that in *Christifideles Laici*, as in other documents, particularly *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Pope referred to the need for “a more penetrating and accurate consideration of the

<sup>53</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, no. 51.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> These began with his message for World Peace Day (1 January 1995) on the theme *Women: Teachers of Peace*, followed by his *Letter to Priests* on Holy Thursday, and the main document, the *Letter to Women* on 29 June 1995. See also his messages to Mrs Mongella, the Secretary General of the Beijing Conference, and his short addresses at the Angelus between 16 July and 3 September that same year.



*anthropological foundation for masculinity and femininity* with the intent of clarifying woman's personal identity in relation to man, that is, a diversity yet mutual complementarity, not only as it concerns roles to be held and functions to be performed, but also, and more deeply, as it concerns her make-up and meaning as a person".<sup>56</sup>

The importance of this approach emerges more clearly when one considers that throughout history the roles of women (that is to say, the roles concerning their *nature*) have always been identified with rules that are *de facto* subordinate to the will, and the management, of men. To say today that it is also necessary to reflect on the male condition and identity is certainly new, but it is still a long way from being done.<sup>57</sup>

It is therefore extremely appropriate to convene a seminar, such as this, to place the relationship between man and woman on the agenda. It might seem superfluous or pleonastic, because since the creation of the world both sexes have always been mutually related. But perhaps it is only today that, with a new awareness and with appropriate tools, we are now in a position to research this founding core of human history, identifying all its problematic aspects, and denouncing the shortcomings, the deviations and delays that are hampering God's plan for the human couple.

One example of the need for and, at the same time, the difficulties raised by this exercise is the experiment conducted in the Milan diocese where Cardinal Martini set up an Observatory on the man-woman relationship. The purpose of this Observatory is to adopt and apply this relationship as a guiding idea and criterion for assessing educational, pastoral and information programmes. It is made up of an equal

<sup>56</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, no. 50.

<sup>57</sup> It is true that there are signs of an awareness of the problem. Cf. A. DANESE – G.P. DI NICOLA, *Il maschile e la teologia*, Bologna, Ed. Dehoniane, 1999, which comprises the papers on this subject delivered at the conference promoted by Centro Ricerche Personaliste, Teramo, in 1998. See also *Che differenza c'è?* by C. MILITELLO, Torino, SEI, 1996. These are contributions from the people of God, which the Magisterium must take into account, because they are a response to the repeated calls made to lay Christians to cooperate in order to present the originality of the Gospel ever more accurately and clearly.

number of men and women in various areas of expertise, and two years after its establishment it published its first report on the work begun in 1990.<sup>58</sup> The main difficulties encountered include the huge legacy of stereotypes and commonplaces that still exist today, the need to carefully explain difference and unity in the human person, the lack of a male code for the question of relations, which has hitherto been relegated to the care of the female sphere. These findings strengthened the conviction that there was a need to continue the work of the Observatory, and in June 2003 a new seminar was convened to focus in particular on the relationship between women and men in the family and in the working world.

### *Rethinking the relationship*

I have mentioned this experience to emphasise the need to move beyond a purely sectoral approach, which will only be possible if both parties agree to talk and open up to a vision that will really take account of the other person, in all his or her dimensions and expressions.

Relations between men and women have hitherto been seriously skewed in every area in favour of men. Not even the Church has managed to avoid this inequality of treatment, if for no other reason than the fact that every definition, indication or instruction comes from the male world.

However, the picture that I have tried to sketch out in this paper clearly shows that a positive evolution took place in the past century regarding women's identity. Here are a few of the main features of this development: a strong affirmation not only of the original equality of women and men (as has always been claimed) but also of woman's equality in every field; the rejection of arguments claiming that the woman had a greater responsibility for the Fall; recognition of women's charisms as an indispensable element for the full and effective witness of the Church's life; the rejection of the stereotypes of women's weakness and fragility,

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Proceedings of the seminar on *Without relations there is no humanity*, Milan, 2002.

including their moral frailty, and hence of the need to specifically protect women (often translated into separation or even isolation), and the superseding of the theme of women's impurity due to their physiology (menstrual cycles, pregnancy, childbirth: one only has to recall the practice of the "churching of women" to purify them after childbirth that was in use until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century). And again, acceptance by the Magisterium of the right/duty of women to play a part in every area of human activity,<sup>59</sup> thereby moving beyond the identification of woman with her family duties (even though their due importance and priority is reiterated), considering Mary as the model not only for women but for all the faithful, giving women the possibility to contribute to 'theo-logic' within the Church, bringing the gifts of their sensitivity and their own *intus legere*, and a growth in the number of tasks entrusted to them which were previously the preserve of men: all this, and much more that is perhaps maturing at every level of the people of God, augurs well.

Apart from the terms that are used from time to time to describe the relationship between men and women, what is important is that all the members of the Church should become increasingly more aware of the essential nature of unqualified exchange, of fearless dialogue, of the need to respond to the deepest yearnings of the whole People of God, overcoming mental reservations and exclusions of principle.

A proposal – put to everyone – of a powerful and essential message, taking a positive and trusting view of the potential of men and women, and to an even greater extent, of the work of the Holy Spirit in every thinking and demanding conscience, can make the Church's Magisterium increasingly a teacher of life and a safe guide so that God will become "all in all things".

<sup>59</sup> In his *Letter to Women*, John Paul II stated that, "As a rational and free being, man is called to transform the face of the earth. In this task, which is essentially that of culture, *man and woman alike* share equal responsibility from the start [...] Their most natural relationship, which corresponds to the plan of God, is the '*unity of the two*', a relational '*uni-duality*' [...] To this '*unity of the two*' God has entrusted not only the work of procreation and family life, but the creation of history itself" (no. 8).



# Benchmarks, problem areas and issues for debate

MOST REV. CARLO CAFFARRA

*Archbishop of Bologna, former President of the John Paul II  
Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, at the Pontifical Lateran University*

My paper will focus on three issues. First, I shall try to identify a number of benchmarks for guidance, and then refer to what I consider to be the main problem areas, and lastly raise a few issues that I consider to be worthy of further debate.

Before I begin, I would like to clarify one point. I think that there are basically two reasons for having invited me to address this Seminar: the fact that I have spent many years reflecting on anthropological issues bordering on, and even forming part and parcel of the subject matter of this Seminar; and secondly, the fact that I have been engaged in pastoral ministry for more than eight years, which has brought me into daily personal contact with the theme we are discussing here.

You might therefore think that I have some special expertise, because, as the ancients used to say *theoria sine praxis curus sine axi, praxis sine theoria caecus in via*. The truth, however, is that I see myself as a theologian... long since retired, and a poor pastor. I mention this to tell you that I merely wish to make a modest contribution for reflection.

## 1. BENCHMARKS

In this first part of my paper I will try to identify the main benchmarks for guidance and criteria for making judgments within what is a very complex subject area. These can be identified by carefully meditating on the history of women within the history of salvation. It is from this history that we can discover the truth about women – the original truth, the disfigured truth, and the transfigured truth.

*The original truth*

Perhaps never before, in the course of human history, have women had to face up to so many challenges and been so radically provoked into raising the problem of their identity. This being so, the first thing we have to do is to seek the truth about the human person-woman. We can only find sound criteria for judgment and discernment in every different situation if we are conscious of our own identities.

And we can discover the original truth about woman by reading and carefully meditating on the account of the creation of woman in *Gen 2:16-25*. It is in the act of creation that the Creator's plan is revealed, and the truth of God's creature is what God thought about His creature.

The biblical account is particularly meaningful because it explicitly explains to us the reason that led God to create woman: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him". (v. 18). These words sum up the whole of the mystery of woman, the human person.

The existence of woman was necessary so that the humanity of the human person could attain the fullness of being ("it is not good that..."), because only woman would make it possible to establish that communion of persons which would bring the man out of his solitude. I should like to dwell for a moment on this meaning of those biblical words.

The solitude of which the Bible speaks must not be thought of primarily as loneliness, as something negative. It signifies the absolute originality of the human person in the created universe. When the human person came into contact with the animals (vv. 19-20) he realised that he was completely different from them and was truly and wholly superior to them. Seeing the animals, the human person became aware of his superiority, in the sense that he could not be placed on a par with any other species of living beings on the planet. Man was "alone" because he was essentially different from the visible world in which he had been placed. His solitude marked out his supreme dignity.

Why is it then that the biblical text says “it is not good that...”? Man’s solitude here also takes on a negative connotation, because the human person needed to “communicate” with another human person. This need could only be met by meeting another person: the person needed to overcome solitude or loneliness, and at the same time, it was by overcoming it that the person affirmed the unique dignity of the human person.

The creation of the woman was the response to this need: she was created to make it possible to establish communion between persons. The truth of woman and the very reason and significance of her existence may therefore be summed up in two fundamental statements: the first is that the woman was a human person, equal in dignity to the human person-man, because she participated in his nature; the test to which man was put in the comparison with the animals was to prepare him for this event in the universe: the creation of a being like himself, a being “fit for him”. The second is that the woman was a human person who differed from the man and it is because of this diversity that man broke out of his solitude, and the communion of persons was formed. In essence, humanity was created in two ways, each having equal dignity, but differing in their internal configuration of masculinity and femininity. We can therefore say that the solitude of the man spoken of in the Bible not only refers to the fact of discovering that he was different from, and superior to, every other living being, but also his discovery of his vocation to be with another person. It is from this that there stemmed the desire, the expectation, of a “communion of persons”.

After creating the woman, the biblical text says that God “brought her to the man”: woman was given to man by God. It was the most precious gift ever made to man. The biblical word “brought” is particularly meaningful here. A person cannot be “donated” in the way a thing can. A person must consent to be given away. It is the person concerned who gives himself or herself away. The biblical text therefore means, on the one hand, that the vocation of the human person is self-giving, and on the other that the person must give consent to this

vocation. I cannot help thinking, in this connection, of a wonderful text of the Second Vatican Council which teaches us that the human person is the only creature in the visible world that God willed “for itself”, adding immediately, however, that the human person “cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself”.<sup>1</sup> This very clearly defines the truth and the ethos of the “communion of persons”. The truth is that the communion of persons can only be created by mutual self-giving and mutual acceptance; the ethos is that each person must be accepted as they were willed by the Creator, that is “for themselves”. True unity between man and woman can only be created in this way, that is to say, by love. For love is the giving of self, which stems from the affirmation of the person “for itself”. The human person, man and woman, become a gift in the freedom of love, and thereby they rediscover themselves.

The biblical text certainly describes the conjugal community; Jesus himself interpreted it in this way (cf. *Mt* 19:4) as does Paul in the *Letter to the Ephesians* (cf. 5:31-32). This is important for a number of reasons.

In the light of the principle of creation, the monogamous and indissoluble conjugal community is common to a certain extent, the fundamental paradigm of every human society: unity in diversity, unity in which every member is affirmed and welcomed “for themselves”, constituting a communion of persons.

What I wish to emphasise here is that, according to the Bible, this was made possible thanks to the presence of the woman. It seems that she was given, in a special way, the mission of making the communion of persons become reality, the custodianship of the freedom of self-giving and care to ensure that the person is always wanted “for himself/herself”.

But the mystery of femininity is also manifested and essentially revealed through motherhood: the capacity to conceive a new human

<sup>1</sup> SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 24.



person, to give it its own original form. In a singular union with the Creator (cf. 2 Mac 7:22-23), the woman cooperates with Him in a unique way in order to form a new person “in the image and likeness of God”. Throughout the nine months of gestation, God is present in a unique way in the person of the mother, because that “image and likeness” which is specific to the human person can only come from God. The moment in which a woman experiences the miracle of the child emerging from her body is perhaps the moment in which the human creature can most intensely experience the joy of the act of creation. This is why motherhood demands particular veneration and respect.

Let us try to sum up what I have said so far. God’s intention, as Creator, when creating the woman, was to make man “a helper fit for him”, to make it possible to establish true communion between people. The communion that exists between the man and woman is built up in the unity of diversity, through sincere self-giving, in which each person is accepted “for themselves”. It is in this unity that a woman can conceive a new human person, mysteriously but truly cooperating with God the Creator.

### *The disfigured truth*

The disfigurement of the human person caused by sin also affected the woman: it was also a disfigurement of human femininity.

This disfigurement can be verified at two levels: at the level of the “truth and ethos of the communion of persons”, that is to say, at the level of permanent anthropological structures, and at the level of the forms which these disfigurements have gradually acquired historically and also institutionally. I would now like to reflect on this damage that sin has produced in the “female form” of humanity.

Before doing this, I think it would be useful to reflect on the text which concludes the creation account, namely, “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (v. 25). What is the meaning of this original nakedness?

In their state of original justice, the man and the woman possessed an interior harmony which prevented them from viewing one another as possible objects to be used, to degrade each other to become *something* of which they might dispose, and no longer *someone* to wish “for himself/herself”. The nakedness of which the Bible speaks signifies that the man and the woman, in the state of original justice, were in full possession of true freedom, which is the capacity to give themselves. Through their bodies they saw the other person, and because of their view of masculinity and femininity, respectively, they were constantly aware of their vocation to interpersonal communion. But perhaps the text intends to draw attention to the fundamental condition of freedom viewed as the capacity for self-giving; self-mastery, and self-domination. For it is impossible to give something that one does not possess.

The loss of original justice, into which Adam dragged all his descendants, was primarily the act of disobedience against the Creator. But this act of injustice against God led to the immediate loss of their original nakedness. The man and the woman lost their capacity to view each other as persons in terms of their masculinity and femininity, as persons who were willed “for themselves” and who could only rediscover themselves through sincere self-giving. They lost the capacity to make this gift of themselves, even though they retained the drive to interpersonal communion and the need for it.

This lies at the heart of all the disfigurement of the original truth about woman.

What is the essence of this mistaken way of viewing each other as a man and a woman when they no longer saw each other as persons whom God has willed “for themselves”, and viewed one another as two individuals, separated from each other? I think that this is where we find one of the main reasons for the grave unease that all of us are experiencing today.

There is an essential difference between a *personalistic* view of the human person and an *individualistic* view.

According to the individualistic view, human persons are not constitutionally related to others, but by their very nature are inward-

looking. This inward-lookingness consists of desiring only and always one's own good, and of the fact that one's reason is incapable of knowing the truth about the good and evil of the person as such (that is to say, the moral good) but only serves the seeking of individual personal happiness. According to this view, every relationship with another person can only be "negotiated", that is to say, created as a meeting between two opposing egoisms that at least seek equality between giving and receiving. Human society, every human society, becomes a fragile convergence between opposing interests: I may seek my own good while disregarding the good of others, and indeed I may normally work against the good of others. It is possible for me to achieve my own good without, and perhaps even by working against, the good of others.

I am not, unfortunately, speaking theoretically or ideologically about things that are confined to the world of ideas. Can we not all see that this kind of individualism is the real cancer of our Western societies? But this is not the general point I am trying to make here. I have mentioned it because it is a factor that disfigures or obscures the original truth about woman, and because it disfigures or obscures the original truth about the relationship between man and woman. How does it do this?

It does so at the level of what I have called "permanent anthropological structures". We have been led to this deeper level of the biblical text which speaks for the first time about the relationship between the man and woman immediately after original sin: "your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (*Gen 3:16*).

Men and women retain their vocation to interpersonal communion, and their desire for unity (cf *Gen 2:24*). But this desire turns out in reality to be a matter of one person "ruling" over another. When confronted with the woman, the man who was in original justice – by being in a covenant with the Lord – experienced joy and amazement, because finally he was with a person, with someone, and not only with something (animals or things). But this vision of the person then became debased and corrupted into instinct, and the attempt to dominate. That individualistic logic that I was speaking about then entered

into that relationship; and past and present experience shows us that since man has greater physical strength, he dominates and puts women into subjection. Women are violated, exploited, and reduced to servitude.

It is important for us to clearly understand this particular transformation/corruption of the original relationship of communion into a relationship of domination. It consists in the degradation inflicted on women within the man's heart. A degradation which consists of reducing the woman's person to a body, to be used either for reproduction or purely for personal pleasure. It is an act of all-out de-personalisation perpetrated against women, as a result of which the dignity of self-giving is removed from the unity between man and woman.

The fundamental anthropological structure is thereby changed in its very essence, and the institution of marriage is gradually being demolished, although this is not something we can go into here. Suffice it to say that the degradation of the person is followed by the incapacity to make a choice for all time, and ultimately the insignificance of marriage as such. The scourge of cohabitation is increasing in our communities, the sign of a freedom that is now often reduced merely to the pure spontaneity of seeking one's own psychophysical well-being.

At the level of what I have called the "permanent anthropological structures" of the relationship between man and woman, I would like to draw your attention to another essential dimension of the same relationship: motherhood.

What is motherhood? It may seem strange to begin this part of my paper with a question to which the answer seems quite obvious. But the fact is that it is no longer obvious, and that goes a long way towards explaining the spiritual crisis in which we are currently floundering. I will come back to this point in a moment.

As far as the permanent anthropological relationship between man and woman is concerned we have already looked briefly at the historical forms that the disfigurement of the original truth about woman have acquired across time. This is the great issue of the true acknowledgement of the dignity of woman in our societies, particularly in terms of two essential components: economics and politics. Acknowledging the

dignity of women in the workplace, and giving women a real possibility to conceive of the construction of society to the measure of their femininity: these are two challenges that have been largely ignored.

### *The transfigured truth*

“But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman” (*Gal 4:4*). The original truth about woman is perfectly fulfilled and transfigured in Christ.

By taking flesh, the Word wished to have that unique, fundamental relationship that every human being has with women: the relationship between the child and its mother. Each one of us is moulded by a woman, and our humanity comes through her. This also applied to the Word: his humanity was moulded by Mary, because he was procreated by her in our humanity. She is therefore, in every sense, “Theotokos”, the Mother of God.

I am becoming increasingly convinced that Mary alone is capable of making women totally aware of their femininity, and that Mary is the key to fully interpreting it. But this is something that I cannot go into here. Let me continue with the account of the relationship between Christ and women, because this is the relationship in which the truth about woman is fully revealed – and transfigured.

The Word could, of course, have taken on human nature without being conceived and without being born into it through a woman. So why did he want to have a mother? What was the deepest reason, the hidden significance of this divine decision? The Fathers and the Doctors of the Church all asked themselves this same question. I would just like to offer a few useful reflections for the purposes of this Seminar.

The relationship between Christ and Mary is viewed in terms of the relationship between Adam and Eve, in a wonderful chiaroscuro. Adam and Eve prefigured that unity of the two in one flesh which defined the event of salvation: the Church. She is the perfect fulfilment of what was already prefigured at the origin of creation: Body and Head, Bride and Bridegroom, humanity made divine, and Christ. Two

in one flesh, in the one (eucharistic) Flesh of Christ who gave Himself (1 Cor 6:15-17).

It is highly significant that the Church is “female”, that ecclesiality is revealed in the form of femininity. But there is not only this, let us say, shining, aspect of it. Our ruin was brought about by cooperation between both Adam and Eve; Christ and Mary co-operate, albeit in an essentially different way, in bringing about our salvation, as we shall be seeing shortly.

I have found a wonderful text in St Thomas that I would like to bring to your attention. I was wondering how the bride is introduced to the Bridegroom and how she is united with Him. What exactly does it mean to say that Mary cooperated in Christ’s act of redemption? In looking for the answer to these questions I came across this text in St Thomas. When the Word became flesh in Mary’s womb it was like the celebration of a marriage between humanity and the Word. Mary gave her consent “in lieu of that of the entire human nature”.<sup>2</sup> The absolutely free decision of the Father to make his Only-begotten son the firstborn of many brothers and sisters was not conditional on our consent: to God alone be the glory. But neither was it taken without our consent. Mary gave that consent. That is the deepest meaning of the Annunciation.

The way in which Mary entered into the origins, the beginnings of our salvation – the Incarnation of the Word – reveals the deepest truth about women. Mary is the one who “consented and made possible” for Life, which is with the Father, to make itself visible. This is why femininity comprises this vocation: the vocation to safeguard, save, and not to permit the degradation of the life of the Person, in the full sense of the term. Perhaps no one expressed this deepest truth about woman better than Dante did. His path of salvation from the “dark forest” was made possible by woman: Lucia, Matelda, Beatrice and, ultimately, Mary.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a, 30, 1 Benziger Bros. edition, 1947. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

I should like to dwell a little on this latter point, once again recalling the text of St Thomas. According to this great Doctor of the Church, Mary gave her consent “in lieu of all humanity” (*loco totius humanae naturae*). John Paul II has taught us in depth that the real symbol of the whole body of the Church, women and men, is woman: “We can say that the analogy of spousal love found in the *Letter to the Ephesians* links what is ‘masculine’ to what is ‘feminine’, since, as members of the Church, men too are included in the concept of ‘Bride’... In the Church every human being – male and female – is the ‘Bride’, in that he or she accepts the gift of the love of Christ the Redeemer, and seeks to respond to it with the gift of his or her own person”.<sup>3</sup>

If we spend a few moments thinking about the meetings that Jesus had with women, according to the Gospel accounts, we can find a constant confirmation of what happened “at the beginning” of his relationship with woman: with Mary, in the Annunciation.

We can see immediately the great esteem in which Jesus held women. “It is universally admitted – even by people with a critical attitude towards the Christian message – that *in the eyes of his contemporaries Christ became a promoter of women’s true dignity* and of the *vocation* corresponding to this dignity. At times this caused wonder, surprise, often to the point of scandal: ‘They marvelled that he was talking with a woman’ (*Jn* 4:27), because this behaviour differed from that of his contemporaries”.<sup>4</sup>

Of the many meetings of this kind I would like to focus briefly on just two: the meeting with the Samaritan woman, and the meeting with Mary Magdalene on Easter morning.

The first recounts the full restoration of the woman’s dignity, restoring her person in her original truth and goodness.

The disfigurement of the dignity of the person of that woman stemmed from the fact that she had been the wife of six men (cf. *Jn* 4:18). As Scripture taught from the beginning, it was sin that placed

<sup>3</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 12.

that woman “at the disposal of man” (“he shall rule over you”: *Gen* 3:16): it had degraded her to become an object of pleasure and exploitation. Her reintegration occurred because she, the Samaritan woman, was introduced into the deepest mysteries of the new Covenant, the very nature of God (cf. *Jn* 4:24), and true adoration. But it was above all to her that Jesus revealed his identity, as he had never done to anyone else before. She became the confidante of his most intimate secret. This was an incredible event: the woman who had had six husbands was introduced into the greatest of mysteries. And that was not all: she became the first person to proclaim the Gospel (cf. vv. 39-42). It was to Mary, the woman who was full of grace, that the Annunciation was made. It was she who welcomed it “*loco totius humanae naturae*”, becoming the one in whom the Word was made flesh. The Samaritan woman, disfigured in her dignity, was given the Annunciation that the Messiah, the gift of salvation, was present and close to her, and she welcomed him, and became the one who announced him. It was life-generating consent.

But I think that even more significant was the meeting between the Risen Christ and Mary Magdalene on Easter morning. The fact that our Lord chose to manifest himself in all his glory for the first time not to an apostle but to a woman is something that has always amazed me enormously. Mary Magdalene is like the real symbol of the sinful humanity called to intimacy with the Bridegroom. “She is the symbol of the unfaithful bride that God has brought back to himself in love”:<sup>5</sup> it was in the sinful woman, now called to union with the Lord in glory, that the most profound truth about woman was reaffirmed, and this reaffirmation signified humanity. The Apostles as such were not called to this union: they were to minister to it. The only person who has the Bridegroom is the bride. They were the servants of the bride. And this is the ultimate reason why, because of their dignity as women, they cannot exercise the apostolic ministry. In one garden, the Garden of Eden, the woman had been disfigured; in

<sup>5</sup> D. BARSOTTI, *Meditazione sulle apparizioni del risorto*, Brescia, Queriniana, 1989, 30.



another garden, the Garden of the Resurrection, woman was transfigured by the light of her full truth.

To summarise briefly what we have said so far: in Christ, woman has been redeemed and transfigured. Redeemed from what had disfigured her original truth; transfigured, because He fully revealed the very essence of femininity in Mary His mother.

## 2. PROBLEMATIC ISSUES

What I have said so far should not be seen as some sort of “ideal”. It is the very real condition in which the human person-woman finds herself today. In her there remains the original truth that has now been transfigured in Christ, in a process that has redeemed her from degradation.

This condition certainly raises problematic issues, some of which I should now like to draw to your attention. When I say “problematic issues” I am not referring to the difficulties that women are encountering today in fulfilling themselves *in truth* – their economic, legal, political difficulties and so on. Other papers in this Seminar will be addressing them. I am referring to the difficulties that Christian thinking is encountering today when envisaging the true self-fulfilment of woman.

An initial premise will lead me through this second point of my reflection. From what I said in my first point, we can see that the original structure of the human person is a dual one: to live in communion and in society. The person is always in a “relationship” with other people. The problematic aspects, in the sense that I have just defined, relate to an understanding of men and women in their original dual structure.

One first problematic aspect is methodological. When addressing an issue of the kind we are treating at this Seminar, the basic aim should not be to tailor the women’s issue to “changed social conditions” and rethink it in those terms. On the contrary: it is the “changed social conditions” of the women’s issue that have to be read and judged in the

light of a truth that has been revealed about woman. I personally believe that this is one of the great methodological lessons of the Magisterium of John Paul II: to start “from the beginning”. It is a methodology that Catholic anthropological thinking today has not fully understood. It is a realistic way of thinking, that must be fully recovered.

Looking more closely at the substance, we can see at once a second problematic aspect. The original duality of the human person as a dimension of communion is by no means an achievement derived from current thinking about man and woman. Modern thought either does not consider this duality to be original or it does not believe that its ultimate significance is communion between persons. In order for women to “flourish” as such, not only in the private sphere but also publicly, this communion-based duality of the person must be thought out and affirmed.

Where do the roots of the second problematic aspect lie? I think there are two sources: the first has to do with the constitution of the human person *in se*, and the second has to do with the vision of the “human social sphere” as such.

With regard to the former, Western thought has never fully managed to take on board the great biblical idea of the unity of the person, because it has never accepted the only true way of viewing the person, namely, St Thomas’s thesis of the substantial unity of the person, or of the soul as the form of the body. Put another way, the great biblical idea has fallen into a rational sphere in which an adequate model for thinking it through has never been elaborated. Indeed, St Thomas’s model has not won through.

The second source of this problematic aspect is the fact that, unless I am mistaken, the dual-communion-related structure of the human person forms part of a more general reflection about human society, or to put it more clearly, about the human being in the social environment. It forms part of the response to the question, “what is there in the social world that is human?” Now, contemporary Western culture offers two contrary answers to this question: everything and nothing. Those who hold the former view consider that everything social is necessarily and

immediately human, adopting a materialistic point of view. Life, in all its aspects, is *bios*. It is a material living thing. Those holding the latter view only see automatisms in society, but no meaningful intentionality. It is not a matter of trying to work out a midway solution between them. What we have to do is pursue a different path in order to answer that question. Sociality is the place of self-transcendence. What is human within the social sphere is in interpersonal relationality. It is within this context that it is possible to project a society in which women can “flourish”.

We might sum this up by saying that the relationship between men and women, taking place as it does in public spaces, is the most meaningful test of the way in which we view the human person and the “human form” of society.

I would like to draw your attention to a third problematic aspect at this point, based on two observations: women are responsible for life because only woman gives life; and because only woman decides to abort. This is where one of the deepest anthropological mysteries arises: the mystery of motherhood. Why is this one of the main problematic aspects in building up an anthropology of woman? Others will refer to other no less important aspects, but I would like to bring up one of them: what is the meaning of motherhood? Motherhood is increasingly being interpreted in terms of a woman’s self fulfilment: as an obstacle to it, or a means of achieving it. This is an individualistic point of view which is increasingly governing the way in which motherhood is interpreted.

A few years ago an Italian court, in the grounds for its ruling, said that it was a fact without any binding anthropological sense that the conception-gestation-birth of a new human person was the act of a human person. I published various commentaries on this judgement in the press, saying that human reason had been seriously humiliated, because the judgment made reason instrumental to the desire for one’s own well-being. Once again, we are faced with that individualistic rationale that I spoke about in the previous section.

Let me repeat it again: a child is often seen as “something” that is

necessary for personal self-fulfilment, and people talk about the “right to have a baby”. Or it is seen as “something” which prevents personal self-fulfilment, which then becomes the “right to have an abortion”. I am not saying that every woman perceives motherhood in these terms: that would be unfair and wrong of me. But what I am saying is that Western ethical thinking, and this includes the institutions, is being influenced by a view of motherhood which is corrupting its original truth and beauty, in both the ways I have just mentioned.

The second set of facts that need to be borne in mind in this regard have to do with the plight of children today. Children are, in a sense, the mirror image of the condition of motherhood. What I am most worried about as a pastor is how often and how deeply children are being exposed to a nihilistic culture. It is impossible to introduce children to reality, which is what “education” means, without bringing the child up to discern truth from falsehood and good from evil. But the nihilistic culture, by definition, deems this distinction to be meaningless. But what has all of this to do with the question of motherhood that we are addressing here? It has a great deal indeed to do with it. Never before has motherhood been so necessary as it is today, in this situation. Motherhood seen as a spiritual place, in which the human person is wholly generated. But the condition in which this is done in reality often prevents it from being such a place. This is the condition in which the family has increasingly become a convention to be defined according to the opinion of the majority; in which there is a turnover of fathers and mothers, sometimes several times over, because of divorce and cohabitation. This is compounded by the regrettable custom of postponing the age of marriage.

### 3. OPEN ISSUES

In this third part I would just like to mention the main issues that require further thought. These are not exhaustive, but are the ones that I consider to be essential, viewed at all times from the position that I have adopted here.

The revival of the dual-communion-based structure of the human person requires an understanding of anthropology which starts afresh, from the very beginning, examining the question of the truth of the human person. It is unthinkable to have a communion-based structure while denying that man is a “subject”, and “agent”, and it is unthinkable to have the truth about being a woman where a communion-based structure is unthinkable. Femininity is relating.

Another fundamental open issue is the question of the person as a body: the corporeity of the person. More specifically, the subjectivity of the body, the body as the language of the person. In ethical terms, the whole question of the virtue of chastity is still wide open.

Lastly, it is becoming increasingly urgent to address the issue of the truth and the meaning of procreation, above all in terms of motherhood. Basically it is always the same question that comes up again and again: procreation is neither “*officium naturale*” nor “the manufacture of individuals” but an act of the person within the man-woman communion. What does this “personalisation of the procreative act” mean? This is still a wide open question.

Irenaeus of Lyons was the first to understand, in the light of the Word of God, that the destinies of humanity – for better or for worse – are bound up with the freedom of women. A freedom which is rooted in the truth about woman: the truth which shines out fully in the economy of salvation.



## **IV. PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES**





# The horizon of reciprocity in the family

GIULIA PAOLA DI NICOLA AND ATTILIO DANESE

*Mr and Mrs Danese are university lecturers,  
co-editors of the magazine "Prospettiva Persona",  
and in 1982 founded the Centro Internazionale Ricerche Personaliste, Teramo*

## 1. THE EARTHQUAKE OF GENDER IDENTITY<sup>1</sup>

**H**ow does the family change when the male and female identities go through the earthquake of postmodern culture?

Is it true that we are moving away from woman as a companion, helper and mother, to the domineering and aggressive career woman? And from a "strong" to a "weak" male identity? From the ideal of the hero, the superman, to the fragile, meek and mild, or even defeated, man?

How can husbands and wives today bring up their children, do a job, run a home, play a part in society, politics and Church life without being traumatised?

What are the two genders today, now that "the civilised, adult, masculine, man" is no longer the model for the whole of humanity? Is it possible to appreciate the difference without one gender prevailing over the other? Is it possible to be truly equal without levelling everything down into unisex terms?

These are all questions that come up time and time again in an age in which people are anxious to establish satisfactory relations but do not know how to do so. There is no doubt that everything was much

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed examination of these issues see G.P. DI NICOLA – A. DANESE, *Lei & Lui. Comunicazione e reciprocità*. Torino. Effatà, 2001; ID (editors), *Il maschile a due voci*, Lecce, Manni, 1998; ID. *Il maschile e la teologia*, Bologna, Dehoniane, 1998, and the two earlier works by G.P. DI NICOLA, *Uguaglianza e differenza. La reciprocità uomo donna*, Roma, Città Nuova, 1988, and *Il linguaggio della madre*, Roma, Città Nuova, 1994.

simpler when people believed that the models had been established once and for all, almost as if – as Ricoeur has put it – there were “idem” identities which, throughout the whole of life, were destined to move forward only along the track laid out for them by nature. Even in 1687 the priest and cultured nobleman, Fénelon, anxious to devote himself to educating girls, described them in the following words: “They confuse the ability to converse and a lively imagination with intelligence; they do not distinguish between their thoughts; they do not order the things they have to say; they bring passion to almost everything they say, and passion makes them speak a great deal: one cannot therefore expect much good from a woman unless she is made to reflect in an orderly manner, to subject her thoughts to criticism, to express them concisely, and then to know how to be silent. Another circumstance that also makes women talk at great length: they are astute by nature, and they can argue round in circles in order to achieve their purpose... They find it natural to adapt, so that they can easily act out any kind of drama; tears come natural to them... Then they are shy, and full of false prudishness... But there is nothing to be feared from young girls more than vanity. They are born with a violent desire to please; since the ways that lead men to power and glory are closed against them, they seek compensation in the attractions of the spirit and the body; it is this which gives them their gentle and persuasive tongues, and from this stems their yearning for beauty and all external graces: well-tended hair, a bow ribbon, a curly lock of hair higher up or lower down, a preferred colour, all of these things for them are equally important”.<sup>2</sup>

The 20th century was certainly the one in which a radical change took place in the way the female identity was viewed. In the Catholic world of the 1930s, Mounier wrote a critical analysis of “female nature”. He viewed women as “a race that for millennia has been sidelined from public life, intellectual creativity and very often from life itself, which has adapted to being set on one side, fearful, and with a tenacious and paralysing sense of their own inferiority, handed down

<sup>2</sup> F. FÉNELON, *On the Education of Girls* [our translation].

from mother to daughter in which certain essential elements of the human spiritual organism have remained uncultivated and have been able to become atrophied across the centuries”.<sup>3</sup>

And he added, “It will take generations: we have to move ahead on tip-toe, alternating boldness and prudence, which entails not sacrificing people as guinea pigs; it will sometimes be necessary to place a wager against what is called ‘nature’ to see where real nature ends up. In this way, little by little, femininity will certainly free itself of artifice, move ahead along paths that we cannot imagine, and will abandon the path that we had believed had been placed there for all eternity. Perhaps this will teach men, who are easily satisfied by facile rationalism, that this ‘female mystery’ is more demanding than the pleasing image that it offers us of itself, and help us to plumb the depths of its mystery”.<sup>4</sup>

There is no doubt that by revolutionising their roles and their identity, women are also bringing about a change in the roles and identities of men, given their reciprocal nature. The fact that male identity has changed can easily be seen from reading the newspapers, from literature, from essays, from the media: for one can see that there is greater coresponsibility in running the home, bringing up children and doing the domestic chores, recovering the human and affective value of procreation, the demand for an occupation that brings satisfaction, and does not take up the whole of their time, and a kind of disenchantment with ideological and political allegiances. It is now an established fact from social research that not only girls, but also boys, today want a future in which they can combine gratifying work with a good family life.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> E. MOUNIER, *Manifeste* in *Oeuvres*, Paris, Seuil, I, 560. There were others writing similar things in the years that followed. For Don Orione, “you will see the attack on this social fortress of the Christian family, which still latent at the present time, becoming more vicious tomorrow. Feminism is a very important part of the social question, and where we, as Catholics, have gone wrong has been in our failure immediately to understand it. This has been a great mistake” (D. L. ORIONE, *Nel nome della Divina Provvidenza. Le più belle pagine*, Casale Monferrato, Piemme, 1955, 36).

<sup>4</sup> E. MOUNIER, *Manifeste*, op cit. 560.

<sup>5</sup> Cf AA.Vv., *La famiglia vista dagli adolescenti. Riflessioni su un'indagine in Abruzzo*, Teramo, Demian, 1994 [our translation].

But it is equally true to say that these aspirations too often meet with failure. Quite apart from the rising divorce rate and the increasing number of marriage break-ups, today we are also witnessing an increase in the numbers of disturbed identities (increased violence, homosexuality, frigidity, anorexia and bulimia, a rise in female prostitution and a corresponding increase in demand for it from men...) which is further confirmation – if that were necessary – that a reformulation of gender identity today is crucial for the future of the family.

## 2. KNOWING THAT WE DO NOT KNOW

Too often, questions relating to the new relations between the genders are only addressed from the point of view of demands and conflict. It is necessary to analyse the categories which regulate the way people think and how they see themselves in the world. Despite the discoveries that have led to the mapping of the human genome and the ever-improving understanding of the mysteries of life, of which cloning is perhaps the most astounding aspect of all, men and women today know even less than they once did about what it means to be a man and woman. Many prejudices have fallen, but with the increase in knowledge there has also been an increase in the awareness of ignorance: we know that we do not know, and we are more willing to challenge ourselves. Men and women today know, above all, that it is no longer possible for one half of the human race to define the other half. Adam was alone when God breathed on him, and “he slept” when God created Eve. Neither of them was able to “comprehend” the mystery of the other, because both were “in the image of God”. The mystery only indicates the starting and finishing points, closed within the biblical harmony of the verse: “in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (*Gen* 1: 27). It is within this horizon which respects the mystery that one has to seek out new relationships between the genders, stumbling between saying and not saying, between what has already been said and the silence that contemplates the mystery.

This is something that married couples know very well, diffident as they are of “clear and distinct ideas” and of *a priori* defences of female or male specificities which are too often belied by the facts. Wife and husband know one another, and across time they recognise each other, the one confirming the identity of the other, and reinventing their relationship and the whole world “as a duet”, with a mutual relationship between their respective outlooks.<sup>6</sup> In the same way, the mother and the father discover the identity of their children, day after day, flexibly reformulating their own identities in a two-way process of co-education. Postmodern culture, in this respect, is perhaps more mature in rejecting stereotypes and ideological positions. Two keywords are indispensable to it: complexity and discernment. Progress in the human sciences teaches us to appreciate the value of the many nuances that lie between the two extremes of the classical dichotomies (male/female, sickness/health, sin/pleasure, incontinence/chastity, affectivity/reason, action/thought, duty/pleasure, body/mind, authority/obedience). Discernment is essential to avoid the pitfalls of an inexorably conflictual gulf between men and women and of a sterile equality between them (it is a subtle masculine-oriented ideology to want everything to be equal to it, and it is the feminist reaction against this approach to wish to achieve emancipation by becoming more like it),<sup>7</sup> and the pitfalls of being stuck fast to the past and those of flying recklessly into the future. Being projected into the future does not mean scorning the values of the past, with all the burden of the past, but also with its valuable resources, that have often been left unexplored. “The past”, says Ricoeur, “contains promises unfulfilled, arrows unshot, that we have to pick up, and bring back to life, like the dead in the Valley of Jehosephat”.<sup>8</sup> After the age of male bullying and the aggressive reaction

<sup>6</sup> Cf. G.P. DI NICOLA – A. DANESE (editors) *Il maschile a due voci*, cit.; ID., *Il maschile e la teologia*, cit.

<sup>7</sup> But “equality” has a completely different meaning from “sameness” in its legal and political sense (equal opportunities) and alludes to a disadvantage from which to seek redress.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. P. RICOEUR, *La sfida e le speranze del nostro futuro*, in “Prospettiva Persona”, no. 4 (1993) [our translation].

of feminism, perhaps it is possible today to place them face-to-face with the intention of being born again together, to meet together at full sail, in a dialogue limited only by love, in the knowledge that today they have to face a kind of *kenosis* of the patriarchy and the matriarchy.

### 3. FOR A HERMENEUTICS OF GENDER IDENTITY BASED ON THE BODY

In this difficult task of describing identity we cannot ignore the indications that come from the body, which is like an open book, to be read and re-read across the ages, the book which changes with us, and which changes us. From its hermeneutics we can design models that are ecologically linked to the *habitat*, albeit without any kind of determinism. It would be a contradiction to push concern for the ecology of nature to absurd extremes and forget that part of nature which has its most intimate relationship with us.

Everyone experiences the aporia of their being in a body, and at the same time transcending it, knowing that they are more than a body. This also applies to gender identity. We are born male and female, knowing that we are more than merely a female or male. The art of deciphering and responding to the signals sent out by the body gradually builds up our identity across the years, interwoven with the identity of others, through looks, caresses, smiles, tone of voice, embracing, dancing, shaking hands and so on. While there is no doubt that the two genders, through their bodies, express a different “tonality” in the way they exist in the world, the difficulty lies in interpreting that difference: we are forced to recognise that there is yet more meaning to it, whenever we try to capture it. While trying to avoid the risk of locking up all men and women in new-old stereotyped gender cages, hermeneutics must therefore also avoid the aphasia of giving up talking.

In this position, which combines talking with silence and waiting, we propose a symbolic hermeneutics of femininity and masculinity, with a warning that it would not be proper to go on to apply it deterministically to all women and to all men: the last word with regard to

membership of a gender always lies with the person. The five categories elaborated here will be examined in terms of the way each one can go astray, that is to say, the possible corruptions of each one. These are not universal archetypes, because when dealing with every individual person we must suspend our judgment, fearing that we might cage them up by prejudice, which might make it impossible to perceive that previously unspoken word which that person alone can and must speak to the world.

#### 4. RELATIONALITY AND SELF-AFFIRMATION

The *relationality* of the person is manifested most demonstrably in the body of the woman. For the procreative process in women has paradigmatic meanings, as if written into it by nature, of “*being for*” in each person *qua* person. It is above all in motherhood that this feature is emphasised because of its unique relationship – two in one – which is established between the mother and foetus. Motherhood, beyond the limitations of nature, becomes an indication of the capacity to make room for, to welcome in, and to accommodate the other person and, little by little, help that person to live autonomously, and also to help him or her to detach themselves from her.

The relational experience that this entails, with explicit reference to the umbilical cord which unites the mother and child, and makes them interdependent, predisposes them to take on holistic, integrated and ecological perspectives, and not to lose sight of the integral nature of the person and environmental contexts, overcoming false dichotomies, fragmentation, and hierarchisation. Consequently, from the female point of view, what is fundamental is everything that contributes towards strengthening bonds between people and fostering integration processes. In cognitive terms, it requires us to view the processes as effects, that is to say, not to focus so much on the immediate effectiveness of actions but rather on the aims and intentions, patiently accepting the timing, the modes, and the routes used to pursue them. The

means used are as important as the ends, fully acknowledging that any gains achieved by violence have a boomerang effect. If the ends can be pursued in different ways, the positions adopted by the individual parties concerned have to be respected, as do any failures, as forming part of a process to which everyone contributes, successfully or otherwise, to developing the whole.

The corruption of this feature is hetero-dependency, or at the opposite end of the scale, the tendency to take possession of the other person, to capture them in one's embrace and swallow them up, concealing their own personal vocation. Attachment and the inability to detach oneself are the causes of numerous identity conflicts in those who will not or cannot cut the umbilical cord – a metaphor of uninterrupted physical dependency (one only has to think of the awful consequences of this on a marriage).

The masculine counterpart to this is self-assertiveness, the tendency to externalise and give visibility to one's own potential. This feature is clearly not the exclusive preserve of men, because low self-esteem is a problem that afflicts both men and women equally, while there are also women who overestimate their potential.

It tends to be more a typical feature of masculinity to assert one's person. This tendency should not be viewed in an egotistical sense, and indeed it is a valuable support which enables a man to establish a positive relationship with his partner and his children. It is a source of security, and offers a sense of protection and trust. Without self-esteem, without self-acceptance and without self-respect, there is no identity, but only an identity crisis or hetero-dependency.<sup>9</sup>

Self-esteem, confidence in one's own potential and one's own capacity to assert that potential are therefore valid prerequisites for guaranteeing personal maturity and strengthening the man's capacity to relate to others, perfectly integrating female relationality. One cannot even love another person unless one loves oneself: *Caritas bene ordinata incipit a semet ipso*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. B. SCHETTINI, *Essere padre: alla scoperta delle proprie radici*, in G.P. DI NICOLA – A. DANESI (editors), *Il maschile a due voci*, cit., 130.



The corrupt forms of this aspect, driven to extremes, are hautiness, selfishness, narcissism, and the tendency to lord it over others, perhaps even with the excuse of protecting them under one's own wing.

Hence the need for a form of education in the family which helps both the daughters and the sons to acquire a healthy ability to relate, which promotes "pro-social" conduct and at the same time a just sense of self-affirmation based on self-esteem and esteem for others.

##### 5. AWARENESS OF ONE'S OWN LIMITS, AND COMBATING LIMITATIONS

A more acute *sense of personal limitations* is typical of a woman's experience. A mother who knows how to interpret the messages of her body also knows that it is not always possible to decide exactly whether and when to have a child (it is easier to prevent having one than to try for a child, whatever the cost, as we know very well from genetic engineering). A new pregnancy is always surrounded with unpredictability, even when planned, because it always entails committing one's own person to an unknown future, and to someone whose face and whose destiny is as yet unknown. But the mother clearly knows that her own life will change because of the presence of another life within her.

The woman's body is certainly more affected by the fact of being in tune with nature, by fragility and menstruation, by having a large stomach throughout the period of pregnancy, by breast-feeding, by the menopause, and so on. It is indispensable for women rapidly to accept unforeseen events (changes in the menstrual cycle, unexpected pregnancies) which convince her that she is unable to keep her own body in check, and to pilot her own life. A mother feels driven, from within her body, to experience the infinite patience of listening to the gradual emergence of life, day after day, within her womb, nurturing her confidence that the process will reach its term normally, while having no power to control or manage it herself. No acquired skills, no more or less rational projects or expertise can play any part in it. All she can do is wait silently, increasing her privacy by avoiding the public streets and

the crowds. Even when an expectant mother is with other people, she experiences the wilderness which can, unfortunately, become enforced exile if she is abandoned by her spouse and by society. The ambivalence lies both in passively accepting reality because her body and events cannot be made to bow to her own desires, and in the joyous realisation of having been endowed with the power to procreate, to make her own personal contribution to the work of creation: an act of abandonment and creativity, of carnality and spirituality.

Realising our limitations entails acceptance of the rule that all living beings are interdependent, and that we need to harmonise our own life with the lives of everyone else, and this prevents people from “flying too high”. We recognise that we are made of the same stuff as animals, plants, the Earth, and the cosmos. This gives priority to listening and to consensus rather than planning and domination (over life, nature, and so on).

It is thanks to this experience that we become more aware of being part of humanity and that we must therefore harmoniously integrate with others. At the other extreme, the male tendency is to take over the “other half of the sky” and incorporate it, as occurs in the Italian language when the masculine plural form also includes the feminine. For in place of the “original uni-duality”, the male identity is more frequently seen as coinciding with universal humanity, where the feminine fits in as a “helper”. Out of ignorance or for convenience, one also finds coercive renunciation being forced on women, elevated to a heroic virtue, according to laws of nature imprisoned in a “weak-spiritualistic” ideal, which is ultimately not attained.

It is particularly important for girls to fully understand the positive sense of their limitations, in order to be able to accept – and not simply endure – the often difficult rhythms of their own body. For it is not easy to come to terms with our body unless we are able to attribute a teleological-vocational significance to what we really are, with the promise of love and fruitfulness, the call to self-giving, the call to the covenant and to cooperation with nature, with humanity and with God.

Awareness of one’s limitations also implies, at the symbolic level

once again, the awareness that all human constructs and all schools of thought break up in the face of death, and hence of the essential dependency of humanity. For our limitations are not only the experience of our own fragility but also our awareness that all things of this world, however beautiful and good, are corrupt and corruptible. They are not in themselves the foundation for happiness. Perhaps this is also a reason why women's religious experience is more common and more immediate.

The corruption of this trait is the tendency among women to become over-aware of their limitations, and to remain infantile, delegating their social responsibilities to others, remaining content with the narrow confines of the home – an attitude that has been typical of a large section of the female population throughout history, preventing them from fully developing their potential.<sup>10</sup>

Starting with the physical attribute of strength, masculinity can be associated with a greater readiness to struggle against limitations, to *fight against adversities*, confident of coming through successfully. Linked to this is a more keenly felt realisation of a duty and ability to defend oneself, one's territory, one's group and one's family.

<sup>10</sup> Mounier wrote these words to a girl who wanted to remain a child for too long: "When I say 'little girl', I evoke both a charming and a painful impression which you often give me, the impression of being with a little girl, and not a woman. But I will not stop at that. I fully realise that you are still playing at being a little girl... But you know that we should not play too much with masks. Otherwise, sooner or later, the masks start playing with us. The time has come for you to become a real woman. This means becoming an adult spiritual being, who does not pull back from anything and does not cling on to adolescence. It simply means a woman who observes, accepts and develops her status as a woman, who observes it and does not shy away from the paths leading to it... But everyone, to varying degrees, is afraid of living, and there is something in all of us that wants to remain unchanged, protected, childish, so that we do not have to play the role of a captain of a ship on the high seas. It is now time for you to make a break with affectivity. By this I mean that primary, carnal affectivity which hampers our higher vocation. Be clear-sighted, listen to the promptings of your vocation, and everyone you love will subsequently receive so much more from you, in mutual frankness and stripping of self. Then you will have sacrificed yourself for truth. I hope you will pardon me for going on in such great length...I could not resist offering you a helping hand" (E. MOUNIER, *Lettre à une jeune amie*, in *Oeuvres*, cit., IV, 825 [our translation]).

The male has always been linked in people's imaginations with the "ideal type" of the hero, the soldier, the obstinate knight in armour taking on anything that stands in his way. He feels urged on to seize the challenges of life, overcoming opposition and never flinching in the face of hostile nature, other people or events, giving the best of himself, in order to win through under adversity.

Struggling is not in itself negative, and can even strengthen a person's abilities and enhance talents and skills, demanding the qualities of courage and doggedness, to overcome evil and conquer new frontiers for life. Mounier viewed *affrontement* as a human value worthy of admiration, because the human being adopts a cause and pursues it even at a cost of personal sacrifice and the shedding of blood.

Its corruption consists of fashioning relations in terms of competition at all times and in every sphere, envy and jealousy triggered by ambition and careerism at the expense of respect and sharing, individualism, Prometheanism, the delirium of omnipotence, and the ideal of the typical self-made man.

From the point of view of education within the family it is essential – particularly to keep at bay the cultural trends propagated by the mass media – to help our sons and daughters accept the limitations of their own bodies, of the family, of the circumstances of life, of their own intelligence, but at the same time to support their determination and willpower to overcome these limitations as far as they can.

## 6. CARE OF LIFE AND THE DYNAMISM OF LIFE

Closely connected with maternity is care of life. This is manifested in various ways as the ability to nurture: nurturing through the placenta – rich in everything that feeds subsistence, breast-feeding, ways of distributing food and protecting others, and also in the aptitude to soothe wounds and alleviate suffering in times of sickness, and to accompany loved ones in the final stage of their lives. Care of life, ranging from the new-born baby to our neighbour, is an educational exercise, not in the

sense of imposing rules of conduct, but of offering a safe world, mothering, encouragement, looks that speak appreciation and love, instilling confidence and supporting the hesitant steps of growing up.

The procreative dimension of the person carries on through the task of bringing up the child, handing on the cognitive structure of the world through language (the *mother* tongue). The mother does not merely repeat, as a certain feminist misinterpretation of the Eco myth would have it, but regenerates the language for her own creature, offers it in a way that is wholly hers, rewriting a culture with the added value of her own identity, her life story, of her empathetic relationship with her child.

In her care of a fragile being, a woman experiences the transition from being *for herself* as an individual to being *with* and *for* someone else. Perhaps this makes it easier to acquire the ability to provide support in every relationship, to generate and/or strengthen a bond. For in the broad sense of the term, motherhood means looking after, and caring for others, not because of some legal or occupational obligation, but driven by an ethical concern that demonstrates the extension of the code of motherhood beyond purely naturally-determined limits (*maternage*, Mother Church...).<sup>11</sup>

It is in the woman's own body that she finds her indispensable task of ensuring the initial survival of the newborn baby: breast-feeding, through which the baby sucks in the food that is processed by the mother's body, almost assimilating its very essence. St Augustine explicitly recognised that he had sucked in the faith together with his mother's milk from his earliest infancy. Mother's milk has always exercised a mysterious fascination throughout history. It is the symbol of infinite qualities, whether true or presumed, of a natural and complete food, both rich and poor, because it does not require huge resources to

<sup>11</sup> It is this concern, according to Ricoeur, which characterises a personalistic type of anthropology, underpinned by the threefold ethical basis: care of self, concern for others, just institutions (cf. P. RICOEUR, *Persona, comunità, istituzioni*, edited by A. Danese, Firenze, ECP, 1994, 66-72). For a further account of the maternal code as the ethics and anthropology of giving, see G.P. DI NICOLA, *Il linguaggio della madre*, cit.

obtain it. The child sucking the milk at his mother's breast receives "blood and milk", as a popular Italian adage has it, increasingly becoming consubstantial with its mother, who bonds with it and leaves imprints on the child's memory prior to language through her bodily contact, her looks of wonderment, words and play.

Even though caring is typical of all responsible men and women, the fact remains that women feel a much stronger calling to remain close to what is fragile, to the point of driving them to heroic acts of self-giving. This is exemplified by the well-known story of King Solomon that recounts the king's insight into the rationale of motherhood when settling a dispute between two mothers, each claiming a live baby to be hers and a stillborn child the other woman's. The king ordered the baby to be cut in two, knowing that the real mother would prefer to lose her child, be accused of perjury, be condemned by society and by the criminal law, rather than agree to her baby's death.

The weak side of this feature is that it can reduce love to sentimentalism, performing tasks and services to help others live well, to catering slavishly and materially to their needs, and to becoming so obsessed with others that it wipes out their vocation: in a word, loving too much and badly, practising ill-thought-out and ultimately unsatisfied and blackmailing prodigality.

It is perhaps more a male trait to tend to face reality with a typical *vital dynamism*, sorting the cards and then reshuffling the pack, taking delight in adventure and showing curiosity in everything. In a sense, men learn about fatherhood from women and are encouraged to develop nurturing behaviour so that a sense of attachment can develop and become established. This learning process is becoming increasingly more important today to create a happy family, considering that the Parsonian social model of the *provider father* has declined, and has been superseded by the more fashionable model of the *nurturant father*.<sup>12</sup> As one would expect, learning about fatherhood as caring is

<sup>12</sup> Cf. M.B. CRESCI, *Preparation for fatherhood: Dreams of transition*, in "Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy", 1 (1995), 77-88.

more costly in psychological terms than it is for women, because men lack the hormonal condition and bodily adaptation that pregnancy brings with it. The father's role as a bridge between the mother-child symbiosis and the external world is more specific. On the one hand, then, there is the calling to serve life and the fragility of life, and on the other the readiness to bring the world – that is to say, everything that is new and extraneous – into the warm nucleus of love and affection, and to a certain extent enriching and galvanising it. Men find it more difficult to do the reverse, namely, to take the world of warm and meaningful relations into the external world. At all events, we do not see the man as the one who “breaks” the mother-child symbiotic union, but as the one who contemplates the miracle of life and sets about assisting it. For the man is in a position to open up unexpected pathways, to help the family to tread unknown paths, trusting in circumstances, chance, and his own caring instinct (*paternage*).

In more general terms, the aptitude for action, reawoken by the feminine difference, brings mobility and enterprise into play, both of which have always been considered to be valuable resources of humanity as such. Addressing this feature, and quoting Sophocles who wrote in *Antigone*, “Many wonders there be, but none more wondrous than man”, Heidegger<sup>13</sup> translated it as “of many species, man is the most uncanny of all”. “Uncanny” (*das Unheimlichste*) was used in place of “wondrous” or “amazing” to express more properly what man is in terms of his enjoyment of novelty, conquest and adventure. These two aspects, the more classical one, referring to the wondrous, and Heidegger's, referring to the disturbing nature, can both be related to the sense of wonder Adam experienced when he met Eve, as an awakening within him caused by the discovery of a difference that set in motion dynamisms that until that time had remained latent, and aroused the enjoyment of life. In this sense, wonder and uncanniness are correlated.

The corruption of this feature lies in the greater difficulty of giving

<sup>13</sup> M. HEIDEGGER, *Introduction to Metaphysics*.

stability to the bond, of remaining faithful to a state of life, even if painful and with little gratification, and of taking on the burden of life, and not only its honours. Dynamism without a compass leads to the relativisation of values and to the pursuit of one's own path at the expense of unity with one's partner and responsibilities towards one's children.

In the family, all must be educated to care for the common good, to be willing to perform small acts of mutual service, independently of their gender or age: all must give something of themselves to build up communion and prevent the home from becoming a boarding house. This readiness stems from an attitude which contemplates the value of communion, and from attention to the signs that manifest the needs of others, an appreciation of one's own capacities, and the determination to act in response to real needs.

## 7. FEMININE FLEXIBILITY/TRANSGRESSION AND MASCULINE NORMATIVITY

Whereas a certain male chauvinist mentality has attributed to men the character of transcendence over reality (which is alleged to be in contrast to the supposed difficulty for women to rise above nature) one can see, in the women's body, the sign of something new which breaks with habit, which represents a positive transgression in terms of a settled life: birth, with the arrival of a new human being, opens up a new perspective on the world. Taking place as it does in a person's body, childbirth is never a common experience, even though it has happened to billions of women. It always entails the sudden emergence of a transgressive novelty, an extraordinary event, a miracle, which makes it possible to re-start history. Just as the woman makes room in her body, she also makes room in the family to enable a human being emerging into the world to live there in the most worthy manner possible. She is aware of her duty to bring that world close to the child, and make it homely, regenerating the world to the measure of the child, so that it does not appear hostile.



As the bearer, by nature, of this innovating transgression, femininity disposes women to supersede the normal concatenation of events by opening up to the unforeseen, to the miracle of life. By focusing her efforts on essentials, a woman tends to attribute secondary importance to everything that has to do with social, political, legal and Church structures. Women have a heightened capacity to live within structures, accepting their rules, while at the same time moving beyond them, as one can see from their readiness to act against them whenever essential values and affections are at stake: in other words, to infringe what has been prescribed by rules, by the institutions, and by everything which is, or is able to be, systematically ordered.

Transgression, symbolically speaking, evokes the myth of Antigone, who was buried alive because of her obstinacy in burying her dead brother against the edict of her uncle, Creon. Antigone could not abandon her brother to the birds of prey. In the poetic imagination of Sophocles, she transgressed and was defeated by the law, but she was the victor from the point of view of history, of her ancestors and the gods awaiting her in the hereafter. Through her, according to Hegel's beautiful insight, defeated femininity nevertheless remained in civil society as the "eternal irony of the community".<sup>14</sup> Antigone upheld the superiority of the law of love, which is also the language of the gods, for she preferred to obey God rather than men.

Linked to this feature is the necessary detachment from structures which makes it possible to reach out to people, beyond the bounds of their social status. It also makes it easier to understand the different type of relationship that women have with the faith, in which they are less concerned with rules and institutions, and more concerned with the spiritual, affective and mystical relationship with God. In eschatological terms, thanks to their ability to live "inside" and "outside", to be within the visible Church with their soul directed towards the invisible Church, one can better understand the fulfilment of the royal

<sup>14</sup> Cf G.W.F. HEGEL, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. On Antigone we also refer the reader to G.P. DI NICOLA, *Nostalgia di Antigone*, Teramo, Andromeda, 1998.

priesthood of men and women in God, and the crowning of truth in love (“the greatest of these is love”, 1 Cor 13:13).<sup>15</sup>

The weak side of this feature is the inability to come to terms with objectivity and hence the tendency to seek refuge in the private sphere, to concentrate on affective bonds and blood ties. The sense of legality is weakened, and there is a prevalence of a desire to turn the common good to personal ends, defending only their own “private” sphere.

A stronger tendency towards “*normativity*”, that is to say, organising social life by producing new rules to guide behaviour and to judge it in terms of consistency and rationality, appears to be a specifically masculine trait. It is worthwhile recalling here the study by Gilligan who, agreeing with Piaget, showed that in children’s games, the boys are more concerned with the rules, while the girls are more interested in relationships: when they have to choose, boys would give up relationships for the sake of the rules, while girls would try to change the rules in order to safeguard relationships. Consequently, there is a female identity oriented towards being with others (*mitsein*), and a male identity oriented towards organising relations according to an ethos that is more attentive to normative morality.

This masculine feature should not be seen as a sort of “fixation” with laying down rules, because it also has a positive side in the tendency to move beyond the subjective attachment to *ego*, family, and loved ones, endeavouring to create that equidistance between everyone which is the source of distributive justice. It is only by applying objective rules that supersede individual attachments, that it becomes possible to rise above blood ties, one’s own ego, and the search for escape routes and loopholes to solve problems. This is why Paul Ricoeur considers concern to build up just institutions to be an essential condition of the ethical triad (“self-esteem, care for others, and just institutions”).<sup>16</sup> This makes it possible to achieve that level of impartial imper-

<sup>15</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 30.

<sup>16</sup> The reader is referred to P. RICOEUR, *Persona, comunità, istituzioni* (edited by A. Danese), cit.

sonality which both prevents the domination of the strong and intelligent and imitates the conduct of a God who distributes his love to everyone: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust... You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (*Mt* 5:43-48).

The corruption of this feature consists of an excessively bureaucratic mentality, treating people impersonally, coldly, and with detachment, which might be useful for reaching out to everyone, but it penalises those who do not fit the model. The rule of the Gospel is the benchmark here: "And he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath'" (*Mk* 2:27), "for the Son of man is lord of the sabbath" (*Mt* 12:8).

It is much easier in the family than anywhere else to understand the primacy of the person, because every member feels that they are loved, and not merely being used for a plan. Boys and girls learn to create harmonious relations with the others even before they see them in terms of their roles, and in the framework of rules which stake out their functions. They therefore learn to live in compliance with certain agreed rules much more than imposed rules, and to be flexible in dealing with contingent events and needs that may arise. Respect for an agreed order within the family is the precondition for taking on social responsibility enabling the members of the family to take care of what belongs to all, whether it is the front garden, or the telephone booth or the school desk, or the institutions and those who represent them.

## 8. THE POSITIVE FACE OF PAIN AND THE DETERMINATION TO DEFEAT EVIL

We may view physical suffering as a sign of decline and an intimation of death, but there is one particular sign in women, in childbirth, of labour pains which are closely bound up with procreation, a sign of

*the positive face of pain.* Procreativity, as a process in progress even before the nine-month period of gestation, does not end with the moment of delivery but continues to develop at the symbolic hermeneutic level with great human and spiritual depth: every birth entails a laceration, a separation. The cries of the mother and the child express both the celebration of the conclusion and the beginning, of both pain and the triumph of life over death. Above all, going into labour is the moment which seems to subjugate the mother's body overwhelmed with pain while at the same time it opens it to fruitfulness. This is why femininity is the bearer of the "boundless power of the negative", bearing testimony of the unbreakable bond between pain and love, and between death and resurrection.

The birth pangs generally evoke the capacity to regenerate the world, through the transmission/re-creation of the culture that the mother gives to her children, and, in particular, her communication of a religious view of life. For through her acts, her kisses and her caresses, the mother hands on the living experience of a love that is transmitted unspoken, and the child not yet able to speak. Generating, feeding and nurturing the baby is the essential precondition for the human mind to be able to form the idea of God.

Bringing up a child is a re-living of the pangs of childbirth in small daily doses. Regeneration entails accepting at every moment the difference of others and, from the cultural point of view, making the social and mental dimensions of living together increasingly more human, generating bonds and networks of solidarity. Every generating activity is therefore symbolically maternal.

It is for this reason that a meaningful linkage has been established between the motherhood of a woman and the motherhood of Christ (and after him and with him, the motherhood of the Church). This can already be seen in the episode of Nicodemus, who asked Jesus "Can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (cf. *Jn* 3: 4). According to Jesus, it is essential to be born again as new persons. Jesus himself therefore appears metaphorically like a mother who regenerates people and enables them to be re-born. The saving work of

Jesus on the Cross is also a maternal generative act from which the Church has sprung, as the new Eve. His cry is the cry of the birth of the new creation.

The pangs of childbirth do not therefore have the last word: they mark the passage into life. They remind us that all suffering contains within in the promise of a greater joy, heralding in a more infinite, and more enlightening, understanding of the mystery of Divine love. Seen in this way, the woman's body becomes a special sign of the mystery of life triumphing over death. It is certainly no coincidence that the annunciation of death/resurrection was first entrusted to Mary Magdalene, thanks to whom it became part of the faith of the early Christian community.

The corruption of this feature consists of playing the victim, over-exaggerating one's own suffering, attention-seeking, depression, and all the different ways of rejecting suffering which can even take on pathological proportions (bulimia, anorexia, depression, suicide or attempted suicide).

Rather than fleeing from danger or the tendency to give in to it and endure it, men tend to see it as a challenge *to overcome evil* and dominate it. This tendency, which has been chronicled for centuries, can go so far as devotion to a cause considered to be just, and even to risking – and sacrificing – their lives for the cause. There are also cowardly men who are fearful of pain, of course; but in the collective imagination the male, as such, stands for the will to overcome the limitations of life by placing their own lives in jeopardy.

For Hegel, the capacity to face up to death is what marks the distance between the master and the servant, in that the servant entrusts himself to the protection of the master, and in exchange offers him his dependency and his service. This is a dialectical relationship which can also be applied when analysing the emergence of social classes, and to the relationship between man and woman, because the male, who faces up to risks outside the home, is repaid by acquiring lordship over women. But Hegel also points out that this dialectical relationship is also reversed, in that the master is also dependent on his servant for the

services provided, in a kind of mutual interdependency. Nevertheless, he remains convinced that the readiness to put one's own life at stake is the sign of mastery or lordship.

The corruption of this feature is recklessness and impetuous hot-headedness (one only has to think of teenage games such as speeding, or driving at high speed with their eyes closed...) with no thought about the proportion between what they are placing in jeopardy – their lives – and the effects of this on their loved ones, and the gain they wish to obtain from what they are doing. Life is played out by individuals, detached from their relations with their family and their own people.

One can understand, from the point of view of a child's upbringing, how essential it is for the child to learn within the family how to appreciate and make the most of every moment of daily life, particularly the negative moments, without being fearful, and without pulling back when confronted by difficulties. It is in the family that children build up their confidence in their ability, and their duty, to boldly face up to obstacles, while at the same time they acquire the conviction that pain brings with it the mystery of fruitfulness, to be contemplated and appreciated.

The traits of femininity and masculinity mentioned above link up very well with personalistic and communitarian anthropology, because they are ethically sound features for all, even though they are more meaningfully identifiable in terms of the woman's body and life experience. It does not so much have to do with resources that produce effects which are automatically positive, or with "*idem*" identities, but with a task to be performed: at the ethical and spiritual levels, every woman goes through the experience of learning about motherhood and from motherhood provided that she learns to listen to the silent language of her body; and by seeing it inscribed in the body of woman, man learns, even more than women, that people are themselves if they give themselves, if they know how to love someone by suffering, if they know how to stand aside to give that person space, if they have a relationship with that other person with that maternal procreational

attitude which generates new inter-subjective realities.<sup>17</sup> The same applies to male resources, because love within the family, as Edith Stein said, makes it evident that each gender depends on the other and that they are co-educated together, learning to live their lives with more complete and more mature human attitudes.

In both, in man and in woman, although in a different manner, there is an implicit calling to give their lives, which is mainly – albeit not exclusively – achieved in the woman by predisposing her for motherhood, and mainly – albeit not exclusively – in the man through conquest and struggle. While the difference becomes obvious at the physical level and in terms of its phenomenological implications, each of them in their own way are reunited by the same calling to “be for”, to give their own bodies and their own blood to the point of giving up their lives. Everyone recognises the symbolic value of blood because of its sacred and sacrificial meanings in every culture, in both the positive and negative sense, for its destructive-cannibalistic (bloodthirsty goddesses and gods) and its purifying effect (the blood shed for noble causes). It is the sign of deep love, which does not flinch before suffering, but gives itself without qualification. It is even more imbued with religious significance when the blood is that of a pure victim, a young animal, a virgin, or a youth, as the first-fruits of life which are pleasing to the gods. The married couple learn their personhood through their relationship lived day by day, in a relational dynamic which across time creatively and flexibly builds up their common way of thinking and feeling. They learn to smooth away the difficulties and to knock the corners off their characters, making the living of a good life easier for each other within their mutual relationship. By holding together equality and difference, love and justice, they offer their children the best testimony of how possible it is to joyfully accept their own identities and the identity of every other member of the human race.

<sup>17</sup> “He must increase, but I must decrease” (*Jn* 3:30) said St John the Baptist in reference to Jesus.





# 1. Participation and collaboration in the life of the Church

MARÍA EUGENIA DÍAZ DE PFENNICH

*President of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO) and Vice-president of the Conference of International Catholic Organizations. She is a member of the Pontifical Council for the Laity and of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace*

I really appreciate the invitation to participate in this seminar. It will surely be a useful tool in the admirable work carried out by the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

The reflections I offer are simple. They are based on my experience of many years of work in different lay organizations and my present role at the leadership of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO), a world federation which affiliates women from all continents.

To begin with, I would like to refer to an experience I had in Togo, in West Africa, two months ago, during the celebration of the WUCWO regional conference for Africa which gathered 150 women from 14 different African countries.

On the first day of the meeting in Lomé I observed a woman who carried her small boy on her back; her youth and the tenderness with which she treated her one-and-a-half year old child captured my attention. Later I approached her and she told me that she was from Ketao, in the northern part of Togo, from where she had traveled five hours to get to Lomé. Her name is Clementine and she does not belong to any organization or movement, but is committed in her parish. She had heard on the radio that a congress for Catholic women would be held in Lomé with the theme, "The Prophetic Mission of the Women of Africa in the Face of the Challenges of Today". Immediately she thought that she should participate because she wanted to grasp this opportunity to become better prepared.

I asked her if she had been able to pay the registration fee and the lodging for the four days. This was around two hundred dollars, and that was in addition to the transportation cost. She answered with sincerity: “I asked my husband to help me with some money and to take care of my other two children. He gave me the equivalent of eight dollars, the parish priest gave me the same amount and another priest, who was visiting him, gave me ten dollars. With that money I came to Lomé, because otherwise, I would never have managed to participate in an event like this”. Obviously, once the organizers of the congress knew about that, they helped her with the lodging and with part of the fare for her return trip. Her participation in the congress was exceptional, not only because of her interest but also due to her faith and her courage to prepare herself better to assume her commitment in her community as a baptized Christian.

Now I have news that she has begun her work with the women of Ketao. Clementine has discovered a new world of opportunities for her personal fulfilment, and above all, she experienced the providential love of God our Father.

In another part of the world, in South Korea in the city of Pusan, I had the opportunity to visit a shelter for women who suffer violence in their families. This hostel was built by the Catholic Church with the help of the government and it protects approximately eighty women, some of them very young, who can stay there for nine months. It is managed by Cho Hyun-Soon, an exceptional woman who is single and lay, and who is committed to her diocese. She works together with a team of professional men and women. They assist the women who come to seek refuge for themselves and their children. They find them temporary work and send their children to school. Her work demands courage, special training, full-time dedication and is a vivid proclamation of the Gospel.

These were the deepest impressions of my most recent trips and they are an example of how women from different parts of the world can do extraordinary things when they live their faith.

One reason why I particularly appreciate this seminar and its

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content is because I greatly value collaboration between men and women. I believe that mutual complementarity is a tremendous richness which we should fully utilize to construct a more just society. I wish to share with you my experience as a woman who presently presides over a Board of forty-four women from twenty-seven different countries representing all continents. In this case our vision is the world of women from the perspective of women. On the other hand, I also form part of the Coordination Committee of the Conference of International Catholic Organizations which is formed by twelve people, ten men and two women. The styles of work of the two boards of which I form part is notably different with regard to their objectives, methods and personal relations, but neither of them reflect the real world in which there is usually a more balanced proportion of men and women.

When speaking about pastoral perspectives, it is important to recognize and take into account the great diversity of cultures and situations. The situation of men and women and the way they live the Gospel in different parts of the world are the guidelines for pastoral action. There are notable differences between the North and the South, the East and West, between different cultural strata, races and historical backgrounds.

We all know that pastoral action must take into account the most urgent needs of the community, because then it follows that the interest, response and commitment of the people are very positive.

The emergence of women in all areas is something we all acknowledge. Woman has not only been able to acquire civil and political rights, but has also become increasingly aware of her dignity as a person and of the importance of her role in society.

Here I quote a paragraph from a document of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) which speaks about pastoral care: "The more open and more decisive presence of women in the world of labor, in politics and arts, in the fields of knowledge and of technology, in the social media and in the life of the Church, has been an enrichment for them, for families and for all of society. When the Church assumes these changes they become a big challenge for pastoral action. When a

culture is challenged to carry out 'new vital syntheses', the Church feels particularly called to be present with the Gospel...".<sup>1</sup>

The steadily growing participation of women in social life is also found within the Church where they are noteworthy for their testimony of life, their response to the values of the Gospel, their work and commitment in catechesis, in defense of human rights, in education, assistance to the sick and particularly, in charity and missionary work.

Throughout the globalized world where we live we have problems of war, massive migration, urban agglomerations, anonymity, loneliness, alienation, hunger, the trafficking of women and girls, hedonism and pornography. On the other hand, we see new values now that motivate the search for justice, the construction of peace and initiatives of solidarity in the face of great disasters. What pastoral perspectives can we propose?

To respond to the current challenges of a new evangelization and of the construction of a culture of love at this time in history, it is fitting that the Church continue to be committed to helping women and men to be aware of their identity, dignity and mission, and to strengthen interrelationships based on mutual respect and appreciation, in recognition of the existing differences and in dialogue.

#### PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES WITH REGARD TO ORGANIZATIONS AND MOVEMENTS OF THE LAITY

The previous deliberations bring me to propose the following perspectives, which do not claim to be exhaustive. First of all, pastoral reflection is needed on human dignity and the complementary mission of men and women wherever there is pastoral action: in education, in the world of labor and in the family.

Pastoral action needs to assist people at different stages in life, and so it should specifically attend to the pastoral care of children, youth and the aged.

<sup>1</sup> CELAM, *The Woman in Latin America*, no. 58, 1994.

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Pastoral action and care should encourage the active participation of men and women in social transformation inspired by evangelical values. It should provide special assistance to the organizations and movements of the laity which promote Christian education in living the faith in a more personal, mature and committed way. It should promote teams of pastoral reflection on the mission of men and women and how it is understood in different cultures. Pastoral action and care should help to re-discover and to re-evaluate the sense of our body which is ruled by the laws of the Creator. It should prepare the laity to be heard as voices of the people of God in international events that deal with sociological issues concerning female or male identity. It should promote appropriate discussion and guidance on homosexuality with parents and educators, in order to help children and teenagers avoid the confusion caused by so much harmful publicity in the media. Finally, pastoral action and care should help people to re-discover the value of the sacraments, especially the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist, which are sources of salvation and hope.

With regard to the mission and dignity of the human being, pastoral action and care should give attention to the right of girls to receive secondary and higher education because there is a notable inequality with boys in many countries. It should search for ways to enable children and teenagers, men and women, to discover and live authentic love so that they may acquire a healthy vision of sexuality, one that restores value to motherhood and the gift of life. It should find ways to fortify the family nucleus through adequate pastoral care for the family, so that parents will share the responsibility of educating their children and be good models of masculinity and femininity for their children. Pastoral care is required for women and men affected by poverty, violence in the family and those who find themselves in difficult situations. Many of these are providers for their families, single mothers, women and men abandoned, separated or divorced. Particular recognition should be given to women's work in the family and their irreplaceable presence in the education and upbringing of the children. Women's natural capacities should be encouraged, such as their aptitude in

creating relationships, building community and living the values of mercy, tenderness and the care of life in all its forms. Pastoral action and care should also search for ways to fortify the integration of the family as an ideal place for the development of the human being with the effective presence of the father and mother.

It is my conviction that in a world where dangers and threats of all kinds are increasing, I consider that only by accepting and understanding the dignity of women and involving them in all the processes of decision making, can the construction of a more humane world be achieved. With regard to the Church, women have a special capacity to make the Church more visibly a space where there is life, reconciliation, hope, acceptance, mercy and confidence in the love of God.

We cannot talk about the participation and collaboration of the laity in the life of the Church without referring to our Blessed Mother, Mary, whom we know to be the woman who was chosen by God. She is our intercessor through whom we receive mercy, consolation, wisdom and strength. The sanctuaries dedicated to Mary in all continents have been visited all down the centuries by pilgrims in search of love, health and consolation in an unjust, sick and inhumane world.

I presented to you at the beginning the examples of two lay women who represent all those dedicated lay people at the grassroots level all over the world. Clementine of Togo, Cho of Korea and many others, with their courage, faith, hope and generosity are the presence of the love and tenderness of God in our world.

## 2. Participation and collaboration in the life of the Church

GUZMÁN CARRIQUIRY

*Lawyer, University lecturer,*

*Undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for the Laity*

Within the unity of human nature, the original bi-polarity of the male being and the female being – created in the image of God, that is to say, in the communion of the Trinity – is the primordial dialectical relationship in friendship, love, communion, and above all in marriage, and hence in the birth of the family, and also at the roots of society as a whole (the “nation”, etymologically derived from the Latin meaning “birth” and hence motherhood, and “fatherland”, indicate forms of brotherhood that go beyond lineage) and in the very being of the Church herself. When the apostle Paul wrote that there is neither male nor female he did not mean that the differences had been wiped out, or that the contrasts between them had been avoided, even the most dramatic ones caused by the entry into the world of sin, and the alienation, enmity and domination that entered with it. He meant that the power of the Resurrection of Christ and his grace make it possible to experience reconciliation and communion, the miracle of a unity which men and women cannot achieve by relying on their own strength alone. The Church is the pledge of the new creation, the first fruits of a reconciled humanity and the sacrament of communion, and so is certainly called to bear shining testimony to the completeness of the human being with this bipolar nature of male and female. These ontological, historical and sacramental facts are of fundamental importance for discerning and fostering the participation and collaboration of men and women in the life of the Church.

Over the past few decades, and particularly during the Pontificate

of John Paul II, the Catholic Church has dedicated great attention to the participation of women in the life and mission of the Church, addressing the issue of the presence of men in Christian communities only on rare occasions, and then simply to reiterate the fact that the ministerial priesthood is the exclusive preserve of men.

Perhaps the Church had no alternative. The decline of the patriarchal family, the way that feminism has burst into history, the realisation of the personal dignity of women and their equal rights and duties, have cast habits and attitudes dating back to time immemorial into turmoil, bringing about far-reaching social and cultural changes, raising serious questions and posing new challenges to the life and mission of the Church. For the Church, as John Paul II wrote in his *Letter to women*, has had to “examine the past with courage”, and purge herself of those historical constraints and cultural vestiges that have hampered the advancement of women and created a misguided understanding of their dignity. But in doing so, the Church has had to stave off ideological and Manichaeian exaggerations seeking to portray the whole of the history of women, before the advent of “feminism”, as a long period of imprisonment in a dark cavern dominated by Church obscurantism, tinged with misogyny. This is why the Church has felt the need to highlight the dignity of women, whose value is exalted in Christianity more than in any other religious experience. One only needs to recall that God’s plan was “made subject” to the *fiat* of a woman; that Jesus was born of a woman – the perfect disciple, the mother of all believers and the epitome of the Church, the new Eve – that during his public life he had a decidedly revolutionary relationship with women, when one recalls the discrimination to which they were subject at the time; that the announcement of the Resurrection was first made and entrusted to a woman; that numerous women cooperated with the Apostles, enriching the life of the early Christian communities with their charisms, their prophecies and their services; and that they have played a decisive part throughout the whole of the Church’s two thousand year history (“history



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marked by grand works”)<sup>1</sup> in which the “feminine genius” bears a special witness to the “*mistero caritatis*” in humanising and evangelising society. More than any other pope before him, John Paul II always emphasised the extremely high esteem in which the Church has always held women. The Church has also enriched theology and ecclesiology with the Marian – feminine, virginal, spousal and maternal – dimension, which is a specific feature of the Church’s mystery. Hans Urs von Balthasar developed this inseparable linkage between the “Marian” and the “Petrine” dimensions of the Church. But what is most important is the fact of recognising that everyone, men and women alike, are called to holiness, to the perfection of love, and that everything else, including the essential apostolic ministry, is merely instrumental to this end.

However, the debate on the participation of women in the life of the Church is often reduced merely to a laboured listing of rights, functions and responsibilities, almost as if to offer a consolation prize to compensate women for the fact that only men are admitted to the ministerial priesthood, as Christ willed it, and as the tradition of the Church has properly confirmed subsequently. Any approach to this subject purely in terms of “ecclesiastical politics” only leads to a spiritual wilderness and blurs the sense of belonging to the ecclesial communion, a communion which emerges devalued in the image of a structure of powers and functions for religious and moral ends.

The sudden entry of women into public life – a phenomenon which John XXIII listed among the “signs of the times”<sup>2</sup> – caused an upheaval in all the traditional male habits and conduct in marriage, the family, society and the Church. This is why it is worthwhile briefly examining the ways in which men participate and cooperate in the life of the Church. The Pope made a passing reference to this in *Christifideles Laici* when he wrote, “Many voices were raised in the Synod Hall expressing the fear that excessive insistence given to the status and role

<sup>1</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, no. 49.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. JOHN XXIII, Encyclical Letter, *Pacem in Terris*, no. 22.

of women would lead to an unacceptable omission, that, in point, regarding *men*. In reality, various sectors in the Church must lament the absence or the scarcity of the presence of men, some of whom abdicate their proper Church responsibilities, allowing them to be fulfilled only by women”.<sup>3</sup>

This is not the appropriate place to refer to the early ages of Christianity when pagan intellectuals described the faith as a religion for the simpleminded, children and women. The gradual decline in the numbers of men attending Church began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Enlightenment and Jansenist views tended to reduce religion to a moral basis for socially acceptable rules of conduct, and mystery at a mythical moment of immature reason, and when there was a pronounced disparagement of ritual practices, particularly with regard to popular piety. Religion, was therefore viewed as a moral and social ‘mortar’ for the masses, the poor and women! “Enlightened” men, particularly those coming from the ruling and intellectual classes, indulgently accompanied their womenfolk to the Sunday celebrations, but they waited for them at the entrance to the Church, or in the square, or in the café. They did not mind their wives engaging in religious devotion, but they adopted an attitude of aloof detachment. Nietzsche was a good example of the man who was supremely free of every sense of belonging, despising Christianity which he considered to be a religion for women. Even today, as in those days, far more women than men go to church. At Sunday Mass, one can quite often see the men clustered together, standing apart and timid, at the back of the church, while at weekday Masses, the Rosary and other devotional practices, women far outnumber the men.

This male absenteeism is also partly due to the new conditions of life and work as a result of the “industrial revolution” and the advent of the mass consumption society. The separation between the home and the workplace, the increasing failure of men to perform their family duties, and the uprooting of men from parish life as part of a radical

<sup>3</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, no. 52.

process of dechristianisation, have increasingly distanced men from the Church.

All this is having further implications and repercussions on the way fathers absent themselves or abscond from the family environment, and the crisis of the male and father figure, that has become a serious issue in contemporary society. The figure of the *pater familias* which had survived social upheavals for 2000 years since Roman times, and which had remained almost intact until the middle of the 20th century, now seems to have been eclipsed. The secularised society, with a separation between sexuality and reproduction, and between sexuality and education, and with easy divorce and the breakup of the family, has caused a weakening of men's sense of responsibility towards their children. One-third of all the children born in the United States – the mirror and the epitome of the advanced society – are born out of wedlock, and two out of three children do not know the identity of their father. The divorce rate has now surpassed fifty per cent, and more than forty per cent of all American children live separately from their parents. But even in intact families, the time that men spend working outside the home has increased by over twenty per cent since 1929, and is continually increasing. Yet they are the ones who have to shoulder the greatest burden of increasingly more demanding and runaway household consumption patterns, which often turns them into mere family income-providers. Furthermore, hardly ever are children awarded to the custody of their fathers in the event of divorce, and abortion can be practised without the consent of the child's father. Fatherhood runs the risk of becoming superfluous, irrelevant and impersonal, the extreme proof of which is Donor Insemination, using semen supplied by a donor who is normally anonymous. This process, in which the figure and the task of the father is gradually disappearing has been accompanied and further boosted by an ideological programme to destroy the paternal role and authority itself, with fatherhood being equated with abuse of power. Jean-Paul Sartre eloquently put it this way, "*Il n'y a pas un bon père; ça c'est la norme*".

This is having hideous consequences on education. We can see it in

the statistics: according to the United States Justice Department, sixty-nine per cent of all child victims of sexual abuse live without a biological father; children brought up without the benefit of a father's presence are twice as likely to be involved in criminal assaults as children brought up by both parents; seventy-two per cent of teenage murderers and seventy per cent of teenage rapists grew up without a father, and eleven out of twelve cases of classroom violence are caused by children deprived of a father's presence. The American census authorities say that ninety per cent of the homeless and eighty-five per cent of young people in prison were brought up without a father; seventy-three per cent of young people committing suicide were without fathers. All these dramatic figures reveal that paternal absenteeism is the cause of serious handicaps, with huge emotional, affective and educational repercussions on their children.

It is true that it is on the mother's love, expressed by embracing, gazing, caressing and every other gesture, that the self-love of their children will depend. The capacity to truly love others and oneself is based on this essential experience of feeling loved. This experience, then, is an essential cornerstone of everyone's existence. Numerous clinical researches and educational experiences have revealed that the lack of a mother-and-child relationship causes serious damage to the child. The absence of the father makes it necessary for the mother's love to occupy an increasingly more disproportionate part of her son's life, giving him the desire for privacy, causing him to seek haven in the past, becoming inward-looking, wishing to remain a child forever in order to continue to be dependent on the mother's care, prolonged adolescence, the increasingly more widespread tendency to leave the family home at a later age, the difficulty in decision-taking and in becoming spiritually and affectively committed on a lasting basis, a certain weakness in facing up to life and its numerous trials, an inclination towards narcissism, and a reluctance to be guided. A boy's growth is under threat without the support of his father, who is duty-bound to hand on to him the instinctive male culture, to support him as he enters adult society, to protect him and shield him, and to free him from the fear of coming to

terms with new situations, to educate him to control his aggression: all these things educate the boy, helping him to become autonomous, enabling him to become aware of his own identity and responsibilities, and teaching him to manage his freedom in the knowledge that he is bound by rules and limitations. The father breaks the symbiosis between the son and his mother, showing that life does not only entail satisfaction, confirmation, reassurance, but also loss, sacrifice, fatigue, order and discipline, thereby making the boy stronger. It is difficult to be a mother or a son with an absentee father, or a father without an identity.

These situations are reflected in the Church's own educational tasks, giving rise to serious problems: the weakening experience of fatherhood is making the figure of God as a Father more ethereal, and is weakening the affective and creative power of the faith in history. It is true that John Paul I exclaimed that "God is a mother"; J. Moltmann speaks of God as a "maternal Father"; V. Soloviev has emphasised the female aspects of God, particularly in relation to wisdom; others have drawn attention to the frequency with which the womb is mentioned in the Old Testament to represent the love of God for humanity. The reality of God transcends all names, but it does not make them superfluous. There is also a gnostic, anti-Christian feminist theology which violently rejects any male symbolism. But God deliberately revealed himself as the Father, and behind the one hundred and fifty times the term "Father" appears in Greek in the Gospels there is the Aramaic word "Abba", which reminds us of the babbling of a baby trying to utter its first words, which are so similar in most languages. God leaves his imprint on humanity through a fatherhood which is similar to his own. The loss of this sense of the Creator as a Father brings with it the risk of a loss of responsibility for procreation and education, being positive when standing up to reality, supporting the child's path through life and helping to overcome the fear of our own limitations, which ultimately means sin and death, and which are not our be-all and end-all. It is certainly no coincidence that the ideologies that supported the rejection of fatherhood of all kinds, and the concept of father/master, have all been linked to Death-of-God theology, the crisis of authority,

the rejection of moral rules, the idea of freedom as breaking every bond, and of happiness as the frenetic and excessive individualistic quest for self-satisfaction. Yet it appears today that even though this culture and this anthropological view has since become standard thinking, it is now losing its impetus, and among increasingly larger sections of the younger generation, who are often victims of this culture, there is a new desire for a more human life, beyond the old patriarchal masculinism and radical feminism that have led nowhere.

The paradoxical result of this is that there is a powerful trend today towards the feminisation of the Christian people, despite the fact that the priestly ministry is only for men which often ensures the survival and dissemination of certain male characteristics. For one sees more women present today not only at Church services but also performing non-ordained ministerial functions in Christian communities. The Christian education of children and the teaching of the catechism in the Church are tasks for which women are mainly responsible, and it is significant that the numbers of women teachers are rising. It is mainly women who assist the priests, cooperate in liturgical functions, welcome people, run works of charity and carry out many different services to the community. When there is a vast majority of women engaged in a Church environment or activity the men tend to stand aside or distance themselves. Think of what is happening today with altar servers: increasingly more girls are now serving at Mass and there seem to be increasingly fewer altar-boys.

There can therefore be no doubt about the valuable contribution of this feminisation in making the female dimension of the Church become reality. It is seen in the sense of welcoming others and the totally Other, being receptive to God's plan and gift by readily saying '*fiat*'. It brings the experience of grace and free giving, and the capacity to cherish, meditate and savour the mystery in our hearts. It brings concern and care for the human being in every minimum aspect, and service to men and women with love. It makes a notable contribution to enhancing communion between people. It has the sensitivity to intuitively understand other people's needs; the ability to respond to them

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readily with a listening ear and companionship; an understanding of the reasoning of the will, of wisdom and of the heart. It shows discreet and tenacious strength in the face of the mystery of suffering, and edifying patience that is vitalised by expectation and hope. But there can also be worrying aspects of this feminisation, which are not to be underestimated. Christian communities often become more affective than normative, and fall back on becoming a comfortable haven without the risk of all-round freedom. There is too much weakness of identity in the Church, where satisfying the need for religion often evades the dimension of detachment and sacrifice, the discipline of communion, the fatigue of reason; and there is no tempering of the will to be a “new creature” in the spiritual battle. The feelings of loving one another often replace the realisation of the reasonableness of the faith and the commitment to a “creed” that cannot depend on subjectivism. There is a certain “everything goes” mentality, and a lack of determination, even with a fair degree of aggressiveness, to embark on new forms of Christian presence amid the din of the battle of the world. The crisis of fatherhood is the relativisation of hierarchy, authority and order. Sometimes it is the lifestyle of the ministers and the environment in which they live that makes it easier for them to approach women and young people than adult men. Could it perhaps be that there is often a lack of a more “masculine” exercise of authority?

We are certainly far from having a thorough understanding of the contributions that men and women have made to building up the Christian Community, knowing – as John Paul II has written – that, A woman and man are marked neither by a static and undifferentiated equality nor by an irreconcilable and inexorably conflictual difference. Their most natural relationship, which corresponds to the plan of God, is the “unity of the two”, a relational “uni-duality”,<sup>4</sup> which makes the difference “enriching and a source of responsibility”. The Church still needs more self-awareness and self-fulfilment based on masculinity and femininity. In this connection, a valuable comparison here can be

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*, *Letter to Women*, no. 8.

drawn with the experience of marriage which, in the union of the man and the woman, creates the vocation of love which God himself writes into their being, and which is elevated by the grace of the sacrament: “the great mystery” which is the sign of the spousal relationship of God with his people, and of Christ with his Church. But how can we fail to also take into account the treasure of virginity, taken on by those who have been chosen by the Lord, as their way of life, who by identifying with Christ temper their freedom by self-domination and the capacity to love, while marking a detachment from the never-quenched desire to possess the other. Marriage-family and the Church are the custodians and witnesses of the genuine communion that exists between man and woman, which flourishes in history, revealing virginity and nuptiality, fatherhood and motherhood, sonship and brotherhood, as the different faces of God’s love.



## The cultural issue: proposals for dialogue

FR DENIS BIJU-DUVAL

*Lecturer at the Pontifical Lateran University, currently Dean of the Pontifical Institute “Redemptor Hominis” at the same university.*

According to the media, it would appear that the Church cannot be a valid party to the contemporary cultural debate on relations between men and women. I will spare you the standard list of stereotypes that are normally used when discussing sexual morality and the issue of women’s ordination, and so many other topics that are linked to the theme of our Seminar, which are used as a pretext to charge the Church of wishing to perpetuate a male-dominated system that has now been superseded and is no longer viable. Culture – thankfully – in its deepest and fullest sense<sup>1</sup> – cannot be reduced to what the mass media are propagating, even though we must not underestimate their role. We therefore have to delve more deeply, and penetrate the surface of the debate to reach the underlying dynamics: the aspirations and values, the sufferings and the bewilderment that are creating such havoc in the modern world regarding the male and female identity, and the relationship between them. Regardless of what the mass media may claim, the Church will only have a credible future as a partner in the contemporary cultural debate when able to discern these underlying dynamics which underpin the current debates, and then to join in and be present.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 53.

## WHY IS DIALOGUE NECESSARY?

The pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* provides us with the essential keys to answering this question.<sup>2</sup> In the mission of salvation, the Church is “in the world but not of the world” (cf. *Jn* 17:11-19). This means that it is the sacrament of the expansion of the Kingdom of God: it contributes to the worldwide spread of the salvation brought by Christ, a salvation which the world cannot give itself because the Father alone is its original source. In so doing, the Church shifts the focus of the world’s attention away from itself, and gives it the keys to achieve something that lies beyond itself. On the specific issue of man and woman, the Church therefore provides a genuine service to the world, offering the Word of God which reveals man and woman to themselves, and the authentic sense of their destiny. By discovering who they are in the eyes of God, men and women acquire the capability to give the world, society and the family all the riches of their own resources, contributing to the growth of the Kingdom of God which transcends the world. In order to achieve all this, the Church must constantly embody the Word: the Revelation to which the Church bears testimony can only become meaningful to those for whom it is intended if it is manifested in their own language, and according to the specific genius of their own culture. This raises the whole question of inculturation, which requires the Church to seriously acknowledge what is positive in different cultures, what they manifest in their own ways about the mystery of man and woman. At the same time, the Church purifies these cultures and opens them up to prospects which are impossible for them to achieve on their own. As John Paul II wrote in his encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*, this is a slow, gradual, and difficult process, sometimes creating conflict, but one that is enriching and fruitful both for the Church and for the world.<sup>3</sup>

In this process the world brings to the Church the riches it has received from God through creation, and which it develops according

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, Chapter IV.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, nos. 52-54.

to the dynamics of the cultures that inhabit the world. Since “in him [Christ] all things were created” (*Col 1:16*), nothing that is true and just in humanity is extraneous to God, just as nothing that is historically outside Revelation is extraneous to him, or that which, since the birth of Christianity, has become established in a spirit of contradiction to Christianity and to the Church. As far as the issue of men and women is concerned, it is obvious that historical feminism came into being partly as a reaction to a Church that was charged with perpetuating a patriarchal mentality and culture that ran counter to the aspirations of women. This in itself should encourage the Church to conduct discernment. It is therefore only fair, without challenging the Word of God and the solidity of the dogmatic teachings of the Church, to ask ourselves how far these charges can be historically justified by the counter-testimony of Christians or their pastors, by their sins, or by their intellectual and cultural limitations and their way of viewing the problems of society. Is this a reason to make acts of repentance along the lines of those performed by John Paul II? On the other hand, how far are these charges against the Church the result of an anthropology that is contrary to the creative and saving plan of God for men and women? Again, which of the scientific, philosophical, artistic and institutional resources that are not part of the Church’s heritage can be welcomed by the Church as a stimulus to new ways of expressing the Christian mystery of man and woman and to discover avenues of Revelation that have so far not been fully explored?

The world is therefore provoking the Church, both positively and constructively and through certain anti-Christian attitudes, which the depths of Revelation and the mystery of the Cross of Christ can fruitfully exploit. *Opportet haereses esse.*

#### A COMPLEX SITUATION

Where we think of “culture” we often have in mind the intellectual debates in what is considered the cultured world. This aspect is

obviously hugely important. It conditions relations between men and women in many ways: it is here, for example, that ethical ideas are worked out, before going on to influence political and social programmes at local and international levels, and many private behaviour patterns. Part of the Church's mission is therefore to be present in these debates, both through the words of the Magisterium and the widespread presence of trained, educated and competent Christians – philosophers, scientists, artists, and so on. When this presence becomes problematic, as is currently the case in many areas of Western culture, the Church must be sure to intervene by speaking out and by acting at more discreet, but no less decisive, levels. Let us take a typical debate, such as the issue of feminism. In the West, the Church is finding it difficult at the present time to appear, from the point of view of culture, to be a promoter of the dignity of women and their liberation and self-fulfilment, because what she says and does is often challenged by anti-Church propagandists. However, a number of important remarks are in order in this regard. First, as many speakers have said at this seminar, the feminist debate has gradually grown in complexity over the years. The original movement that demanded equal rights is still based on Marxist ideological thought, often in forms that are influenced by these ideas. But other trends have also emerged. Some focus on the originality and specificity of the female approach to the world, others on the postmodern deconstruction of sexual identities, linked to a rejection of the so-called “essentialist” perspective and homosexual demands.<sup>4</sup> This is compounded by the realisation that the male identity is in crisis, and particularly the difficulties that men are currently experiencing when committing themselves as husbands and fathers.<sup>5</sup> When these issues emerge explicitly in the intellectual debate we cannot ignore the fact that they have been preceded by serious tensions in

<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. SCHUMACHER, *La nature dans le féminisme: du dualisme à l'unité*, in AA.VV., *Femmes dans le Christ: vers un nouveau féminisme*, Toulouse, Éditions du Carmel, 2003, 95ff.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. G. CORNEAU, *Père manquant, fils manqué*, Québec, Éditions de l'Homme, 1989; L. PAYNE, *Crise de la masculinité*, Le Mont-Pèlerin, Éditions Raphaël, 1994.

many areas of personal and social life: crises in schools, and the breakup of the couple and the family, that have forced many people to seek the help of psychotherapists to be able to cope with increasingly more common pathologies, and so on. This is compounded by the emergence of a worldwide problem involving several dimensions. In the West, the women's issue can no longer be examined independently of the status of women in different cultures and religions in the world (in France there is a great deal of discussion just now on the problem of Islam) or of issues relating to education and economic advancement (birth control, roles within the family, employment). People are now realising that the Church and Christians are making up for a certain belittling by the mass media by guaranteeing a strong presence and providing a wealth of experience at all these levels, often demonstrating that the Church possesses expertise and skills that are difficult to find anywhere else. This leads us to hope that Christianity will eventually return to these debates, despite the fact that attempts are still being made today to exclude it.

Without wishing to treat the issue comprehensively here, I would just like to mention a few key dimensions of the pastoral relationship of the Church to the cultural aspect of the questions to which I have just referred.

#### CULTURAL CRISIS AND DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENTS

In the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western culture was characterised by a "deconstruction" of sexual identities and their mutual relations. This is demonstrated both by the attempt to reduce sexual differences to purely social aspects without any reference to the natural roots of man and woman (according to Simone de Beauvoir, "people are not born, but become, women") and the affirmation of homosexual demands. In both cases, the Church has become involved in various ways.

First of all, these trends have radically challenged marriage and the family. Ever since they first emerged, the Church has therefore not only

had to promote a solid theology of the sacrament of marriage but also justify its anthropological bases. The sacrament of Orders has also been challenged: how can we explain why it is reserved only for the male sex in debates that are increasingly hinging around the demand for equal rights and social roles? In addition to references by the Magisterium to the fact that this Church practice is based on Jesus' own choice, and confirmed by Tradition,<sup>6</sup> the Church has also had to elaborate theological and anthropological arguments on masculinity and femininity, and on the essential structure of the sacrament of Orders in the mystery of Christ and the Church. These deliberations have not reached a conclusion, although a great deal of progress has been made. Signs of this date back to the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From an anthropological point of view, Gertrude von Le Fort and Edith Stein set out on the quest for the "eternal woman".<sup>7</sup> Phenomenology attempts to describe the specificity of the female *Erlebnis*,<sup>8</sup> and thereby makes it possible to overcome the dualism between biology and spirit, which the most radical critiques of sex differences paradoxically imply. More recently, it has been possible to decisively bring out the theological stakes: the Orthodox, undoubtedly helped by their long tradition of symbolic reflection, have produced works of outstanding quality<sup>9</sup> on the subject, and Catholic theology has not remained far behind.<sup>10</sup> One should not therefore be surprised to find that, as a result of this process of maturity, the Magisterium of the Church has been able to speak out and help to push forward the debate from the doctrinal point of view regarding the problem of the equal dignity of men and women in their call to holiness, and

<sup>6</sup> Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Declaration on the question of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood*; JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*.

<sup>7</sup> GERTRUDE VON LE FORT, *The Eternal Woman* (Bruce, 1954); E. STEIN, *La femme et sa destinée*, Paris, Amiot-Dumont, 1956.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. F.J.J. BUYTENDIJK, *La femme, ses modes d'être, de paraître, d'exister*, Paris, DDB, 1967.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. P. EVDOKIMOV, *La femme et le salut du monde*, Paris, DDB, 1978.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. J. HOURCADE, *Des femmes prêtres?* Paris, Mame, 1993; A. SCOLA, *Il mistero nuziale, 1. Uomo-Donna*, Roma, PUL Mursia, 1998.

the specific forms of this calling.<sup>11</sup> What was at stake was not only anthropological and doctrinal, but also ethical and social. Some cultural trends have radically challenged the very structure of the family itself. Contraception and abortion were being promoted in propaganda and legislation in the name of equal rights for men and women. People argued that since women are born more dependent on sexual biology than men are, they must be given the technical means – if this is the appropriate term to use – to liberate themselves from the “constraints” of their own body. In social, political and legislative terms, the Church’s struggle on these issues is by no means over. It would also appear that the breakup of the family and educational and social structures, is spreading inexorably. Yet this crisis has given the Church an opportunity to embark on a radical debate regarding the theology of the body, and to spell out the ethical and spiritual stakes in increasingly rigorous terms,<sup>12</sup> enabling the Church to supersede the materialistic and dualistic reductive positions debated in Christian and non-Christian cultural environments.

These issues, in the short term, still remain “signs of contradiction”, and a source of bitter conflict at all levels. One cannot say, however, that theological research has yet reached any clear-cut conclusions. A few years ago, we began to realise that because of the need to take up the feminist challenge, the Church had ignored the issue of the male identity, which has now become problematic. But in the long term, drawing on her dogmatic and doctrinal heritage, the Church has an incomparable source of inspiration both to pursue the theological debate and to take up the challenges of the cultural and anthropological debate, and to invent and to spell out ways in which to be pastorally present to meet the needs and expectations of men, women and couples.

I would like to add a final point in this connection. Globalisation and migration are driving an evolution in the cultural debate. Western

<sup>11</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

<sup>12</sup> One can see these developments in such documents as PAUL VI’s Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, and JOHN PAUL II’s *Familiaris Consortio* and *Evangelium vitae*.

Christian-based societies are no longer only the places where there is a caricatured opposition between patriarchal clericalism and feminist anti-clericalism; we are now having to deal with an encounter with cultures in which the status and the dignity of women are by no means safeguarded. These are cultures and religions that admit polygamy or female genital mutilation, and which still keep women subjugated to male domination by denying them, for example, the freedom to choose a marriage partner. Inevitably, this situation is leading to a return to the Christian roots of Western culture. For it is precisely these Christian roots that enable Western culture, unlike many others, to develop such a sensitivity towards the dignity of women. In the context of a Church that is now almost completely freed of certain patriarchal-type cultural conditioning factors, Christian influences will become increasingly more evident. Jesus' deep respect for women, Paul's affirmation that "there is neither male nor female" (*Gal 3:28*), the veneration of our Lady and its consequences in the mediaeval period in terms of courtly love and respect for women, the establishment of an extraordinarily rich tradition of women saints, the Christian sense of the sacrament of marriage implying the freedom of choice of both the bride and the groom and so on, are all evidence of this. The rediscovery of the historically Christian sources of feminism is already taking place, and will eventually overcome the anticlerical ideological mindsets that are typical of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The mediaeval period has been subjected to very thorough research,<sup>13</sup> while the part played by women's Religious Congregations in educating girls has yet to be examined – and it certainly will be. It would also be appropriate to clarify the reasons why the status of women declined between the 14th and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The theological and magisterial studies that have been conducted in recent decades would gain credibility in the cultural debate as a result of these clarifications. For they would be seen as an explicit development of an underlying trend of Christianity, and not only as an ideological patch applied at the last minute under the pressure of the environment.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. R. PÉRNAUD, *La femme au temps des cathédrales*, Paris, Stock, 1980.



RECENT CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS

Underlying the “official” media debate there are a number of developments, some quite serious, which in the long run will certainly prove highly significant for the Church and for the world. I would merely like to mention two types here: developments in the psychological sciences, and developments in education policy.

*The psychological sciences*

When the feminist claims to equal rights were first broached, the psychological sciences had to become more aware of the specific and complementary roles of the father and the mother in bringing up their children. From a theological point of view, after several decades of suspicion due to the ideological environment from which these sciences had originated, their progress was finally welcomed with great interest and certainly stimulated the anthropological research that I have just referred to. The question, in particular, of the linkage between identity and difference, originally a psychological matter, soon began to prove productive in the debate on relations between God and man, and even in the theology of the Trinity.<sup>14</sup> It has also proved to be easier to gain a better understanding of some of the implications of God as “our Father”, or of considering Mary or the Church as “our Mother”.

It is a fact today that with the general loss of benchmarks for sexual identity, psychological suffering has increased considerably. More and more couples today are no longer able to discuss their complementarity, many men are in the throes of a full-blown identity crisis, and many women are suffering as a result of having used contraception or had an abortion. The increasing frequency of appeals for help are fuelling the “psychology market” which is not without its pitfalls and ambiguities. Psychological or psychoanalytic theories are not always honest in terms of the significance of the person and his or her dignity.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. D. BIJU-DUVAL, *Le psychique et le spirituel*, Paris, Éditions de l’Emmanuel, 2000.

Many lobbies are exercising powerful pressure to have certain forms of behaviour caused by psychological disorders considered to be “normal”, and there are few areas of science and psychotherapy which have been left unscathed. The “new age” movement and Orientalising philosophies sometimes propound proposals that are humanly and spiritually dangerous, and even destructuring.<sup>15</sup>

Christianity would therefore seem to be the most suitable to offer the most appropriate assistance, respectful of their dignity, to all those who are suffering psychologically because of the sexual identity crisis. Considerable efforts have already been made in this area: help for couples in difficulty, healing sessions for women who have experienced abortion<sup>16</sup> or for men whose sexual identity has been wounded,<sup>17</sup> and so on. It is extremely important to step up all these efforts. Despite the fact that sound references to Christian anthropology can help people to avoid the ambiguities of the “psychology market”, it is much simpler to address the issues of male and female identity in psychological terms. For these are areas of genuine suffering for men, women and couples, and psychology can offer real pathways to heal them; secondly, everything is done in a language which offers such a high level of cultural credibility that it is possible to overcome any suspicions linked to feminist ideologies. Lastly, this approach brings out issues that can easily lead to an understanding of the Christian meaning of existence: the question of male and female identity always ends with a reference to the quest for completeness, and hence to the question of God.<sup>18</sup> In terms of service to humanity and cultural dialogue, and of evangelisation, there are challenges of paramount importance to be addressed here.

<sup>15</sup> One example, with widely-read authors is: J. SALOMÉ S & S. GALLAND, *Aimer et se le dire*, Québec, Éditions de l'Homme, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. S. STANFORD, *Une femme blessée: le traumatisme de l'avortement*, Paris, Fayard, 1989.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. L. PAYNE, *op.cit.*; M. BERGNER, *Aimer en vérité*, Le Mont-Pèlerin, Éditions Raphaël, 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Conversely, J. Salomé and S. Galland (*op. cit.* 255-262) fall into the new age confusion between sexual experience and the experience of God. On the theological meanings of sexual symbolism see also A. Scola, *op. cit.*

*Teaching and education*

The psychological formation of sexual identity is partly linked to the educational practices used in our societies, especially in schools. But new questions are now being raised.

Recently an important educational debate has been revived: coeducation.<sup>19</sup> In the West, the quest for equality between men and women and the desire to educate boys and girls to respect one another have led virtually everywhere to coeducation. But now, after three decades of experience with it, people are realising that we are not only still far from having achieved the original aim, but that various disadvantages have emerged. From the point of view of educational achievement, coeducation has proven to be particularly unfavourable to boys, and to a lesser degree to girls as well, who have been so affected by it that in some feminist environments in the United States all-girl schools are now being established. Far from bringing the behavioural models closer together, coeducational schools are causing boys and girls to exaggerate the differences, particularly in adolescence, when teenagers tend to categorise themselves as pushy boys and skittish girls. This has led to a disturbing increase in sexist behaviour, which is unfortunately not confined to marginalised groups alone, and even cases of sexual violence. The widening gap between boys and girls has therefore turned out to be difficult to manage from the educational point of view.

My purpose here is not to resolve the issues. At all events, the issues vary from one age group to another. But we are seeing that, in educational terms, the egalitarian approach to coeducating boys and girls which has been ideologically driven by certain schools of feminist thought, is now in crisis. The reason has nothing to do with the debate on ideas. It would appear that, in this respect, it is still difficult to challenge the dogma of the universal benefits of coeducation. Where the questions arise is when educators and teachers come face-to-face with daily reality in coeducational

<sup>19</sup> Cf. M. FIZE, *Les pièges de la mixité scolaire*, Paris-Montréal, Presses de la Renaissance, 2003.

schools, which is an interesting and revealing aspect of the problem. For everyone agrees on the need to promote the equal dignity of both sexes in the schools, and the need to educate boys and girls to respect one another. But the debate on coeducation seems to demonstrate that this cannot be achieved by applying “unisex” educational techniques: equal dignity implies the practical acknowledgement of the specificities, the differences, and hence the different educational needs, of boys and girls.

But what does this issue have to do with the Church? One reason is that the Church bears the responsibility for many schools, and has a long experience educating children and young people. For the Church, the school is a service to man and society, a powerful means of disseminating genuine Christian humanism and an appropriate instrument for providing children with a Christian education. In France, as a number of leading figures in the debate have acknowledged, even people who are not committed to any particular religious ideas are admitting that the “non-faith” school is encountering difficulties in reflecting freely on the coeducation issue: because of their historical and ideological tradition, they try to neutralise the differences instead of acknowledging that they exist. This leads to ideologically rigid stances and an unwillingness to engage in serious debate. Educationalists usually turn to private schools, mostly Catholic, for their research and for putting their ideas to the test. Even with such problems as the *chador* – an extremely sensitive issue, because it concerns the sexual and the religious identities of the girls who wish to wear it – the Catholic school has shown that it is better able to handle the difficulties this raises than non-faith schools, a fact that the Muslim authorities have also recognised.

In a word, because of her proximity, the Church seems once again to have gained in terms of credibility in the cultural dialogue.

## CONCLUSION

One final remark to close with: what the Church has to say in the cultural dialogue can only be credible if it fully reflects what the

Christian communities actually experience. Otherwise, the Church will fall under Jesus' judgment against the Pharisees: "they preach, but do not practice" (*Mt 23:3*). In other words, the equal dignity of men and women, the need to respect one another, and the acknowledgement of male and female vocations, demand particular attention not only in preaching and teaching, but also in the practice of the Christian and ecclesial life.

Here, too, there have been a number of positive developments. Over the past few decades, for example, we have seen many different ways in which women are present and active in the Church. Catechesis is one particularly evident aspect. The development of a genuine spousal spirituality has greatly enriched the lives of Christian couples and families. In educational terms, many Christian youth movements have made huge efforts to design a co-educational approach that takes account of the sexual differences, and to put forward specific proposals for boys and girls, such as Scouting and Guiding, serving at the altar, and Catholic Action women's movements.

But, if we are to believe the statistics, there still remains a great deal more to be done, and certain temptations still lie in wait. For example, the dogmatically unambiguous fact that the ministerial priesthood is for men alone has sometimes given rise to debates on the role of women in the Church, not from the point of view of their specificity but, if I might put it this way, in terms of a sense of male guilt and compensation. This, in my opinion, is the main flaw in theological speculation regarding the diaconate for women. In the same way, there should be much more debate on the increasing practice of girls and boys serving at the altar together, or their joint membership of youth movements whose original educational approach did not make provision for both boys and girls. More generally, however, I do not consider that enough serious theological and pastoral thought has gone into examining the reasons for the absence of men from parish life and religious practice. Over the past two centuries, women have made up two-thirds of our parish congregations, with men accounting for only one-third. In some cases this proportion is even more extreme still, such as in recourse to the

Sacrament of Reconciliation. Starting from the principle that Christ came to earth both for men and for women, why is it that the Church's pastoral ministry appears to be configured more for women than for men? Why is it that many men lapse, saying that religion is only for the women (also pejoratively, which does not rule out a touch of male chauvinism)? Without wishing to offer a straight answer to this question, it does appear that we have to reflect specifically on the lay man, and why lay men do not feel comfortable in Church, and on the pastoral resources and methods that we should be using to try to bring them back.

I do not wish to give the impression of trying to re-establish male domination. What I want is to address a male identity crisis in the Church which is affecting the whole of society today. Considering the principle of the reciprocity of sexual identities, it is highly probable that a more comprehensive rediscovery of the role of men in the Church – not limited merely to the question of Ordination – may prove to be one of the main conditions for a better understanding of the vocation of women in the Church.

## APPENDIX





# Letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church on the collaboration of men and women in the Church and in the world

## INTRODUCTION

1. The Church, expert in humanity, has a perennial interest in whatever concerns men and women. In recent times, much reflection has been given to the question of the dignity of women and to women's rights and duties in the different areas of civil society and the Church. Having contributed to a deeper understanding of this fundamental question, in particular through the teaching of John Paul II,<sup>1</sup> the Church is called today to address certain currents of thought which are often at variance with the authentic advancement of women.

After a brief presentation and critical evaluation of some current conceptions of human nature, this document will offer reflections – inspired by the doctrinal elements of the biblical vision of the human person that are indispensable for safeguarding his or her identity – on some of the essentials of a correct understanding of active collaboration, in recognition of the difference between men and women in the Church and in the world. These reflections are meant as a starting point for further examination in the Church, as well as an impetus for dialogue with all men and women of good will, in a sincere search for the truth and in a common commitment to the development of ever more authentic relationships.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* (November 22, 1981): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 74 (1982), 81-191; Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (August 15, 1988): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 80 (1988), 1653-1729; *Letter to Families* (February 2, 1994): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 86 (1994), 868-925; *Letter to Women* (June 29, 1995): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 87 (1995), 803-812; *Catechesi sull'amore umano* (1979-1984): *Insegnamenti* II (1979) – VII (1984); English translation in *The Theology of the Body. Human Love in the Divine Plan*, (Boston: Pauline Books Media, 1997); Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educational Guidance in Human Love* (November 1, 1983); PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE FAMILY, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family* (December 8, 1995).

## I. THE QUESTION

2. Recent years have seen new approaches to women's issues. A first tendency is to emphasize strongly conditions of subordination in order to give rise to antagonism: women, in order to be themselves, must make themselves the adversaries of men. Faced with the abuse of power, the answer for women is to seek power. This process leads to opposition between men and women, in which the identity and role of one are emphasized to the disadvantage of the other, leading to harmful confusion regarding the human person, which has its most immediate and lethal effects in the structure of the family.

A second tendency emerges in the wake of the first. In order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied, viewed as mere effects of historical and cultural conditioning. In this perspective, physical difference, termed *sex*, is minimized, while the purely cultural element, termed *gender*, is emphasized to the maximum and held to be primary. The obscuring of the difference or duality of the sexes has enormous consequences on a variety of levels. This theory of the human person, intended to promote prospects for equality of women through liberation from biological determinism, has in reality inspired ideologies which, for example, call into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality.

3. While the immediate roots of this second tendency are found in the context of reflection on women's roles, its deeper motivation must be sought in the human attempt to be freed from one's biological conditioning.<sup>2</sup> According to this perspective, human nature in itself does not possess characteristics in an absolute manner: all persons can and

<sup>2</sup> On the complex question of *gender*, see also THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE FAMILY, *Family, Marriage and "De facto unions"* (July 26, 2000), 8.

ought to constitute themselves as they like, since they are free from every predetermination linked to their essential constitution.

This perspective has many consequences. Above all it strengthens the idea that the liberation of women entails criticism of Sacred Scripture, which would be seen as handing on a patriarchal conception of God nourished by an essentially male-dominated culture. Second, this tendency would consider as lacking in importance and relevance the fact that the Son of God assumed human nature in its male form.

4. In the face of these currents of thought, the Church, enlightened by faith in Jesus Christ, speaks instead of *active collaboration* between the sexes precisely in the recognition of the difference between man and woman.

To understand better the basis, meaning and consequences of this response it is helpful to turn briefly to the Sacred Scriptures, rich also in human wisdom, in which this response is progressively manifested thanks to God's intervention on behalf of humanity.<sup>3</sup>

## II. BASIC ELEMENTS OF THE BIBLICAL VISION OF THE HUMAN PERSON

5. The first biblical texts to examine are the first three chapters of Genesis. Here we "enter into the setting of the biblical 'beginning'. In it the revealed truth concerning the human person as 'the image and likeness' of God constitutes the immutable *basis of all Christian anthropology*".<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio* (September 14, 1998), 21: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 91 (1999), 22: "This opening to the mystery, which came to him [biblical man] through Revelation, was for him, in the end, the source of true knowledge. It was this which allowed his reason to enter the realm of the infinite where an understanding for which until then he had not dared to hope became a possibility".

<sup>4</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (August 15, 1988), 6: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 80 (1988), 1662; cf. ST. IRENEUS, *Adversus haereses*, 5,6,1; 5, 16, 2-3: *SC* 153, 72-81; 216-221; ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *De hominis opificio*, 16: *PG* 44, 180; *In Canticum bomilia*, 2: *PG* 44, 805-808; ST. AUGUSTINE, *Enarratio in Psalmum*, 4, 8: *CCL* 38, 17.

The first text (*Gn* 1:1-2:4) describes the creative power of the Word of God, which makes distinctions in the original chaos. Light and darkness appear, sea and dry land, day and night, grass and trees, fish and birds, “each according to its kind”. An ordered world is born out of differences, carrying with them also the promise of relationships. Here we see a sketch of the framework in which the creation of the human race takes place: “God said ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’” (*Gn* 1:26). And then: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (*Gn* 1:27). From the very beginning therefore, humanity is described as articulated in the male-female relationship. This is the humanity, sexually differentiated, which is explicitly declared “the image of God”.

6. The second creation account (*Gn* 2:4-25) confirms in a definitive way the importance of sexual difference. Formed by God and placed in the garden which he was to cultivate, the man, who is still referred to with the generic expression *Adam*, experienced a loneliness which the presence of the animals is not able to overcome. He needs a *helpmate* who will be his partner. The term here does not refer to an inferior, but to a vital helper.<sup>5</sup> This is so that *Adam's* life does not sink into a sterile and, in the end, baneful encounter with himself. It is necessary that he enter into relationship with another being on his own level. Only the woman, created from the same “flesh” and cloaked in the same mystery, can give a future to the life of the man. It is therefore above all on the ontological level that this takes place, in the sense that God's creation of woman characterizes humanity as a relational reality. In this encounter, the man speaks words for the first time, expressive of his wonderment: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (*Gn* 2:23).

<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew word *ezer* which is translated as “helpmate” indicates the assistance which only a person can render to another. It carries no implication of inferiority or exploitation if we remember that God too is at times called *ezer* with regard to human beings (cf. *Ex* 18:4; *Ps* 10:14).

As the Holy Father has written with regard to this text from Genesis, "...woman is another 'I' in a common humanity. From the very beginning they appear as a 'unity of the two', and this signifies that the original solitude is overcome, the solitude in which man does not find 'a helper fit for him' (*Gn* 2:20). Is it only a question here of a 'helper' in activity, in 'subduing the earth' (cf. *Gn* 1:28)? Certainly it is a matter of a life's companion with whom, as a wife, the man can unite himself, becoming with her 'one flesh' and for this reason leaving 'his father and his mother' (cf. *Gn* 2:24)".<sup>6</sup>

This vital difference is oriented toward communion and was lived in peace, expressed by their nakedness: "And the man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame" (*Gn* 2:25). In this way, the human body, marked with the sign of masculinity or femininity, "includes right from the beginning the nuptial attribute, that is, *the capacity of expressing love, that love in which the person becomes a gift* and – by means of this gift – fulfils the meaning of his being and his existence".<sup>7</sup> Continuing his commentary on these verses of Genesis, the Holy Father writes: "In this peculiarity, the body is the expression of the spirit and is called, in the mystery of creation, to exist in the communion of persons in the image of God".<sup>8</sup>

Through this same spousal perspective, the ancient Genesis narrative allows us to understand how woman, in her deepest and original being, exists "for the other" (cf. *1 Cor* 11:9): this is a statement which, far from any sense of alienation, expresses a fundamental aspect of the similarity with the Triune God, whose Persons, with the coming of Christ, are revealed as being in a communion of love, each for the others. "In the 'unity of the two', man and woman are called from the beginning not only to exist 'side by side' or 'together', but they are also

<sup>6</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (August 15, 1988), 6: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 80 (1988), 1664.

<sup>7</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *The Man-Person Becomes a Gift in the Freedom of Love*, general audience of January 16, 1980, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body*, 63.

<sup>8</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *The Heart – A Battlefield between Love and Lust*, general audience of July 23, 1980, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body*, 125.

called to exist mutually ‘one for the other’... The text of Genesis 2:18-25 shows that marriage is the first and, in a sense, the fundamental dimension of this call. But it is not the only one. The whole of human history unfolds within the context of this call. In this history, on the basis of the principle of mutually being ‘for’ the other in interpersonal ‘communion’, there develops in humanity itself, in accordance with God’s will, the integration of what is ‘masculine’ and what is ‘feminine’.”<sup>9</sup>

The peaceful vision which concludes the second creation account recalls the “indeed it was very good” (*Gn* 1:31) at the end of the first account. Here we find the heart of God’s original plan and the deepest truth about man and woman, as willed and created by him. Although God’s original plan for man and woman will later be upset and darkened by sin, it can never be abrogated.

7. Original sin changes the way in which the man and the woman receive and live the Word of God as well as their relationship with the Creator. Immediately after having given them the gift of the garden, God gives them a positive command (cf. *Gn* 2:16), followed by a negative one (cf. *Gn* 2:17), in which the essential difference between God and humanity is implicitly expressed. Following enticement by the serpent, the man and the woman deny this difference. As a consequence, the way in which they live their sexual difference is also upset. In this way, the Genesis account establishes a relationship of cause and effect between the two differences: when humanity considers God its enemy, the relationship between man and woman becomes distorted. When this relationship is damaged, their access to the face of God risks being compromised in turn.

God’s decisive words to the woman after the first sin express the kind of relationship which has now been introduced between man and woman: “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over

<sup>9</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (August 15, 1988), 7: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 80 (1988), 1666.

you” (*Gn* 3:16). It will be a relationship in which love will frequently be debased into pure self-seeking, in a relationship which ignores and kills love and replaces it with the yoke of domination of one sex over the other. Indeed the story of humanity is continuously marked by this situation, which recalls the three-fold concupiscence mentioned by Saint John: the concupiscence of the flesh, the concupiscence of the eyes and the pride of life (cf. *1 Jn* 2:16). In this tragic situation, the equality, respect and love that are required in the relationship of man and woman according to God’s original plan, are lost.

8. Reviewing these fundamental texts allows us to formulate some of the principal elements of the biblical vision of the human person.

Above all, the fact that human beings are persons needs to be underscored: “*Man is a person, man and woman equally so, since both were created in the image and likeness of the personal God*”.<sup>10</sup> Their equal dignity as persons is realized as physical, psychological and ontological complementarity, giving rise to a harmonious relationship of “uni-duality”, which only sin and “the structures of sin” inscribed in culture render potentially conflictual. The biblical vision of the human person suggests that problems related to sexual difference, whether on the public or private level, should be addressed by a relational approach and not by competition or retaliation.

Furthermore, the importance and the meaning of sexual difference, as a reality deeply inscribed in man and woman, needs to be noted. “Sexuality characterizes man and woman not only on the physical level, but also on the psychological and spiritual, making its mark on each of their expressions”.<sup>11</sup> It cannot be reduced to a pure and insignificant biological fact, but rather “is a fundamental component of personality, one of its modes of being, of manifestation, of communicating with others, of feeling, of expressing and of living human love”.<sup>12</sup> This capacity

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, l. c., 1663.

<sup>11</sup> CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Educational Guidance in Human Love* (November 1, 1983), 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

to love – reflection and image of God who is Love – is disclosed in the spousal character of the body, in which the masculinity or femininity of the person is expressed.

The human dimension of sexuality is inseparable from the theological dimension. The human creature, in its unity of soul and body, is characterized therefore, from the very beginning, by the relationship with the other-beyond-the-self. This relationship is presented as still good and yet, at the same time, changed. It is good from its original goodness, declared by God from the first moment of creation. It has been changed however by the disharmony between God and humanity introduced by sin. This alteration does not correspond to the initial plan of God for man and woman, nor to the truth of the relationship between the sexes. It follows then that the relationship is good, but wounded and in need of healing.

What might be the ways of this healing? Considering and analyzing the problems in the relationship between the sexes solely from the standpoint of the situation marked by sin would lead to a return to the errors mentioned above. The logic of sin needs to be broken and a way forward needs to be found that is capable of banishing it from the hearts of sinful humanity. A clear orientation in this sense is provided in the third chapter of Genesis by God's promise of a Saviour, involving the "woman" and her "offspring" (cf. *Gn* 3:15). It is a promise which will be preceded by a long preparation in history before it is realized.

9. An early victory over evil is seen in the story of Noah, the just man, who guided by God, avoids the flood with his family and the various species of animals (cf. *Gn* 6-9). But it is above all in God's choice of Abraham and his descendants (cf. *Gn* 12:1ff) that the hope of salvation is confirmed. God begins in this way to unveil his countenance so that, through the chosen people, humanity will learn the path of divine likeness, that is, the way of holiness, and thus of transformation of heart. Among the many ways in which God reveals himself to his people (cf. *Heb* 1:1), in keeping with a long and patient pedagogy, there is the recurring theme of the covenant between man and woman. This is



paradoxical if we consider the drama recounted in Genesis and its concrete repetition in the time of the prophets, as well as the mixing of the sacred and the sexual found in the religions which surrounded Israel. And yet this symbolism is indispensable for understanding the way in which God loves his people: God makes himself known as the Bridegroom who loves Israel his Bride.

If, in this relationship, God can be described as a “jealous God” (cf. *Ex* 20:5; *Nab* 1:2) and Israel denounced as an “adulterous” bride or “prostitute” (cf. *Hos* 2:4-15; *Ez* 16:15-34), it is because of the hope, reinforced by the prophets, of seeing Jerusalem become the perfect bride: “For as a young man marries a virgin so shall your creator marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (*Is* 62:5). Recreated “in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy” (*Hos* 2:21), she who had wandered far away to search for life and happiness in false gods will return, and “shall respond as in the days of her youth” (*Hos* 2:17) to him who will speak to her heart; she will hear it said: “Your bridegroom is your Creator” (*Is* 54:5). It is substantially the same reality which is expressed when, parallel to the mystery of God’s action through the male figure of the suffering Servant, the Book of the prophet Isaiah evokes the feminine figure of Zion, adorned with a transcendence and a sanctity which prefigure the gift of salvation destined for Israel.

The Song of Songs is an important moment in the use of this form of revelation. In the words of a most human love, which celebrate the beauty of the human body and the joy of mutual seeking, God’s love for his people is also expressed. The Church’s recognition of her relationship to Christ in this audacious conjunction of language about what is most human with language about what is most divine, cannot be said to be mistaken.

In the course of the Old Testament, a story of salvation takes shape which involves the simultaneous participation of male and female. While having an evident metaphorical dimension, the terms bridegroom and bride – and covenant as well – which characterize the dynamic of salvation, are much more than simple metaphors. This spousal language touches on

the very nature of the relationship which God establishes with his people, even though that relationship is more expansive than human spousal experience. Likewise, the same concrete conditions of redemption are at play in the way in which prophetic statements, such as those of Isaiah, associate masculine and feminine roles in proclaiming and prefiguring the work of salvation which God is about to undertake. This salvation orients the reader both toward the male figure of the suffering Servant as well as to the female figure of Zion. The prophetic utterances of Isaiah in fact alternate between this figure and the Servant of God, before culminating at the end of the book with the mystical vision of Jerusalem, which gives birth to a people in a single day (cf. *Is* 66:7-14), a prophecy of the great new things which God is about to do (cf. *Is* 48:6-8).

10. All these prefigurations find their fulfillment in the New Testament. On the one hand, Mary, the chosen daughter of Zion, in her femininity, sums up and transfigures the condition of Israel/Bride waiting for the day of her salvation. On the other hand, the masculinity of the Son shows how Jesus assumes in his person all that the Old Testament symbolism had applied to the love of God for his people, described as the love of a bridegroom for his bride. The figures of Jesus and Mary his mother not only assure the continuity of the New Testament with the Old, but go beyond it, since – as Saint Irenaeus wrote – with Jesus Christ “all newness” appears.<sup>13</sup>

This aspect is particularly evident in the Gospel of John. In the scene of the wedding feast at Cana, for example, Jesus is asked by his mother, who is called “woman”, to offer, as a sign, the new wine of the future wedding with humanity (cf. *Jn* 2:1-12). This messianic wedding is accomplished on the Cross when, again in the presence of his mother, once again called “woman”, the blood/wine of the New Covenant pours forth from the open heart of the crucified Christ (cf. *Jn* 19:25-27, 34).<sup>14</sup> It is therefore not at all surprising that John the Baptist, when

<sup>13</sup> *Adversus haereses*, 4, 34, 1: SC 100, 846: “*Omnem novitatem attulit semetipsum afferens*”.

<sup>14</sup> The ancient exegetical tradition sees in Mary at Cana the “*figura Synagogae*” and the “*inchoatio Ecclesiae*”.

asked who he is, describes himself as “the friend of the bridegroom”, who rejoices to hear the bridegroom’s voice and must be eclipsed by his coming: “He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease” (*Jn* 3:29-30).<sup>15</sup>

In his apostolic activity, Paul develops the whole nuptial significance of the redemption by seeing Christian life as a nuptial mystery. He writes to the Church in Corinth, which he had founded: “I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a chaste virgin to her one husband” (*2 Cor* 11:2).

In the Letter to the Ephesians, the spousal relationship between Christ and the Church is taken up again and deepened in its implications. In the New Covenant, the beloved bride is the Church, and as the Holy Father teaches in his *Letter to Families*: “This bride, of whom the Letter to the Ephesians speaks, is present in each of the baptized and is like one who presents herself before her Bridegroom: ‘Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her..., that he might present the Church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish’ (*Eph* 5:25-27)”.<sup>16</sup>

Reflecting on the unity of man and woman as described at the moment of the world’s creation (cf. *Gn* 2:24), the Apostle exclaims: “this mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church” (*Eph* 5:32). The love of a man and a woman, lived out in the power of baptismal life, now becomes the sacrament of the love between Christ and his Church, and a witness to the mystery of fidelity

<sup>15</sup> Here the Fourth Gospel presents in a deeper way an element found also in the Synoptic Gospels (cf. *Mt* 9:15 and parallel texts). On the theme of Christ the Bridegroom, see JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Families* (February 2, 1994), 18; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 86 (1994), 906-910.

<sup>16</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Families* (February 2, 1994), 19; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 86 (1994), 911; cf. Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (August 15, 1988), 23- 25; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 80 (1988), 1708-1715.

and unity from which the “New Eve” is born and by which she lives in her earthly pilgrimage toward the fullness of the eternal wedding.

11. Drawn into the Paschal mystery and made living signs of the love of Christ and his Church, the hearts of Christian spouses are renewed and they are able to avoid elements of concupiscence in their relationship, as well as the subjugation introduced into the life of the first married couple by the break with God caused by sin. For Christian spouses, the goodness of love, for which the wounded human heart has continued to long, is revealed with new accents and possibilities. It is in this light that Jesus, faced with the question about divorce (cf. *Mt* 19:3-9), recalls the demands of the covenant between man and woman as willed by God at the beginning, that is, before the eruption of sin which had justified the later accommodations found in the Mosaic Law. Far from being the imposition of a hard and inflexible order, these words of Jesus are actually the proclamation of the “good news” of that faithfulness which is stronger than sin. The power of the resurrection makes possible the victory of faithfulness over weakness, over injuries and over the couple’s sins. In the grace of Christ which renews their hearts, man and woman become capable of being freed from sin and of knowing the joy of mutual giving.

12. “For all of you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ... there is neither male nor female”, writes Saint Paul to the Galatians (3:27-28). The Apostle Paul does not say that the distinction between man and woman, which in other places is referred to the plan of God, has been erased. He means rather that in Christ the rivalry, enmity and violence which disfigured the relationship between men and women can be overcome and have been overcome. In this sense, the distinction between man and woman is reaffirmed more than ever; indeed, it is present in biblical revelation up to the very end. In the final hour of present history, the Book of Revelation of Saint John, speaking of “a new heaven and a new earth” (*Rev* 21:1), presents the vision of a feminine Jerusalem “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband”

(Rev 21:2). Revelation concludes with the words of the Bride and the Spirit who beseech the coming of the Bridegroom, "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20).

Male and female are thus revealed as *belonging ontologically to creation* and destined therefore *to outlast the present time*, evidently in a transfigured form. In this way, they characterize the "love that never ends" (1 Cor 13:8), although the temporal and earthly expression of sexuality is transient and ordered to a phase of life marked by procreation and death. Celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom seeks to be the prophecy of this form of future existence of male and female. For those who live it, it is an anticipation of the reality of a life which, while remaining that of a man and a woman, will no longer be subject to the present limitations of the marriage relationship (cf. Mt 22:30). For those in married life, celibacy becomes the reminder and prophecy of the completion which their own relationship will find in the face-to-face encounter with God.

From the first moment of their creation, man and woman are distinct, and will remain so for all eternity. Placed within Christ's Paschal mystery, they no longer see their difference as a source of discord to be overcome by denial or eradication, but rather as the possibility for collaboration, to be cultivated with mutual respect for their difference. From here, new perspectives open up for a deeper understanding of the dignity of women and their role in human society and in the Church.

### III. THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMININE VALUES IN THE LIFE OF SOCIETY

13. Among the fundamental values linked to women's actual lives is what has been called a "capacity for the other". Although a certain type of feminist rhetoric makes demands "for ourselves", women preserve the deep intuition of the goodness in their lives of those actions which elicit life, and contribute to the growth and protection of the other.

This intuition is linked to women's physical capacity to give life. Whether lived out or remaining potential, this capacity is a reality that

structures the female personality in a profound way. It allows her to acquire maturity very quickly, and gives a sense of the seriousness of life and of its responsibilities. A sense and a respect for what is concrete develop in her, opposed to abstractions which are so often fatal for the existence of individuals and society. It is women, in the end, who even in very desperate situations, as attested by history past and present, possess a singular capacity to persevere in adversity, to keep life going even in extreme situations, to hold tenaciously to the future, and finally to remember with tears the value of every human life.

Although motherhood is a key element of women's identity, this does not mean that women should be considered from the sole perspective of physical procreation. In this area, there can be serious distortions, which extol biological fecundity in purely quantitative terms and are often accompanied by dangerous disrespect for women. The existence of the Christian vocation of virginity, radical with regard to both the Old Testament tradition and the demands made by many societies, is of the greatest importance in this regard.<sup>17</sup> Virginity refutes any attempt to enclose women in mere biological destiny. Just as virginity receives from physical motherhood the insight that there is no Christian vocation except in the concrete gift of oneself to the other, so physical motherhood receives from virginity an insight into its fundamentally spiritual dimension: it is in not being content only to give physical life that the other truly comes into existence. This means that motherhood can find forms of full realization also where there is no physical procreation.<sup>18</sup>

In this perspective, one understands the irreplaceable role of women in all aspects of family and social life involving human relationships and caring for others. Here what John Paul II has termed *the genius of women* becomes very clear.<sup>19</sup> It implies first of all that women

<sup>17</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* (November 22, 1981), 16: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 74 (1982), 98-99.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 41, *l.c.*, 132-133; CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Instruction *Donum vitae* (February 22, 1987), II, 8: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 80 (1988), 96-97.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Women* (June 29, 1995), 9-10: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 87 (1995), 809-810.

be significantly and actively present in the family, “the primordial and, in a certain sense sovereign society”,<sup>20</sup> since it is here above all that the features of a people take shape; it is here that its members acquire basic teachings. They learn to love inasmuch as they are unconditionally loved, they learn respect for others inasmuch as they are respected, they learn to know the face of God inasmuch as they receive a first revelation of it from a father and a mother full of attention in their regard. Whenever these fundamental experiences are lacking, society as a whole suffers violence and becomes in turn the progenitor of more violence. It means also that women should be present in the world of work and in the organization of society, and that women should have access to positions of responsibility which allow them to inspire the policies of nations and to promote innovative solutions to economic and social problems.

In this regard, it cannot be forgotten that the interrelationship between these two activities – family and work – has, for women, characteristics different from those in the case of men. The harmonization of the organization of work and laws governing work with the demands stemming from the mission of women within the family is a challenge. The question is not only legal, economic and organizational; it is above all a question of mentality, culture, and respect. Indeed, a just valuing of the work of women within the family is required. In this way, women who freely desire will be able to devote the totality of their time to the work of the household without being stigmatized by society or penalized financially, while those who wish also to engage in other work may be able to do so with an appropriate work-schedule, and not have to choose between relinquishing their family life or enduring continual stress, with negative consequences for one’s own equilibrium and the harmony of the family. As John Paul II has written, “it will redound to the credit of society to make it possible for a mother – without inhibiting her freedom, without psychological or practical discrimination and

<sup>20</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Families* (February 2, 1994), 17: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 86 (1994), 906.

without penalizing her as compared with other women – to devote herself to taking care of her children and educating them in accordance with their needs, which vary with age”.<sup>21</sup>

14. It is appropriate however to recall that the feminine values mentioned here are above all human values: the human condition of man and woman created in the image of God is one and indivisible. It is only because women are more immediately attuned to these values that they are the reminder and the privileged sign of such values. But, in the final analysis, every human being, man or woman, is destined to be “for the other”. In this perspective, that which is called “femininity” is more than simply an attribute of the female sex. The word designates indeed the fundamental human capacity to live for the other and because of the other.

Therefore, the promotion of women within society must be understood and desired as a humanization accomplished through those values, rediscovered thanks to women. Every outlook which presents itself as a conflict between the sexes is only an illusion and a danger: it would end in segregation and competition between men and women, and would promote a solipsism nourished by a false conception of freedom.

Without prejudice to the advancement of women’s rights in society and the family, these observations seek to correct the perspective which views men as enemies to be overcome. The proper condition of the male-female relationship cannot be a kind of mistrustful and defensive opposition. Their relationship needs to be lived in peace and in the happiness of shared love.

On a more concrete level, if social policies – in the areas of education, work, family, access to services and civic participation – must combat all unjust sexual discrimination, they must also listen to the aspirations and identify the needs of all. The defence and promotion of equal dignity and common personal values must be harmonized with

<sup>21</sup> Encyclical Letter *Laborem exercens* (September 14, 1981), 19: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 73 (1981), 627.



attentive recognition of the difference and reciprocity between the sexes where this is relevant to the realization of one's humanity, whether male or female.

#### IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMININE VALUES IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

15. In the Church, woman as "sign" is more than ever central and fruitful, following as it does from the very identity of the Church, as received from God and accepted in faith. It is this "mystical" identity, profound and essential, which needs to be kept in mind when reflecting on the respective roles of men and women in the Church.

From the beginning of Christianity, the Church has understood herself to be a community, brought into existence by Christ and joined to him by a relationship of love, of which the nuptial experience is the privileged expression. From this it follows that the Church's first task is to remain in the presence of this mystery of God's love, manifested in Jesus Christ, to contemplate and to celebrate it. In this regard, the figure of Mary constitutes the fundamental reference in the Church. One could say metaphorically that Mary is a mirror placed before the Church, in which the Church is invited to recognize her own identity as well as the dispositions of the heart, the attitudes and the actions which God expects from her.

The existence of Mary is an invitation to the Church to root her very being in listening and receiving the Word of God, because faith is not so much the search for God on the part of human beings, as the recognition by men and women that God comes to us; he visits us and speaks to us. This faith, which believes that "nothing is impossible for God" (cf. *Gn* 18:14; *Lk* 1:37), lives and becomes deeper through the humble and loving obedience by which the Church can say to the Father: "Let it be done to me according to your word" (*Lk* 1:38). Faith continually makes reference to Jesus: "Do whatever he tells you" (*Jn* 2:5) and accompanies Jesus on his way, even to the foot of the Cross. Mary, in the hour of darkness, perseveres courageously in faithfulness, with the sole certainty of trust in the Word of God.

It is from Mary that the Church always learns the intimacy of Christ. Mary, who carried the small child of Bethlehem in her arms, teaches us to recognize the infinite humility of God. She who received the broken body of Jesus from the Cross shows the Church how to receive all those in this world whose lives have been wounded by violence and sin. From Mary, the Church learns the meaning of the power of love, as revealed by God in the life of his beloved Son: “he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their heart... he has lifted up the lowly” (*Lk* 1:51-52). From Mary, the disciples of Christ continually receive the sense and the delight of praise for the work of God’s hands: “The Almighty has done great things for me” (*Lk* 1:49). They learn that they are in the world to preserve the memory of those “great things”, and to keep vigil in expectation of the day of the Lord.

16. To look at Mary and imitate her does not mean, however, that the Church should adopt a passivity inspired by an outdated conception of femininity. Nor does it condemn the Church to a dangerous vulnerability in a world where what count above all are domination and power. In reality, the way of Christ is neither one of domination (cf. *Phil* 2:6) nor of power as understood by the world (cf. *Jn* 18:36). From the Son of God one learns that this “passivity” is in reality the way of love; it is a royal power which vanquishes all violence; it is “passion” which saves the world from sin and death and recreates humanity. In entrusting his mother to the Apostle John, Jesus on the Cross invites his Church to learn from Mary the secret of the love that is victorious.

Far from giving the Church an identity based on an historically conditioned model of femininity, the reference to Mary, with her dispositions of listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting, places the Church in continuity with the spiritual history of Israel. In Jesus and through him, these attributes become the vocation of every baptized Christian. Regardless of conditions, states of life, different vocations with or without public responsibilities, they are an essential aspect of Christian life. While these traits should be characteristic of every baptized person, women in fact live them with particular

intensity and naturalness. In this way, women play a role of maximum importance in the Church's life by recalling these dispositions to all the baptized and contributing in a unique way to showing the true face of the Church, spouse of Christ and mother of believers.

In this perspective one understands how the reservation of priestly ordination solely to men<sup>22</sup> does not hamper in any way women's access to the heart of Christian life. Women are called to be unique examples and witnesses for all Christians of how the Bride is to respond in love to the love of the Bridegroom.

## CONCLUSION

17. In Jesus Christ all things have been made new (cf. *Rev* 21:5). Renewal in grace, however, cannot take place without conversion of heart. Gazing at Jesus and confessing him as Lord means recognizing the path of love, triumphant over sin, which he sets out for his disciples.

In this way, man's relationship with woman is transformed, and the three-fold concupiscence described in the First Letter of John (*1 Jn* 2:16) ceases to have the upper hand. The witness of women's lives must be received with respect and appreciation, as revealing those values without which humanity would be closed in self-sufficiency, dreams of power and the drama of violence. Women too, for their part, need to follow the path of conversion and recognize the unique values and great capacity for loving others which their femininity bears. In both cases, it is a question of humanity's conversion to God, so that both men and women may come to know God as their "helper", as the Creator full of tenderness, as the Redeemer who "so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" (*Jn* 3:16).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (May 22, 1994): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 86 (1994), 545-548; CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Responsum ad dubium* regarding the doctrine of the Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (October 28, 1995): *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 87 (1995), 1114.

Such a conversion cannot take place without humble prayer to God for that penetrating gaze which is able to recognize one's own sin and also the grace which heals it. In a particular way, we need to ask this of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the woman in accord with the heart of God, she who is "blessed among women" (cf. *Lk* 1:42), chosen to reveal to men and women the way of love. Only in this way, can the "image of God", the sacred likeness inscribed in every man and woman, emerge according to the specific grace received by each (cf. *Gn* 1:27). Only thus can the path of peace and wonderment be recovered, witnessed in the verses of the Song of Songs, where bodies and hearts celebrate the same jubilee.

The Church certainly knows the power of sin at work in individuals and in societies, which at times almost leads one to despair of the goodness of married couples. But through her faith in Jesus crucified and risen, the Church knows even more the power of forgiveness and self-giving in spite of any injury or injustice. The peace and wonderment which she trustfully proposes to men and women today are the peace and wonderment of the garden of the resurrection, which have enlightened our world and its history with the revelation that "God is love" (*1 Jn* 4:8,16).

The Sovereign Pontiff John Paul II, in the Audience granted to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect, approved the present Letter, adopted in the Ordinary Session of this Congregation, and ordered its publication.

Rome, from the Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, May 31, 2004, the Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

✠ JOSEPH Card. RATZINGER  
*Prefect*

✠ ANGELO AMATO, SDB  
Titular Archbishop of Sila  
*Secretary*



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