

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

by

**Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ
2006**

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

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”**

Signed by Card. Joseph Ratzinger on May 31, 2004, Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, approved by John Paul II and ordered to be published.

The present booklet is a subsidy meant to help the study and the understanding of the above document and its rich teaching about the place of the women in the Church and in the world. The booklet contains the essential teaching of the document, but the ideal would be to read the document in its integrity. The study of the document invites to widen the horizon to embrace the whole “Feminine Question” in the Church. The first part is the dossier about “Women in the Church” which appeared in *WORLD MISSION*, August 2006; the second part contains the original study from which the dossier was taken. The booklet is simply like study notes.

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WOMEN (summary window)

Women are more than half of humanity and of the Church, the first witnesses of the Resurrection according to the New Testament. Women represent a different way of being human; they even show the other face of God. One of the greatest changes of the modern times is the emergence of women: they are affirming their dignity, their equality and taking their place and responsibility in society.

Two years ago, exactly on May 31, Feast of the Visitation, Card. Joseph Ratzinger, then head of the Congregation for the Defense of Faith, published his last important document before being chosen, a year later, to be pope Benedict XVI. It is the Letter to the bishops on the collaboration of men and women in the Church and society. This letter is the immediate occasion for choosing this topic and the direct object of my interest.

In this sense, the document is a point of arrival

The word 'Collaboration' is very much in use especially applied to the "collaborative ministry" in today's Church. It describes a different type of relationship from those that have existed in the past and are still present in many parts of the world and many aspects of the life of the Church. They are considered imperfect or wrong and therefore hopefully should be on the way out: like submission, subservience, competition, domination, antagonism.

The implication of this "new" feminism are radical. There is no reason to single out women and make an ideology called feminism for them alone. We speak about women and men and their cooperation and difference, not only about women.

In this sense, we are already beyond feminism. If the status of women need to be promoted in the Church (and it does!), it is not because they are women but because they are laity. It is the baptismal priesthood of the faithful that has to be rediscovered in the practice of the Church's life. Only in this way we shall overcome the lingering clericalism and see that the laity take their responsibility and have their space in the life of the Christian community. In this context, the women's genius already shines and will continue shining in the centuries to come as it did throughout Christianity's long history.

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

Women are more than half of humanity and of the Church, the first witnesses of the Resurrection according to the New Testament. Women represent a different way of being human; they even show the other face of God. One of the greatest changes of the modern times is the emergence of women: they are affirming their dignity, their equality and taking their place and responsibility in society.

The dates when women received the right to vote (the first country to comply was Finland in 1906; the last one: the Swiss Canton of Appenzell in 1986) remind us of how recently it was that women received equal political rights, and how this was accomplished in the face of much suspicion and resistance. The entry of women into all professions in society and into political roles is truly new and truly revolutionary.

It was the worldwide feminist movement the symbol and instrument of the emancipation of women. It is within the wider feminist movement that we place the blossoming of feminist theology in the Christian Church, in the second half of the XX century.

A hot potato

The feminist movement is still a hot potato, occasion of much controversy for the polarization of positions that are reflected in the following passage by the famous sociologist, Francesco Alberoni: "It was the women that made use of their intelligence, instead of brutality to ensure their survival and that of their children. As wives and mothers, they have created a civilized way of life. They have invented the home and they have convinced their men to care for it. They have trained their husbands and sons to cleanliness and order; they have valued gentleness, tenderness, everything that is sweet and delicate.

But not the new type of women...They do not search for love, but for power; they do not work for harmony but for domination. They compete with men; they have assumed their values. Exteriorly, they appear like women, but interiorly they are men. They care for their beauty, their charm and attractiveness by means of dieting, lifting, gymnastics, sophisticated accessories and refined make-up. Only to

seduce, to climb the social ladder, to affirm themselves. They will feel wasted if they give themselves to a man. Man is the enemy.

This type of women think that they represent the future: instead they don't know that they have put themselves in line with the oldest tradition of humanity: power, prevarication, war... and they risk to lose the most precious things in life: the ability to understand, the capacity to love, a warm heart".

Doctors of the Church

The desire and the choice to speak about the place and mission of the women in the Church originated in me from the study of our Baptismal Priesthood, the priesthood of the faithful. The greater number of the faithful (or laity) is made up of women: they are a world apart, with very distinctive and original characteristics. To me personally, the topic appeals out of a sense of gratitude for all that I have received from the many women in my life, starting with my mother, but also out of a sense of wonder: I have never outgrown the marvel that I experience looking at their difference and peculiarity.

Already pope Paul VI had manifested the awareness of the Church about the place of women by proclaiming St. Teresa of Avila and Saint Catherine of Siena doctors of the Church (1970). John Paul II declared St. Teresa of Lisieux doctor of the Church (*doctor amoris: the doctor of love*) in 1997, the anniversary of her death. Two years before, going to Spain for a gathering of Formators, I had passed by Lisieux and I also had signed the petition for her to be proclaimed Doctor of the Church.

In Rome, in 1987 there was the Synod about the Laity. On that occasion, one of the recommendations was for a further study of the anthropological and theological bases of the meaning and dignity of being a woman and of being a man: "It is a question of understanding the reasons for and the consequences of the Creator's decision that the human being should always and only exist as a woman or a man. It is only by beginning from these foundations that it will be possible to understand the greatness of the dignity and vocation of women and their active presence in the Church and in society".

From the new awareness that the Church is first of all people of God, comes the promotion of the Laity. It is in the context of the promotion of the laity expressed by the 1987 Synod, that Pope John

Paul II decided to write the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988) about the Vocation and the Dignity of women.

The style and character of the letter are those of a meditation, yet it is possibly the most personal and original document of the late pope, written with fine sensitivity, a document that gave rise to admiration even in certain radical feminist circles. For example, Gertrud Mongella, President of the International Conference on Women in Beijing said: "I would like all the fanatics in the world to reason in the same balanced way as the Pope."

The spousal character of the human body

In it, the late pope speaks of our sexuality as experience of communion between woman and man. This self-giving, in mutuality, and without either's dominance, is more like the inner life of God than anything else that we encounter in creation. It has in it the taste of the divine, and the Song of Songs is its internal music.

Wojtyla refuses to separate the "person" from the body. He loved the human body, he always enjoyed the strength and vitality his body used to give him, climbing the mountains or canoeing or swimming. He loved the sights and smells and sounds of the liturgy. Everywhere he saw that our spirit and body are made for one another, enter into one another, interpenetrate in the secret of our being. For the late pope, even celibacy is understood in the light of matrimony, the sacrament by which the Creator revealed to humankind the communion of His own nature. In *Mulieris Dignitatem* he brought together his previous rich and original teaching about human sexuality.

Beginning in 1979, in the very first year of his papacy, John Paul II devoted 15 minutes of each weekly general audience over a five years period, to dense and rigorous meditations on human sexuality. He began with Adam in his solitude. Adam walked alone as a species. He stood alone in all creation. Neither had he company of his own kind, nor could he procreate and assure the continuation of his own species.

This solitude, the Bible says, was not good. He lacked an essential part. So, from Adam's flesh to underline the oneness of the human essence, God created Eve: not just a woman, but a person with a name and personality. One inescapable point of this account is that the human being is two-in-one.

Moreover, if the human being is made “in the image of God”, the distinctness of our being male and female is revelatory of God’s own being and inner life. It is in our communion with one another that we are images of God. Each gender alone is incompletely human. We are made for the communion of male with female.

Thus, it can be said that God created man and woman in a single mysterious act. There is no right without left, no high without low, no man without woman. We can therefore clearly see that the sexual difference is neither irrelevant nor additional, nor is it a social product: it originates in the very intention of the Creator. It is in this context that *Mulieris Dignitatem* speaks of the genius of women in virginity and motherhood.

A letter about collaboration

Two years ago, exactly on May 31, Feast of the Visitation, Card. Joseph Ratzinger, then head of the Congregation for the Defense of Faith, published his last important document before being chosen, a year later, to be pope Benedict XVI. It is the *Letter to the bishops on the collaboration of men and women in the Church and society*. This letter is the immediate occasion for choosing this topic and the direct object of my interest.

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In this sense, the document is a point of arrival. The feminist movement in its extreme positions has not affected women only but also men, as the English journalist Melanie Phillips has shown in her book: *The Sex-Change Society (Feminized Britain and the Neutered Male)*, published in 1999. The gender revolution of the twentieth century was female, but extreme feminism has distorted its own agenda of equality by replacing it with sameness. At the same time, men have been demonized and the male role has been put in crisis. The result has been an anti-family policy in which everyone has become a potential loser.

Beyond Feminism

In such a situation, it is not surprising that the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith has addressed its letter to both men and women. Today, in addition to clearly indicating the legitimate rights of women and working to make them respected in the five continents, it is also necessary to speak of the duties of both sexes.

The letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World underlines the equality in human dignity and yet the fundamental difference between the sexes. It expounds the unsuspected rich and deep anthropology of the sexes in Catholicism in order to find solutions to pressing problems in the area of family and women's policies.

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WOMEN'S UPHILL STRUGGLE

The open-minded and free approach of Jesus towards the women members of his discipleship group is followed very soon by a narrowing of the mentality as it is witnessed by the passages about women attributed to Saint Paul. The narrow-minded outlook reached its peak in the Middle Ages and it was expressed by the saying that the woman needed: *Aut murus aut maritus* (either a wall or a husband: to be enclosed by the walls of a monastery or by the marital status).

So pervasive was the inferiority position of the women in marriage that it was paradoxically from the monasteries that women were able to manifest their free initiative and their gifts. It was in monasteries that women found education in an age of almost universal illiteracy; there they found leadership space: abbesses had the jurisdiction of bishops in their monastery.

I remember the choir of a Trappistine monastery in Uganda. At the place of the abbess there was a silver pastoral staff resembling one of a bishop. It was a sign that, also in the recent history of the missionary church, the monastery or the convent was sometimes a way for a young woman to reach education and leadership, in a social context where women are in a condition of subjection and inferiority.

It is from the monasteries of medieval Europe that we find a bunch of remarkable women mystics and theologians like St. Hildegard of Bingen, St. Gertrude the Great, St. Bridget of Sweden, Blessed Julian of Norwich, St Catherine of Siena. They were very influential in the often tumultuous life of the Church of their times and protagonists of interesting “feminine” insights in theology, especially in their speaking of God and his mystery.

Mother Ignatia's achievement

The Renaissance did not bring any change of the set attitude against women. We have the exemplary story of Mary Ward (1586-1645), a brave English woman who wanted to start a congregation of active life like the Jesuits. She was in love with the rule of St. Ignatius of Loyola. As she discovered, her enemies were not only in Protestant England. Her devotion to the spiritual vision of St. Ignatius fed the distrust of the secular clergy, who were rivals to the glamorous Society of Jesus. Her institute was mocked as the house of “Lady Jesuits”.

But beyond the territorial jealousies of English Catholics, there was the wider resistance, in principle, to the radical program that Mary outlined. While elements of her program were admired – especially her proposal for free school for Catholic girls – her adamant insistence that the Institute be non enclosed and that it remain free of Episcopal jurisdiction, ran head-on against the prescribed place of the women in the Church.

While some bishops offered polite approval for her plans, most ultimately shared the opinion of one priest who, while admiring the Sisters' fervor, noted: "When all is said and done, they are all but women!". Mary Ward traveled great part of Europe on foot, was imprisoned by the Inquisition, and saw the failure of her attempts.

Something different happened to Mother Ignatia of the Espiritu Santo, the founder of the Religious of the Virgin Mary (RVM), who around the same time gathered women in her *beaterio* in the Philippines, inspired and helped by the Jesuits. But the happening was at the periphery of the world, otherwise also that attempt might have failed.

Modern blossoming

It was necessary to reach the time after the French Revolution for the women religious to be allowed to come out of the enclosure and commit themselves in the world to a life of apostolate, social work and mission. The XIX and the first part of the XX century have seen an extraordinary blossoming of female religious congregations of apostolic and missionary life. Women religious have contributed mightily to the uplifting of the condition of the women especially through education.

The Catholic Church has always, from the very beginning of the school system in Europe, placed major emphasis on the education of girls and women. Education is the major force of change in traditional sex-role patterns. The Church put major efforts into the education of women especially in the missions. "If one educates a woman, one educates a village" a saying from Africa explains. The problems facing women in the developing world are worse. Here women are responsible not only for their own family, but for whole communities as well, in an endless workday, often amid poverty and deprivation.

The coming out of the women religious in the modern times is the beginning of the accelerated movement of change so typical of the contemporary scene in all the fields. The emancipation of women in society coincides with the appearance of so many outstanding women in the Church's horizon of the XX century who follow the tradition of the giant women of the second millennium of Christianity like Teresa of Avila and Terese of Lisieux. They are: Dorothy Day, Raissa Maritain, Edith Stein (Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross), Teresa of Calcutta, Sue Ryder, Josephine Bakita, Simone Weil,

Catherine De Hueck Doherty, Magdeleine de Jesus to mention just a few. The uphill struggle is not completely over, but Vatican II is also in this field a watershed the fruits of which we have just started to gather.

THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LETTER

The Church, “expert in humanity”(Paul VI), presents principles of active collaboration between men and women in the Church and in society, in recognition of their difference, in order to foster dialogue for a more authentic relationship. It starts from the biblical foundations of a Christian anthropology.

From the very beginning, humanity is described as articulated in the male-female relationship. Woman is another “I” in a common humanity that therefore appears as a unity of the two. Humanity is a relational reality. An ordered world is born out of differences brought together in harmony by relationships.

The capacity to love – reflection of the image of God who is love- is disclosed in the spousal character of the body in which the masculinity and femininity of the person is expressed. 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 called to exist mutually ‘one for the other”, in interpersonal communion by means of the integration of what is masculine and what is feminine.

Their equal dignity as persons is realized as physical, psychological and ontological complementarity. Sexual difference is both important and meaningful. Sexuality is a fundamental component of personality, one of its modes of being, of manifestation, of communicating with others, of feeling, of expressing and living human love.

The human dimension of sexuality flows into the theological dimension. The great allegory of the covenant between Yahweh and the people of Israel is marriage, the love between man and woman, so beautifully exalted in the Song of Songs. The allegory becomes infinitely concrete with the Incarnation: Jesus is the bridegroom and the Church is the bride.

Christian life is as a nuptial mystery. The bride is present in each of the baptized and is like one who presents herself to the

Bridegroom, Christ. The Bible, in the book of 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 by nature to creation and destined therefore to outlast the present time, evidently in a transfigured form. 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.

Motherhood is a physical and spiritual dimension. The genius of women shines in family and society life, involving human relationships and caring for others. It is in the family that we learn the basic teachings of our humanity. We learn to love in as much as we are unconditionally loved, we learn respect for others in as much as we are respected and we learn to know the face of God in as much as we receive the first revelation of it from a father and a mother full of attention in our regard.

Feminine values are above all human values, although women by nature may be more immediately attuned to them. What 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.

The harmonization of 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 in the family is required. Women who freely desire to devote their life to the family should be able to do so without being stigmatized by society and penalized financially. In the same way, women who opt for a job outside the home should find an appropriate work schedule that respects their condition of pregnancy, motherhood and responsibility in the family.

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. Thus women have access to the heart of Christian life. Mary is the mirror, the icon of the Church. She is a model, not of passivity but of passion.

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"

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A RICH FEMINIST HERITAGE

Feminist theology makes us aware of the struggle of women in order to come out of the constraints of the traditional male-dominated mentality so as to occupy their rightful place in the Church. The struggle of more than half a century of feminist studies has contributed to the new appreciation of the rich heritage of the women in the history of the Church.

Kari Elisabeth Boerresen is a feminist theologian who was born in Norway into a noble Lutheran family. She followed the mother who converted to Catholicism and has become a leading theologian. To her we owe the term Matristic Studies (or Matrology), meaning the study of the "Mothers of the Church": those women mystics and theologians of the Middle Ages who are protagonists of interesting "feminine" insights in theology.

She says that the Catholic and Orthodox traditions are well equipped for the new enculturation concerning the place and mission of women in the Church: "Both traditions have a dynamic exegesis of the Scriptures and an anthropology that looks with optimism at the divinization of the human being. The patristic enculturation of the ancient Greek-Roman world and the Northern-European enculturation of the medieval Mothers of the Church can be useful as models for a feminist restoration of Christianity".

Women: subject of theology

The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes or distorts the full humanity of women, therefore, must be presumed not to reflect the divine will. The negative principle also implies the positive principle: what does promote the full humanity of women reflects a true relation with the Divine (Rosemary Redford Reuther)

With the emergence of feminist theology, women pass from being object of theology (especially in the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary), to being subject of theology. Feminist theology is first of all for the promotion of the dignity, place and mission of women in the Church, and then for a more balanced and complete understanding of God's mystery and Christ's Mystery, given the contribution of the feminine outlook. Feminist theology implies a revision of the past, especially the sources of the Christian tradition, in order to research a more complete and relevant place for the women in the Church.

Sororitas (Sisterhood) is the mutual support that women give to each other in the effort to promote their dignity and fight against what diminishes or destroys that dignity. "Brotherhood" is the best term to express the Christian Identity. Yet, in the "*androcentric*" culture, this brotherhood is many times betrayed in the way women were treated and are treated.

"Sisterhood" wants to redress, to counter-balance this. Icon of "Sorority" is the Visitation: the encounter of Mary with Elizabeth, both pregnant and both called by God to take part in his merciful plan of salvation: two women that honor each other and recognize in each other God's call and the special dignity that it confers; two women come together in order to help each other.

Sorority is beneficial and legitimate as long as it does not mean the exclusion of men; as long as it does not produce isolation and alienation.

Mary in Feminist Theology

From a position of refusal of Mary, feminist theologians have recently come back to Mary as a symbolic figure of identification. The Virgin Mary is the most appropriate context, in which to study and to discuss the experience of women. In feminist theology, understood as liberation theology, Mary's *Fiat* and *Magnificat* become the manifesto of a freed and freeing femininity.

In the past, it was common to emphasize the ways in which Mary was set apart from and above all other women and the ordinary condition of humanity. Today there is a new emphasis on her status as woman of the people and her solidarity with the rest of humanity. A "*Mariology from above*" emphasized God's initiative in selecting Mary for her part in the divine mystery of redemption.

On the other hand, a “*Mariology from below*” begins with a poor woman, Mary of Nazareth, who was rooted in the faith and struggles of her people, subject to the cruelties of the world, and heir of the ancient hope for deliverance and salvation. In this light, Mary is not so much honored for her special nature as for her exceptional faith. This position has a special appeal in Latin America, in the context of Liberation Theology and the suffering of the people, especially women, under oppressive regimes.

One woman of El Salvador writes: “I often think of Mary: I suffered so much when they arrested my son. When I went to ask where he was, they said they didn’t know. I searched and searched, but couldn’t find him. Finally, his corpse appeared, his head in one place and his body in another. I fainted when I saw him. I thought of how the Blessed Virgin Mary also suffered when they told her that her son had also been arrested. Surely, she went searching for him and later saw him die and buried him. That is why she understands my sorrow and helps me to go on”. The mothers of the *plaza de Mayo*, the mothers of the *disaparecidos* share those feelings.

Throughout Latin America, in the rural areas and in the poor districts on the edges of cities, there are millions of women, conceiving, bearing and suckling new children of the common people. Sometimes they do it with difficulty, pain and suffering, sometimes with the last trickle of life left in them.

This female body, which nourishes with its flesh and blood the lives it has conceived, is the same body that wastes away and dies tilling the earth, working in factories and homes, stirring pans and sweeping floors. It is the woman’s body that is eucharistically given for the cause of liberation and continues the same struggle of patience and resistance, pain and courage, devotion and joy.

Breaking the bread and distributing it, having communion in the bread and the blood of the Lord until he comes again, means for women today repeating and symbolizing, in the midst of the community, the divine act of surrender and love so that the people may grow and the victory come, which is celebrated in the feast of true and final liberation.

This position is reflected in one of the leading women theologians of Latin America, Maria Teresa Porcile Santiso, especially in her book, *Woman: Space of Salvation* (1994).

From an anthropological perspective, she points out the mission of the woman in the Church, based on a theology of the

woman's body (or female body) as space of salvation: the woman's body is capable of becoming space/ambience/milieu for a life which it keeps, hosts and nourishes until the moment of birth and beyond. This is the unique experience of the woman, an experience which is exclusive, non-transferable and cannot be substituted".

This position is close to the teaching of John Paul II about the spousal orientation of the body, and the call of women to motherhood. Some feminists have criticized this position: they find restrictive the idea of limiting the mission of the women in the Church to their sexual body, as if not considering enough other aspects of the feminine personality.

Dead ends

Other tendencies of feminist theology have stressed polemic attitudes that are not easily assimilated by the mainstream Catholic conscience. In their extreme position, they represent a dead end.

As regard the Virgin Mary, this tendency is seen in the book by the Indian theologian Tissa Balasuriya, '*Mary and Human Liberation*' criticized by the Congregation of the Defense of Faith. In it, he argues that traditional Mariology has perpetuated the oppressive and imperialistic tendencies of western patriarchy by cultivating passivity and conformity among colonized people.

"If we recognize that Mary is woman of the poor, we must also challenge the lie that depicts her as jeweled and elaborately dressed. Because the good news of the *Magnificat* is bad news for the rich, we reject Mary's hijacking by a wealthy Church – for the consolation of the rich. This simply reinforces the oppression of the poor." (*Statement on Feminist Mariology, produced at a conference of Asian Christian Women in Singapore, 1987*).

The experience of the popular devotion to Mary on the part of the Catholic masses of the poor in Latin America, Mexico and the Philippines and, with a different slant, even in Europe around the most famous Marian shrines, makes us realize how this tendency can be unrealistic, patronizing towards the devotion of the poor and a theological dead end.

"*Mariology from below*" must take into account the fundamental Biblical data about Mary: "*Ave Maria, gratia plena*", "*The Lord has done great things for me and holy is his Name*". The greatness of Mary is not only her exceptional faith, and the fact that she belonged

to the sociologically poor. It is the grace of God that called her to become the Mother of God, *Theotokos*.

Another “dead end” is the antagonism or gut aversion against men. Women - some feminists sustain - in order to be themselves, must make themselves enemies of men. Faced by the abuse of power, they think that the answer for women is to seek power.

Or, in order to avoid the domination of one sex on the other, their differences tend to be denied. One prefers to speak of gender and not of sex, as if sexual orientation were only a cultural product or a choice. The consequences are deadly for the family as a communion of a man and a woman.

A very dangerous application of the above position is the fight against Patriarchy in theology. Yet God the Father and God the Son are of equal greatness in the bosom of the Trinity. We know that there is no sex in God and we are aware that the male images of God are counterbalanced by feminine traits (God is Father/Mother).

To want to abolish the Fatherhood of God because of the idea of Patriarchy, is to destroy the Gospels as we know them. After all, Jesus taught us the prayer of the ‘Our Father’. Moreover, Jesus’ relationship with the Father, as shown especially in the gospel of John, is a relationship of love and obedience. What about the parable of the prodigal son and the merciful father? What about our call to sonship and daughtership according to the teaching of Saint Paul?

The fight against Patriarchy, if taken literally, destroys the Bible and our Christian religion. This is what happened to Mary Dale (*‘Beyond God the Father’, 1986*) and other extremists in feminist theology: they do not consider themselves Christian any more.

An area that has particularly focused the struggle of feminist theologians in the recent past is the promotion of women to the Holy Orders. According to the Italian feminist theologian Cettina Militello that is also a dead end, since the document of the Congregation for the Defense of Faith: *“Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood” (1977)*. Many women theologians nowadays have embraced the cause of the promotion of the laity and understood the struggle for the promotion of women in the Church as part of this movement.

Truly, the solution appears to be in the line of the re-discovery of the Common Priesthood of the Faithful. It is our Baptismal Priesthood that must be promoted in order to cut to size the importance of the Ministerial Priesthood and counter-act the tendency

of clericalism. To empower the laity, be they women or men, is for the Church the way to the future.

Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

(Original)

Introduction

The desire and the choice to speak about the place and mission of the women in the Church and in the world originated in me from the study of our Baptismal Priesthood which was based mainly on the document *Christifideles Laici*.

A great part of the laity are women: a world apart, with very distinctive and original characteristics, more than half of humanity and of the Church.

To me personally, the topic appeals out of a sense of gratitude for all that I have received from women in my life and it is very much (starting with my mother, Angelina (may God rest her generous soul!) and my dearest friend and spiritual sister Domitilla, a missionary of Charity of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, an Indian from Kerala, who has given already more than 30 years of her life to Africa and who is at present in Nairobi, and so many others!). Not only out of a sense of gratitude, but also out of a sense of wonder: women are the other side of God for me.

The immediate occasion for choosing this topic and the direct object of my interest is the LETTER TO THE BISHOPS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON THE COLLABORATION OF MEN AND WOMEN IN THE CHURCH AND IN THE WORLD written by the Congregation for the Defense of Faith on May 31, 2004.

The word **collaboration** has become very much in use especially applied to the “collaborative ministry”, and obviously it takes the place of other types of relationships which have existed in the past and may still be in existence, but that are considered imperfect or wrong and therefore on the way out: like SUBMISSION, SUBSERVIENCE, COMPETITION, DOMINATION, ANTAGONISM, INDIFFERENCE, ALIENATION.

The promotion of the laity

In this sense, the document is a **point of arrival**: From the new awareness that the Church is first of all PEOPLE OF GOD, comes the promotion of the Laity. It is in the context of the promotion of the laity (Cfr. the 1987 Synod about the Laity), that Pope John Paul II decided to write the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988) about the Vocation and the Dignity of women. The style and character of the letter is that of a meditation.

Already pope Paul VI had manifested the awareness of the Church about the place of women by proclaiming St. Teresa of Avila and Saint Catherine of Siena doctors of the Church (1970). John Paul II declared St. Teresa of Lisieux doctor of the Church (DOCTOR AMORIS) in 1997, the anniversary of her death (In 1995, going to Spain for the gathering of the Formators, I had passed through Lisieux and I also had signed the petition for her to be proclaimed Doctor of the Church). Paul VI had also instituted a commission for the study of the problem of the effective promotion of the dignity and responsibility of women.

In the 1987 there was the Synod about the Laity; on that occasion: “One of the recommendations was for a further study of the anthropological and theological bases that are needed in order to solve the problems connected with the meaning and dignity of being a woman and of being a man. It is a question of understanding the reason for and the consequences of the Creator’s decision that the human being should always and only exist as a woman or a man. It is only by beginning from these bases, which make

possible to understand the greatness of the dignity and vocation of women, that one is able to speak of their active presence in the Church and in society”.

The apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* is the beginning of the answer to this need and demand. The point of arrival (maybe only provisional) is the Document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith that we have mentioned before.

THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN

One of the greatest changes of the modern times is the emergence of the women, the other half of humanity: they are affirming their dignity, their equality and taking their place and responsibility in society: this is THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT.

It is within the wider feminist movement (i.e. the worldwide movement of emancipation of the women in society) that we place the feminist movement in theology or the blossoming of feminist theology in the Christian Church in the second half of the XX century.

The feminist movement is still a hot potato, occasion of much controversy for the polarization of positions that are reflected in the following article of the famous psychologist and sociologist, Francesco Alberoni: “It was the women that that made use of their intelligence, instead of brutality (or brute force) to ensure their survival and that of their children. As wives and mothers, they have created a civilized way of life. They have invented the home and they have convinced their men to care for it. They have trained their husbands and sons to cleanliness and order; they have valued gentleness, tenderness, everything that is sweet and delicate.

But not the new type of women...They do not search for love, but for power; they do not work for harmony but for domination. They compete with men, they have assumed their values. Exteriorly, they appear like women, but interiorly they are men. They care for their beauty, their charm and attractiveness by means of dieting, lifting, gymnastics, sophisticated accessories and refined make-up. Only to seduce, to climb the social ladder,

to affirm themselves. They will feel wasted if they give themselves to a man. MAN IS THE ENEMY.

This type of women think that they represent the future: instead they don't know that they have put themselves in line with the oldest tradition of humanity: power, prevarication, war... and they risk to lose the most precious things in life: the ability to understand, the capacity to love, a warm heart".

Women's struggle for their place in the Church

The open minded and free approach of Jesus and the early Church towards the women members is followed by the narrow minded outlook of the Middle Ages which was expressed by the saying that the woman needed *Aut murus aut maritus* (either to be enclosed by the walls of a monastery or by the marital status).

The Renaissance did not bring any change of this set attitude. We have the exemplary story of MARY WARD (1586-1645), a remarkable English woman who wanted to start a congregation of active life like the Jesuits. She was in love with the rule of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

"As she discovered, her enemies were not only in Protestant England. Her devotion to the spiritual vision of St. Ignatius fed the distrust of the secular clergy, who were rivals to the glamorous Society of Jesus. Her institute was mocked as the house of "Lady Jesuits".

But beyond the territorial jealousies of English Catholics, there was the wider resistance, in principle, to the radical program that Mary outlined. While elements of her program were admired – especially her proposal for free school for Catholic girls – her adamant insistence that the Institute be non enclosed and that it remain free of Episcopal jurisdiction, ran head-on against the prescribed place of the women in the Church.

While some bishops offered polite approval for her plans, most ultimately shared the opinion of one priest who, while admiring the Sisters' fervor, noted: "WHEN ALL IS DONE THEY ARE BUT WOMEN!". Mary Ward traveled great part of Europe on foot, was imprisoned by the Inquisition, and saw the failure of her attempts.

Something different happened to Mother Ignatia of the Espiritu Santo, the founder of the RVM, who around the same time gathered women in her *beaterio* in the Philippines, inspired and helped by the Jesuits. But the

happening was at the periphery of the world and of little relevance, otherwise also that attempt might have failed.

It was necessary to reach the time after the French Revolution for the women religious to be allowed to come out of the enclosure and commit themselves in the world to a life of apostolate, social work and mission

A RICH FEMINIST HERITAGE

Feminist theology makes us aware of the struggle of the women in order to come out of the constraints of the traditional masculinist mentality so as to occupy their place in society and in the Church. The struggle of half a century of feminist studies has contributed to the new appreciation of the rich heritage of the women in the history of the Church.

KARI ELISABETH BOERRESEN is a feminist theologian who was born in Norway into a noble Lutheran family. She followed the mother who converted to Catholicism and has become a leading theologian.

Her most famous book is *Subordination and Equivalence: Nature and role of women in Augustin and Thomas Aquinas* (1979). We owe her the word “**androcentric**” (the fact that the human being of male sex was taken as the only referent of what is human). To her we owe also the term **MATRISTIC** (or Matrology), meaning the women mystics and theologians of the Middle Ages who are protagonists of a very interesting “feminine” insight in theology, especially in their speaking of God and his mystery.

She goes on to say that the Catholic and Orthodox traditions are well equipped for the new enculturation concerning the place and mission of the women in the Church: “Both traditions have a dynamic exegesis of the Scriptures and an anthropology that looks with optimism at the divinization of the human being. The patristic enculturation of the ancient Greek-Roman world and the Northern-European enculturation of the medieval Mothers of the Church, if purified from their androcentric aspects, can be useful as models for a feminist restoration of Christianity”.

I thought it could be of interest to dwell on the rich heritage of the medieval women mystics and theologians. From Northern Europe we have: St. Hildegard of Bingen, St. Gertrude the Great, St. Bridget of Sweden, Blessed Julian of Norwich. To them I decided to add St Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa of Avila and St. Therese of the Child Jesus.

To these giants among the women, who cover the second millennium of Christianity, we must add the many outstanding women of the XX century like Dorothy Day, Raissa Maritain, Edith Stein (Teresa Benedicta of the Cross), Teresa of Calcutta, Sue Rider, etc.....

SAINT HILDEGARD OF BINGEN (1098-1179)

She was an abbess and a visionary. By any standard, one of the most remarkable figure of her age: author and theologian, preacher, musician and composer, poet and artist, doctor and pharmacist. Her visions have received great attention recently, thanks to the contemporary interest in the role of women in history. She is increasingly honored as a visionary whose ecological and holistic spirituality speaks prophetically to our time.

The daughter of a noble family, at the age of eight she was entrusted to a saintly anchoress, Blessed Jutta, who lived in a cottage attached to a Benedictine abbey. Other religious women joined Jutta who became the abbess of a new Benedictine community. When she died, Hildegard became the abbess. She was 38.

Although she had visions since the early childhood, it was from the year 1141 that the mystical break through happened. She wrote down her visions that were approved by the bishop and then by the pope himself. She had been given a monk as secretary and worked ten years to produce her major work: *Scivias (Know the Ways)*.

Her book is the record of a series of visions concerning the relation between humanity and God, and humanity and the cosmos. With extraordinary symbolic paintings that accompany the text, Hildegard presents a picture of human beings and cosmos as emanations from God's love, "living sparks or rays of his splendor, just as the rays of the sun proceed from the sun itself". There are many elements to Hildegard's visions that speak to our ecological era.

Constantly Hildegard refers to God as "Living Light", and she employs a remarkable word: VIRIDITAS (*green-ness*) to describe the animating energy or grace that shines forth in all living things. By her holistic vision, Hildegard has inspired the proponents of "Creation Spirituality" (Matthew Fox).

At a certain moment she managed to transfer her community to Bingen. She made numerous preaching tours throughout the Rhineland.

Besides her religious writings, she wrote extensively of medicine. She studied the use of medicinal herbs (Homeopathic medicine).

She composed music of great beauty and originality. Music, she wrote, was a symbol of the harmony that Satan disturbed. Her writings are titled: *Illuminations*.

SAINT GERTRUDE THE GREAT (1253-1302)

On the birth and background of St. Gertrude there is no record. When she was five she was given to the nuns of the monastery of Helfta in Saxony, and within the walls of that enclosure she remained for the rest of her life. This monastery was one of the great religious communities of its time, distinguished by women of great learning as well as a number of famous mystics.

One of them, St. Mechthild, was put in charge of the girl and oversaw her education and upbringing. Their relationship remained particularly intimate. When she came of age, Gertrude was professed as a nun. The religious life was all she had ever known. Nevertheless, she truly owned her vocation only at the age of 25.

The turning point came one evening as she was preparing for bed. Suddenly she experienced a vision of Christ in the form of a young man. He spoke to her and said: "You have licked the dust of my enemies and sucked honey from thorns. Now come back to me and my divine delights shall be as wine to you". She answered: "Inscribe with your precious blood, most merciful Lord, your wounds on my heart, that I may read in them both your sufferings and your love."

For the rest of her life, Gertrude enjoyed mystical revelations, often couched in dialogues with Christ, her Beloved Spouse. Believing these revelations were not for her own sake, she forced herself to record them in a book, *The Herald of Divine Love*, a work combining great theological sophistication with mystical ardor.

Nearly all the themes of catholic theology are treated in her book, though the principle theme is God's love for his creatures. Gertrude had a special devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the point where human and divine love are most intimately joined. (*)

Gertrude was often in poor health. Once when she was too sick to attend a sermon the Lord spoke to her: "Would you like me to preach to you,

my dearest?” When she assented, the Lord made her lean against his heart, with the heart of her soul close to his divine heart. When her soul had sweetly rested there awhile, she heard in the Lord’s heart two wondrous and sweet pulsations. He told her that the first pulse was for the salvations of sinners, the second for the salvation of the just.

Gertrude served her community as a spiritual director and was frequently called upon to lead the community in prayer. When another of Helfta’s mystics asked the Lord what he most liked about Gertrude, he answered: “Her freedom of heart.” She died on November 17, 1302, at the age of 49.

(*) *It was in the 12 century that the great spiritual writers began to focus on the open side of the Savior. It was a part of the maternal aspect (nurturing and protecting the young) that Cistercian authors frequently called attention to in Christ. In their writings, Christ repeatedly appears as protecting the faithful, like a hen protecting and maternally feeding her chicks.*

William of Saint Thierry used to say that Eternal Wisdom nourishes the little ones at her maternal breasts. On the image of maternal breasts, the great writers of the Middle Ages eventually came to superimpose the loving image of the Spouse’s breasts, based on the Latin text of the Song of Songs (Song 1:1), where the Bride says to the beloved: “Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth: for your breasts are better than wine”. The Bridegroom’s breasts give joy to her spouse, Saint Bernard tells us. The breasts signify love and tenderness.

The theme of the open side of the Crucified was introduced into this context. With his lance, the soldier opened up the ineffable riches of glory and the sacraments flowed forth. This revealed the Heart, the cleft in the rock in which we could hide ourselves.

Aelred of Rievaulx points to the image of Jesus Crucified with his arms open and his breast laid bare, in order to nourish us. From his open side flow honey, wine and milk. With that, attention began to focus on the wounded heart of Christ.

The first mystic who felt attracted by the Heart of the Lord was Saint Mechtilde of Magdeburg, who spent the last years of her life in the monastery of Helfta. She is the one who most likely recommended to St. Gertrude that she nourishes her devotion with the contemplation of the open side of the Lord. Gertrude felt a strong attraction to the five wounds of Christ, especially that of the side, which she beheld in several visions.

In some experiences of union, Gertrude felt that she had been introduced into the Heart of Christ. It is not surprising then that she refers to the Divine Heart as the Transfixed Heart. For her, the Heart was the Ark of the Godhead, the place where the divine treasures are kept and, by this very fact, the place where we experience the secrets of God.

SAINT BRIDGET OF SWEDEN (1303-1373)

She is the patron saint of Sweden, the founder of the Brigittine Order and a mystic whose revelations were very influential during the Middle Ages. John Paul II declared her patron of Europe, together with Catherine of Siena and Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) The male counterpart are St. Benedict and Saint Cyril and Methodius.

The daughter of a governor, she had from an early age remarkable visions, including one of Christ crucified, which influenced her entire life and outlook. She married at 13 and bore eight children to her husband who was also a governor. She was a widow at 31 and retired to a life of prayer and penance near a Cistercian monastery. To the prior, Peter Olafsson, she dictated the visions and revelations that came to her.

One was the command to found a new religious order, which she was able to fulfill only towards the end of her life. During the Holy Year 1350 she went to Rome and remained there until the end of her life in the company of one of her daughter who became a saint, St. Catherine of Sweden.

She exercised a wide apostolate among the rich and the poor, sheltering the homeless and sinners, giving God's messages of warning in times that were full of unrest and corruption. She worked untiringly for the return of the Pope from Avignon to Rome. Spurred by a vision to visit the Holy Land (1372), she died soon after her return to Rome.

She was a woman of outstanding human and spiritual gifts and of great influence, given her nobility, education, various life experiences, wide traveling and profound spiritual depth. She was canonized in 1391. Bridget's revelations were first published in 1492.

BLESSED JULIAN OF NORWICH (1342-1416)

We know about her very little, only what can be inferred by the book that made her famous: *The showings (Revelations)*. She was an anchoress. She was literally sealed (walled in) in a dwelling attached to the walls of a church.

Her cell had a window which allowed her a view of the church interior, as well as an outside window for the delivery of food and the reception of visitors seeking spiritual council. She may also have enjoyed a garden and the company of a cat. Otherwise, her life was devoted to prayer and reflection.

Notwithstanding the extreme form of rejection of the world that she had embraced, her writings testify to the profound love and compassion that were the fruit of her solitary existence.

She asked three graces: recollection of Christ's passion; bodily sickness and the "three wounds" of contrition, compassion and longing for God. She fell seriously sick to the point of dying, and on that occasion, as she lay gazing on a crucifix, she experienced sixteen revelations concerning Christ's passion, after which she was cured.

She recorded these revelations in a book called: *The showings*. After twenty years she gave another longer version of the same revelations. There are many themes in Julian's writings that speak directly to the heart of contemporary spirituality.

Among these is her frequent recourse to the feminine images of God. Jesus, she writes, is our true mother, who bears us in the womb of his love and nourishes us with his own flesh. For her the cross becomes a source not of terror but of consolation, a sign of Christ's "friendliness" and extreme "courtesy".

Throughout her writings, the affirmation of the goodness of creation and her stress on the beauty, friendliness and the love of God contrast sharply with the contemporary theology which stressed the anger and judgment of God over a sinful world. Her central insight was that the God who created us out of love and who redeemed us by suffering love, also sustains us and wills to be united with us in the end.

Creation amounts to no more than "a hazelnut" in the hand of God. Physically it is nothing. But spiritually, its value is measured against God's love and the price God has paid for it in blood. This love, and not sin, fundamentally determines our existence. Evil has no independent status;

whatever we may suffer, God has already suffered. “The worst,” as she noted, “has already happened and been repaired”.

Thus she could say, in her most famous and characteristic words, “All shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well”.

SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA (1347-1380)

One of the greatest saints of all times, she enjoyed an intimate relationship with Christ (“Gesù’ dolce, Gesù’ amore!”); this was certified by an extraordinary number of miracles that made her a celebrity.

What was distinctive about the holiness of Catherine was the way she mediated through her own heart the burning love of Christ and the needs of her time.

She was the 24th of 25 children of a prosperous wool-dyer. She refused to marry and said she was betrothed with Christ. As a sign of this, she cut her beautiful, golden hair. Her family retaliated by treating her as one of their servants.

She did not enter any order, but she dressed the habit of a Dominican Tertiary. She enclosed herself in her room for three years. “My cell, she said, will not be one of stone or wood, but of self-knowledge”. In what did this self-knowledge consist?

She received the answer in a vision of Christ: “Know, daughter, that I am He who is, and you are that which is not”. From this simple formula, Catherine would develop her whole understanding of the spiritual life and of her vocation. When she was twenty, Christ appeared to her and, in a mystical betrothal, placed a ring on her finger, visible only to herself.

Since then Catherine started her public life: she nursed the sick, distributed alms to the poor, ministered to prisoners and plague victims. A group of men and women followed her and called her their mamma! They were known as *La Catarinata*. She became a public figure, dictating hundreds of letters to the pope, monarchs and other prominent people, counseling them in the performance of their duties.

She became peacemaker between different parties: families, cities... With her retinue of followers, she traveled across Italy to meet with the contending parties. Everywhere she went, she was greeted by enthusiastic crowds. Finally she journeyed all the way to Avignon to meet personally with pope Gregory . While honoring the pope as her “Dolce Cristo in terra –

Sweet Christ on earth”, she was blunt and uncompromising in her insistence that he return to Rome.

She was successful, but later on the crises of the Church intensified. Catherine had the vision: it seemed as if the Church, like a mighty ship, was placed on her back. She collapsed to the ground in terrible pain. After few weeks she died. She was 33. Upon her death, the marks of the stigmata and her “wedding band” were clearly visible in her body.

In 1970, Saint Catherine of Siena was named a Doctor of the Church. She wrote her major work by the title of *The Dialogue* in which she describes her conversations with Christ. One of her famous saying is: “All the way to heaven is heaven, because He said: I am the Way”.

SAINT TERESA OF AVILA (1515-1582)

By any standard, Teresa of Avila is one of the towering figures in Christian history. She was a mystic, a religious reformer, the foundress of seventeen convents, the author of four books, and one of the outstanding masters of Christian prayer. Her courage and wisdom were rooted in a special relationship with God.

She was born in Avila in a family of rich merchants and aristocrats. Teresa’s grandfather was a *converso*, one of the many Spanish Jews who converted to Christianity. Educated in a Carmelite convent, she entered religious life at the age of 20. For many years she adapted to the lax atmosphere of the convent.

But when she was 39 she experienced conversion. It was sparked when she happened to glance, one day, at an image of the suffering Christ on the cross. Instantly she was filled with a loathing for the mediocrity of her spiritual life, and she decided to give herself more seriously to a life of prayer. Very soon she began to experience the sensation of God’s love, transforming her from within.

She decided to establish a new, reformed Carmelite house, returning to the spirit of the original rule of Carmel. Her new convent was founded in Avila in 1562. Her community was known as the Discalced (without shoes) Carmelites. Teresa went on to establish sixteen other convents in Spain. As a woman and a reformer, who based her authority on private visions, Teresa faced considerable risks. Her confessor and colleague, Saint John of the Cross, with whom she helped to inspire the male branch of the Discalced

Carmelites, had a direct taste of these dangers when he was for a time imprisoned in the dungeon of the monastery of the Calced Carmelites of Toledo (Inquisition).

Teresa was a strong woman: she endured sickness, hunger and poverty. A particular mortification was the misery and hazards of travel at a time when donkey carts were the standard mode of transportation. One time her cart overturned, throwing her into a muddy river. When she complained to Jesus about this ordeal, she heard a voice from within her saying: “This is how I treat my friends”. “Yes, My Lord-she answered- and that is why you have so few of them!”

Teresa’s public accomplishments, though extraordinary, are little if compared with the intensity of her life of prayer and the variety and depth of her mystical experiences that she describes in her autobiography and in her other volumes about prayer and mystical spirituality.

She was very concrete and simple in her spiritual advice: “Remember that you have only one soul; that you have only one death to die; that you have only one life, which is short and has to be lived by you alone; and there is only one glory, which is eternal. If you do this, there will be many things about which you care nothing”.

Teresa died in 1582 at 67 years of age. She was canonized forty years later. In 1970, she was the first woman to be named a Doctor of the Church. Her most famous words were found in a little poem that she had scribbled on the margin of her prayer book: “*Nada te turbe, nada te espante. Quien a Dios tiene, nada le falta... Nada te turbe, nada te espante. Solo Dios basta!*” (Let nothing disturb you, nothing dismay you. If you have God, you lack nothing. All things are passing, God never changes. Patient endurance attains all things...God alone is enough, God alone suffices)

SAINT THERESE OF LISIEUX (1873-1897)

She was born in 1873 to a middle class family in Lisieux, a small town in Normandy. Her mother died when she was four, and Therese and her other four older sisters were left in the care of their father, a watchmaker and a man of marked piety. Therese, it seems, was his favorite child.

When she was fifteen she received a special dispensation (in light of her young age) to enter the Carmelite convent of Lisieux, where two of her

sisters had preceded her and where the other two will join later. The rest of her short life was spent within the cloister of this obscure convent. She died of tuberculosis on September 30, 1897.

The story of a soul, her autobiography, was published posthumously and it took the world by storm. St. Therese is one of the most popular saints of the Catholic Church and one who is marked by genius. Although her life looked very plain, with no outward drama, and apparently no extraordinary spiritual gifts, it was marked by a heroic single-mindedness and a profound modern sensitivity.

St. Therese is considered the Saint of the Third Millennium. Her Little Way of Spiritual Childhood is about the path of holiness in everyday life. Simply put, this meant performing the everyday actions and sufferings in the presence and the love of God. It is doing what is ordinary with an extraordinary love.

Devoting herself body and soul to Christ, she offered her life as a victim of love for the salvation of souls. So acute was her belief in the Mystical Body of Christ that she believed that, although she was only a “Little Flower”, she could make a significant contribution to transforming the world.

Therese writes of her feeling that she was called to all vocations (she felt a powerful vocation to be a priest), but ultimately she came to realize that her vocation was nothing less than Charity itself, a virtue embracing every other vocation: “My vocation is love! In the heart of the Church, who is my Mother, I will be love. So I shall be everything and so my dreams will be fulfilled”. She describes her mission as simply “to make Love loved”.

In 1894, at 21, Therese woke on the morning of Good Friday to find her mouth filled with blood. During the last period of her life, she asked God to experience the spiritual situation of the atheists (“to sit at the table with sinners”), and she was troubled by intense spiritual dryness and crises of faith. By continuing to pray and to hold fast to the image of Christ she eventually passed through this dark night.

When she died at 24, her last words were: “Oh, I love Him...My God, I love you!”. In the years following her death, Therese was credited with an extraordinary number of miracles and conversions. She had said: “After my death, I will let fall a shower of roses. I will spend my heaven in doing good upon earth”. She was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1997 (DOCTOR AMORIS).

[illegible]

WHAT IS FEMINIST THEOLOGY?

“The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as non-redemptive. And must be presumed not to reflect the divine, the authentic nature of things or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption. The negative principle also implies the positive principle: what does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy, it does reflect true relation with the divine, it is the true nature of things, the authentic message of redemption and the mission of a redemptive community” (Rosemary Redford Reuther)

With the emergence of feminist theology, women pass from being **object** of theology (especially in the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary), to being **subject** of theology. Feminist theology is first of all for the promotion of the dignity, place and mission of women in the Church, and then for a more balanced and complete understanding of God’s mystery and Christ’s Mystery, given the contribution of the feminine outlook and point of view or sensitivity or genius.

Feminist theology implies a revision of the past, especially the sources of the Christian tradition in order to research a more complete and relevant place for the women in the Church.

Hermeneutics of suspicion

ELISABETH SCHÜESSLER FIORENZA is a German woman theologian, married to an Italian and living and teaching in USA, famous for the seriousness of her biblical studies. She is a militant feminist. She defines feminist theology as a critical liberation theology. She has given the principle for a hermeneutics (interpretation) of the Bible from a feminist point of view.

Hers is the principle of *hermeneutics of suspicion* as regards structures and interpretations that are oppressive of women. Her study of Romans 16 is a classic reconstruction of a community of the origins where there was a discipleship of equals (both men and women) and a missionary partnership as well; a community in which both men and women shared the *sequela Christi*, accepted and spread the message.

Such appears to have been the face of the community of Jesus still intact in the first generation of Christians, as it is expressed in Gal. 3:28, the equality “manifesto”. Her most famous book is *“In Memory of Her: a Feminist Theological Reconstruction of the Christian Origins (1984).*

The “hermeneutics of suspicion” can be a critically useful tool for the interpretation of the past. It must not however become “Hermeneutics of antagonism or enmity”.

Sororitas or Sisterhood

It is the mutual support that women give to each other in the effort to promote the dignity of women and fight against what diminishes or destroys that dignity. “Brother” and “brotherhood” are the best terms to express the Christian Identity. Yet, in the “*androcentric*” culture, this brotherhood is betrayed in the way women were treated and are treated.

“Sisterhood” wants to redress, to counter-balance. Icon of “Sorority” is the Visitation: the meeting/encounter of Mary with Elizabeth, both pregnant and both called by God to take part in his merciful plan of salvation: two women that honor each other and recognize in each other God’s call and the special dignity that it confers; two women come together in order to help each other.

Sorority can be beneficial and legitimate as long as it does not mean the exclusion of men; as long as it does not produces isolation and alienation.

Mary in Feminist Theology

From a position of refusal of Mary (“*The reality her myth describes is over; the moral code she affirms has been exhausted*” wrote Marina Warner in her influential book: *Alone of Her Sex*), the feminist theologians came back to Mary as a symbolic figure of identification. Cfr. Tina Beattie, *Rediscovering Mary (1995)*; Cettina Militello, *Maria con occhi di donna (1999)*.

The Virgin Mary is the context, the most appropriate context, in which to study and to discuss the experience of the women. In the feminist theology, understood as liberation theology, Mary’s FIAT and MAGNIFICAT become the program (Manifesto) of a freed and freeing

femininity. The reflection about Mary is like the *litmus paper* (cartina al tornasole) of feminist theology.

In the past, it was common to emphasize the ways in which Mary was set apart from and above all other women and the ordinary condition of humanity. Today there is a new emphasis on her status as woman of the people and her solidarity with the rest of humanity. A “**Mariology from above**” emphasized God’s initiative in selecting Mary for her part in the divine mystery of redemption.

In contrast, a “**Mariology from below**” begins with a poor woman, Mary of Nazareth, who was rooted in the faith and struggles of her people, subject to the cruelties of the world, and heir of the ancient hope for deliverance and salvation. In this light, Mary is not so much honored for her special nature as for her exceptional faith.”

This position has **a special appeal in Latin America**, in the context of the Liberation Theology and the suffering of the people, especially the women, under oppressive regimes.

One woman of El Salvador writes: “ I often think of Mary: I suffered so much when they arrested my son. When I went to ask where he was, they said they didn’t know. I searched and searched, but couldn’t find him. Finally, his corpse appeared, his head in one place and his body in another. I fainted when I saw him. I thought of how the Blessed Virgin Mary also suffered when they told her that her son had also been arrested. Surely, she went searching for him and later saw him die and buried him. That is why she understands my sorrow and helps me to go on”. The mothers of plaza de Mayo, the mothers of the *desaparecidos*!

“Throughout Latin America, in the rural areas and in the poor districts on the edges of cities, there are millions of women, conceiving, bearing and suckling new children of the common people. Sometimes they do it with difficulty, pain and suffering, sometimes with the last trickle of life left in them.

This female body, which is extensive and multiplies in other lives, which gives itself as food and nourishes with its flesh and blood the lives it has conceived, it is the same body that wastes away and dies tilling the earth, working in factories and homes, stirring pans and sweeping floors, spinning thread and washing clothes, organizing meetings and leading struggles...

It is the woman’s body, **eucharistically given for the struggle of liberation**, really and physically distributed, eaten and drunk by those who

will- as men and women of tomorrow- continue the same struggle of patience and resistance, pain and courage, joy and pleasure.

Breaking the bread and distributing it, having communion in the bread and the blood of the Lord until he comes again, means for women today reproducing and symbolizing, in the midst of the community, the divine act of surrender and love so that the people may grow and the victory come, which is celebrated in the feast of true and final liberation” (Maria Clara Bingemer, *Women in the Future of the Theology of Liberation*, 1989)

This position is reflected in one of the leading women theologians of Latin America, MARIA TERESA PORCILE SANTISO, especially in her book, *Woman: Space of Salvation* (1994).

From an anthropological perspective, she points out the mission of the woman in the Church, based on a theology of the woman’s body (or female body) as space of salvation: the woman’s body is capable to become space/ambience/milieu for a life which it keeps, hosts and nourishes until the moment of birth and beyond. This is the unique experience of the woman, an experience which is exclusive, non-transferable and cannot be substituted”.

This position is close to the teaching of John Paul II about **the spousal orientation of the body**, and the call of women to motherhood. Some feminists have criticized this position: they find restrictive the position of limiting the mission of the women in the Church to their sexual body, not considering other aspect of the feminine personality.

DEAD ENDS

Other tendencies of feminist Mariology have stressed a polemic attitude that is not easily assimilated by the mainstream Catholic conscience; in their extreme position, **they represent a dead end.**

1. We can have an example in the language of this declaration:

“The task of feminist Mariology is twofold: We must name and liberate ourselves from the destructive effects of 2000 years of male interpretation of Mary. We must return to the Scriptures as women within our cultural contexts, to rediscover the Mary who is liberated and liberator. The *Magnificat* emerges as the most powerful focus of reflection on Mary. Mary announces the reversal of the present order.

We must take this challenge seriously. The first reversal must be to rescue Mariology from the control of Catholic male celibates, and hear the voices of women, both protestant and Catholic, as we observe the mother of

Jesus. Mary is also the mother of all and of all Christian traditions, so it is the combined task of women of all traditions to redefine her.

If we recognize that Mary is woman of the poor, we must also challenge the lie that depicts her as jeweled and elaborately dressed. Because the good news of the *Magnificat* is bad news for the rich, we reject Mary's hijacking by a wealthy Church – for the consolation of the rich. This simply reinforces the oppression of the poor.

If we understand the virgin birth as the beginning of a new order, in which patriarchy can no longer be the basis of human life, we must hear the angel's greeting, '*Hail, full of grace*', as addressed to all of us. We too must participate in changing oppressive relationships and cultural symbols – overcoming patterns of domination and subordination between north and south, rich and poor, male and female, black and white" (*Statement on Feminist Mariology, produced at a conference of Asian Christian Women in Singapore, 1987*).

This tendency is represented by the book of the Indian theologian Tissa Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation* (which was condemned by the Congregation of the Defense of Faith). In it, he argues that traditional Mariology has perpetuated the oppressive and imperialistic tendencies of western patriarchy by cultivating passivity and conformity among colonized people.

The experience of the popular devotion to Mary on the part of the Catholic masses of the poor in Latin America, Mexico and the Philippines and, with a different slant even in Europe around the most famous Marian shrines, makes us realize how this tendency can be unrealistic, patronizing towards the devotion of the poor and a theological dead end.

"Mariology from below" must take into account the fundamental Biblical data about Mary: "**Ave Maria, gratia plena**", "**The Lord has done great things for me and holy is his Name**". The greatness of Mary is not only her exceptional faith, and the fact that she belonged to the sociologically poor, but the grace of God that has called her to become the Mother of the Son of God, the Mother of God, *Theotokos*.

This "dead end" is the enmity or gut aversion against men, antagonism: women, in order to be themselves, must make themselves the adversary of men. Faced by the abuse of power, they think that the answer for women is to seek power.

2. Another "dead end" is the tendency by which, in order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied. One prefers to speak of GENDER and not of SEX. The consequences are deadly

for the family as a communion of a man and a woman. Moreover it makes homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent in a new model of polymorphous sexuality.

3. A very grave and dangerous application of the above position is the **fight against Patriarchy** in theology. God the Father and God the Son are of equal greatness in the bosom of the Trinity. We know that there is no sex in God and we are aware that the male images of God are counterbalanced by feminine traits (God is Father/Mother).

But to want to abolish the Fatherhood of God because of the idea of Patriarchy, is to destroy the Gospels as we know them. What about the prayer of the OUR FATHER that Jesus taught us? The relationship of loving and obedient Son ship that Jesus revealed, especially in the Gospel of John? What about the parable of the prodigal son and the merciful father? What about our call to son ship and daughter ship according to the teaching of Saint Paul?

The fight against Patriarchy, if taken literally, destroys the Bible and our Christian religion. This is what happened to MARY DALE (*Beyond God the Father*, 1986) and other extremists in feminist theology: they do not consider themselves Christian any more.

4. Another area that has focused the struggle of the Feminist Theologians is the promotion of women to the Holy Orders. According to the Italian feminist theologian Cettina Militello that is also a “Dead End” since the document of the Congregation for the Defense of Faith: *“Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood”* (1977).

The solution appears to be in the line of the re-discovery of the common Priesthood of the Faithful. It is our Baptismal Priesthood that must be given importance in order to cut to size the importance of the Ministerial Priesthood and counter-act the tendency of clericalism.

[illegible]

SUGGESTIONS FOR MEDITATION

1. ALPHABETIC POEM ON THE PERFECT WIFE: (Proverbs 31:10-31)

This classic passage about women maintains its suggestive beauty, notwithstanding the cultural conditioning of a time and society very distant from ours. One can see in it the human wisdom of femininity, especially in its aspects of industriousness and resourcefulness. In Tagalog, we have the adjective MASIPAG, and the noun KASIPAGAN. Since this is the virtue of many of our women religious in their charism of service, one can feel the desire to contemplate this aspect of femininity in prayer and make it an object of petition and thanksgiving.

*“A perfect wife—who can find her?
She is far beyond the price of pearls.*

*Her husband’s heart has confidence in her,
from her he will derive no little profit.*

*Advantage and not hurt she brings him
all the days of her life.*

*She is always busy with wool and with flax,
she does her work with eager hands.*

*She is like a merchant vessel
bringing her food from far away.*

*She gets up while it is still dark
giving her household their food,
giving orders to her serving girls.*

*She sets her mind on a field, then she buys it;
with what her hands have earned she plants a vineyard.*

She puts her back into her work

and shows how strong her arms can be.

*She finds her labour well worth while;
her lamp does not go out at night.*

*She sets her hands to the distaff,
her fingers grasp the spindle.*

*She holds out her hand to the poor,
she opens her arms to the needy.*

*Snow may come, she has no fears for her household,
with all her servants warmly clothed.*

*She makes her own quilts,
she is dressed in fine linen and purple.*

*Her husband is respected at the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.*

*She weaves linen sheets and sells them,
she supplies the merchant with sashes.*

*She is clothed in strength and dignity,
she can laugh at the days to come.*

*When she opens her mouth, she does so wisely;
on her tongue is kindly instruction.*

*She keeps good watch on the conduct of her household,
no bread of idleness for her.*

*Her sons stand up and proclaim her blessed,
her husband, too, sings her praises:*

*‘Many women have done admirable things,
but you surpass them all!’*

Charm is deceitful, and beauty empty;

the woman who is wise is the one to praise.

*Give her a share in what her hands have worked for,
and let her works tell her praises at the city gates”.*

2. THE MESSIANIC WEDDING in the NEW TESTAMENT:

(John 2:1-12; John 10:27-34)

“All the pre-figurations of the Old Testament 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 St. Irenaeus wrote -- with Jesus Christ “all newness” appears.

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 2:2-12).

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)” (*Letter on Collaboration...*, 10).

- **JOHN 2:1-12 The wedding at Cana**

“Three days later there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus was also invited to the wedding with his disciples. When all the wine provided for the celebration had been served and they had run out of the wine, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” Jesus replied, “Woman, your thoughts are not mine! My hour has not yet come.”

However his mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Nearby were six stone water jars meant for the ritual washing as practiced by the Jews; each jar could hold twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them to the brim. Then Jesus said, "Now draw some out and take it to the steward." So they did.

The steward tasted the water that had become wine, without knowing from where it had come; for only the servants who had drawn the water knew. So, he called the bridegroom to tell him, "Everyone serves the best wine first and when people have drunk enough, he serves that which is ordinary. Instead you have kept the best wine until the end."

This miraculous sign was the first, and Jesus performed it at Cana in Galilee. In this way he let his disciples believe in him."

After this, Jesus went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers and his disciples; and they stayed there for a few days".

- **JOHN 19:27-34**

"Then he said to the disciple, "There is your mother." And from that moment the disciple took her to his own home.

With that Jesus knew all was now finished and he said, I am thirsty, to fulfill what was written in Scripture. A jar full of bitter wine stood there; so, putting a sponge soaked in the wine on a twig of hyssop, they raised it to his lips. Jesus took the wine and said, "It is accomplished." Then he bowed his head and gave up the spirit.

As it was Preparation Day, the Jews did not want the bodies to remain on the cross during the Sabbath, for this Sabbath was a very solemn day. They asked Pilate to have the legs of the condemned men broken, so they might take away the bodies.

The soldiers came and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who had been crucified with Jesus.

When they came to Jesus, they saw that he was already dead; so they did not break his legs. One of the soldiers, however, pierced his side with a lance and immediately there came out blood and water".

REFLECTIONS ON THE LETTER ABOUT “COLLABORATION” AND THE TEACHING OF JOHN PAUL II ABOUT WOMEN

“To speak of Adam and Eve as “in communion” is to capture their gift of each to each. Their beings come to rest in one another. Thus, however imperfectly, our sexuality reveals to us that, whatever else he might be like, our Creator lives in self-giving communion.

This experience of communion between woman and man, self-giving, in mutuality, and without either’s dominance, is more like the inner life of God than anything else that we encounter in creation...It has in it the taste of the eternal and divine, and the Song of Songs is its internal music....

For the young priest and later pope, even celibacy is understood in the light of matrimony, the sacrament by which the Creator revealed to humankind the communion of His own nature. Wojtyla refuses to separate the “person” from the body.

He loves the human body, he always enjoyed the strength and vitality which his body used to give him, climbing in the mountains, pulling his kayak’s oar in silver mountain waters, until an assassin’s bullet and the will of God through other maladies made him bear the cross of the body’s infirmities.

He loves the sights and smells and sounds of the liturgy of the Mass. He loves the oils of the sacraments. Everywhere he sees the ways the spirit and body are made for one another, enter into one another, interpenetrate in the secret of our being. Embodied selves, indeed. No other religion but Christianity would dare to believe in the resurrection of the embodied self.

Who among us would dare to admit he learned the humanness of sexuality from a Pope? Just wait. Disordered sexual love will pass away... There will come a time when the minds will be open, when women and men will begin to wonder: When God wrote Eros in our embodied selves, what did He intend? In the mountain passes of the soul, they will not find any guides as daring as Karol Wojtyla, climber in the snow-tipped Tatras.

In the very first year of his papacy, pope JP II planted a time bomb in the Church that is not likely to go off until many years to come. Beginning in 1979, he devoted 15 minutes of each weekly general audience over a five years period until November 1984 to sustained, dense, rigorous meditations on human sexuality...

In the 129 public addresses, he began with Adam in his solitude. Adam walked alone as a species... He stood alone in all creation. Neither had he company of his own kind, nor could he procreate and assure the continuation of his own species. This solitude, the Bible says, was not good. He lacked an essential part.

So, from Adam's flesh to underline the oneness of the human essence, God created Eve: not just a woman but a person with a name and personality. One inescapable point of this account is that the human being is two-in-one. Further, if the human being is made "in the image of God", the distinctness of our being male and female is revelatory of God's own being and inner life.

It is in our communion with one another that we are images of God. Each gender alone is incompletely human. We are made for the communion of male with female. (Michael Novak)

Thus, it can be said that God created man and woman in a single mysterious act. There is no right without left, no high without low, no man without woman. We can therefore clearly see that the sexual difference is neither irrelevant nor additional, nor is it a social product: it originates in the very intention of the Creator.

The feminist movement in its extreme positions has not affected women only but also men. As the English journalist has shown, demonstrated, explained in her book...In such a situation, it is not surprising that the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith has addressed its letter to both men and women. Its intention is not only to defend the dignity of women as Pope JP II did with fine sensitivity in his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, a document that even gave rise to admiration in certain radical feminist circles.

For example, Gertrud Mongella, President of the International Conference on Women in Beijing said: "I would like all the fanatics in

the world to reason in the same balanced way as the Pope.” Instead today, in addition to clearly indicating the legitimate rights of women and working to make them respected in the five continents, it is also necessary to speak of the duties of both sexes.

To use a more attractive metaphor: the time has come to remind people of their important mission in this world: we have all been created to be “eagles” that can soar towards the sun, and we must not diminish ourselves by behaving like “hens” that do nothing but peck at grain scattered on the ground”.

“The biblical account of creation speaks of the solitude of Adam, the first man, and of God’s decision to give him a helper. Of all other creatures, not one is capable of being the helper man needs. So God formed the woman from the rib of man. Now Adam finds the helper that he needed: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”.

The idea is certainly present that man is somehow incomplete, driven by nature to seek in another the part that can make him whole, the idea that only in communion with the opposite sex can he become “complete”... only together the two represent complete humanity and become “one flesh”...

Eros is rooted in man’s very nature...Adam is a seeker, who “abandons his father and mother” to find woman...Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love, becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa. God’s way of loving becomes the measure of human love. This close connection between *eros* and marriage in the Bible has practically no equivalent in extra-biblical literature” (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*,11)

The letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the Catholic Bishops on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World underlines the equality in human dignity and yet the fundamental difference between the sexes.... The rich and deep anthropology of the sexes in Catholicism in order to find solutions to pressing problems in the area of family and women’s policies.

Women's special capacity of self-giving in pregnancy, child-birth and care for the infant is held up as indicative of women's particular capacity for self-giving, which is the essence of the feminine itself. It is also the exemplar of true Christian behavior. Therefore, the startling implication of Catholic teaching on the feminine is that women have a special ability to "humanize" the family, and society and politics as well...

While both sexes share in the Christian capacity for self-giving love, the Church emphasizes that women have this ability in a specific way because of motherhood. And motherhood is not only physical. Far from having a lesser place in Christianity than men, women occupy in reality a privileged position. It is in fact a woman, Mary, who is the supreme model of Christian life.

The Catholic Church has always, from the very beginning of the school system in Europe, placed major emphasis on the education on girls and women. Education is the major force of change in traditional sex-role patterns. The Church puts major efforts into the education of women especially in the missions. "If one educates a woman, one educates a village" a saying from Africa explains.

The problems facing women in the developing world are worse. Here women are responsible not only for their own family, but for whole communities as well, in an endless work day, often amid poverty and deprivation.

The dates when women received the right to vote remind us of how recently it was that women received equal political rights, and how this was accomplished in the face of much suspicion and resistance. The entry of women into all professions in society and into political roles is truly new and truly revolutionary.

The Letter is very clear on the fact that men and women are different, and women must therefore not be treated as if they were men. This is a radical point that contradicts the "equality model" of feminism. The point here is that women should not have to imitate men, because they are not men. Their femininity is not only motherhood, but is much more than that.

The implication of this “new” feminism are radical....There is no reason to single out women and make an ideology called feminism for them alone. We speak about women and men and their cooperation and difference, not only about women.

Mother and father are not replaceable or interchangeable; they are complementary. This means that the mother’s work with children is of special importance, especially when they are small. The father’s complementary position regarding children is also deeply important. It is within the family that love is taught. Catholic feminism has as its core principle that the family is first in order of personal and societal importance.

The paradox for modern man is, of course, that Christian power is equal to service. When the reflection about women’s role in the Church and society starts from the assumption that power is domination, the analysis falters.... It is also clear that work-as-service makes work in the family something extremely valuable and important. Seen thus, work is more than just the task undertaken, it is also cooperation and association with others. With education, women are in all professions, and should be there.

An outline of a different kind of “feminism”, one based on Catholic anthropology. Most current commentary and critique regarding the role of women in the Catholic Church commits the same fallacy as the feminist critique of the family. When the analysis is based on power assumptions, it is bound to go wrong.

The difficulty and the challenge for a Catholic is precisely in accepting and living out the demand for self-giving love, and to understand that this is the kind of power our Lord spoke of and taught. This demand is naturally the same for both sexes, and sexual difference has no bearing on the need to understand this and live accordingly.

Yet, as the Letter makes clear, women are at a particular advantage in doing this, being privileged to give life through birth and care of the completely helpless child. (Prof. Janne Haaland Matlary, department of Political Science, University of Oslo)

The Church, “expert in humanity”(Paul VI), presents principles of active collaboration between men and women in The Church and in society, in recognition of their difference, in order to foster dialogue for a more authentic relationship.

Biblical foundations of a Christian anthropology.

From the very beginning, humanity is described as articulated in the male-female relationship. Woman is another “I” in a common humanity that therefore appears as a unity of the two. Humanity is a relational reality. An ordered world is born out of differences carrying with them the promise of relationships.

There is a spousal character in the human body that is oriented to the gift of self. This capacity to love – reflection of the image of God who is love- is disclosed in the spousal character of the body in which the masculinity and femininity of the person is expressed. 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 called to exist mutually ‘one for the other”, in interpersonal communion by means of the integration of what is masculine and what is feminine.

Their equal dignity as persons is realized as physical, psychological and ontological complementarity. This marks the importance and the meaning of sexual difference. Sexuality is a fundamental component of personality, one of its modes of being, of manifestation, of communicating with others, of feeling, of expressing and living human love.

The human dimension of sexuality flows into the theological dimension. The great allegory of the covenant between Yahweh and the people of Israel is marriage, the love between man and woman, so beautifully exalted in the Song of Songs. The allegory becomes infinitely concrete with the Incarnation: Jesus is the bridegroom and the church is the bride.

Christian life is as a nuptial mystery. The bride is present in each of the baptized and is like one who present herself to the Bridegroom, Christ. The bible, in the book of 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. From the first moment of their creation, man and woman are distinct, and will remain so for all eternity. Placed within Christ 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.

Motherhood as a physical and spiritual dimension. The genius of women in family and society's life involving human relationships and caring for others. It is in the family that we learn the basic teachings of our humanity. We learn to love in as much as we are unconditionally loved, we learn respect for others in as much as we are respected and we learn to know the face of God in as much as we receive the first revelation of it from a father and a mother full of attention in our regard.

Feminine values are above all human values, although women by nature may be more immediately attuned to them. What 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.

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 in the family is required.

Women who freely desire to devote their life to the family should be able to do so without being stigmatized by society and penalized financially. In the same way, women who opt for a job outside the home should find an appropriate work schedule that respect their condition of pregnancy, motherhood and responsibility in the family.

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. Thus women have access to the heart of Christian life.

Mary is the mirror, the icon of the Church. She is a model, not of passivity but of passion.

CONCLUSION: a poem and a prayer:

A HEALING TOUCH (Linda Jones)

Luke 8:43-48

Who touched me? Somebody touched me

With the needs, the dreams and the hopes of the world
Who touched me? Somebody touched me
And I turned and saw the people
And I turned and listened to their story
Who touched me? Somebody touched me
And I turned and saw two worlds where God created one
And the gates of the rich were closed

And I dreamed of the world you created
A garden with plenty for everyone
With a stream of clean, flowing water
For all to drink

And I believe in life

I believe in hope
I believe in a future where there is one world
That we build together.
Who touched me? Somebody touched me
And I pray
Stay with us, Lord, as we work for a better world.

Amen.

[illegible]

Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ