

The Dignity and Mission of Women: The Anthropological and Theological Foundations

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A culture that does not accept the revelation of the Trinitarian God ultimately renders itself incapable of understanding sexual difference in a positive sense.

I. A Constant Concern

John Paul II, from the very beginning of his pontificate,¹ unfolds the anthropological and theological foundations of the dignity and mission of women and he returns to this important topic with noteworthy frequency. In fact, at least two very important documents have been dedicated specifically to a reflection on women—*Mulieris dignitatem* (=MD) (1988) and *Letter to Women*

¹ Already on April 29, 1979 John Paul II took up the question in an audience granted to the participants of the Tenth National Congress of Italian Domestic Workers. Cf. "Woman's Dignity," *Origins* 9, no. 2 (May 31, 1979): 31–32.

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(1995)—and this reflection has appeared with analytical comprehensiveness in catecheses, talks, addresses, homilies, and so forth. Moreover, with respect to the teaching of previous pontiffs,² such teaching marks a considerable advance, qualitatively and quantitatively.³

² See e.g. John XXIII, *Discorso nella solenne apertura del Concilio Vaticano II*, in *Enchiridion Vaticanum* (Bologna, 1985), 55; *Gaudium et spes* 9, 29, 31, 40, 60; *Apostolicam actuositatem* 9, 32; *Ad gentes* 17; Paul VI, *Presentare all'uomo contemporaneo il messaggio cristiano nella sua integralità*, in *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, vol. 11 (Vatican City, 1974), 630–42. For a bibliography of the feminine question in the Magisterium see: *La femme dans l'enseignement des Papes* (Abbaye St. Pierre de Solesmes, 1982); *La donna nel magistero di Paolo VI*, (Rome, 1980); *Les enseignements pontificaux: Le problème féminin (1878–1958)* (Tournai, 1965); A. Aluffi, *Il privilegio di essere donna nella documentazione del Vaticano II* (Rome, 1967); M. Alcalá, *La mujer y los ministerios en la Iglesia del Vaticano II a Pablo VI* (Salamanca, 1982); L. Antinucci, "La Chiesa e la nuova coscienza femminile. Una lettura del Magistero del postconcilio," in *La donna nella Chiesa a nel mondo* (Naples, 1988), 285–313; G. Bragantini, *Le donne nel Concilio Vaticano II* (Rome, 1984); G. Cazorla Russo, *Il ruolo della donna nei documenti pontifici da Leone XIII a Paolo VI: Ricerca sullo status sociale della donna*, vol. 2, (Rome, 1975), 752–826; R. Harahan, *The Vocation of Women: The Teaching of the Modern Popes from Leo XIII to Paul VI* (Rome, 1983).

³ Obviously we cannot pretend to have provided a complete list of all of the contributions of John Paul II on the question which concerns us. We must, however, cite the more important documents and, above all, show with a few examples the diversity of occasions on which the Pope has taken up this question. The great documents are fundamentally three: in the first place the encyclical letter *Redemptoris mater* (March 25, 1987), in which the Pope introduces the views informing his most important contribution on women: the apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (August 15, 1988), whose themes have been taken up again in the *Letter to Women* (June 30, 1995). To these documents must be added the cycles of Wednesday catechesis, two in particular: the one on human love, brought together in *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1997) and the one dedicated precisely to women (some of them tied to the reflection on Mary): June 22, 1994; July 6, 1994; March 15, 1995; September 6, 1995; November 29, 1995; December 6, 1995. In 1995, together with the celebration of the United Nations Conference on women in Beijing, the Pope dedicated many talks to the subject of women during the Sunday *Angelus*: June 25; July 9, 16, 23, 30; August 6, 13, 15, 20 and 27; September 3 and 10; December 8. John Paul II addressed himself on different occasions to international organizations making the question concerning women a fundamental part of his talk, for example: *To the XXV Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization* (November 16, 1989); *To the Secretary of the International*

In the apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem* we find the most organic expression of the Pope's thought on this subject. It therefore constitutes the primary point of reference. In its turn *Mulieris dignitatem* is to be read in the context of the celebrated *Wednesday Catechesis* on the theology of the body, apart from which the richness of the letter would not be fully apparent. In *Mulieris dignitatem*, John Paul II, referring to the Synod of Bishops in October 1987 on the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and the world, affirms:

One of the recommendations [of the synodal fathers] 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 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 it 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. *This is what I intend to deal with in this document (MD, 1).*

Conference on Population and Development (March 18, 1994); and with reference to the conference in Beijing: *To the Secretary General of the IV Conference of the UN* (May 26, 1995). Another block of talks that seems to us significant is that wherein the Pope, speaking about the Saints, refers to the dignity and vocation of women, for example: November 5, 1979; September 11, 1984; June 10, 1987; April 9 and 30, 1989; June 20, 1993; April 24, 1994; January 19 and 20, 1995; February 5, 12, 19, and 26, 1995; May 10, 1995; October 1 and 29, 1995. Other than these talks, John Paul II has tackled the theme of women in reference to the following questions: family, work, feminism, conferences of women's associations, world days of women, the theme of the priesthood reserved only to men; *ad limina* visits of bishops. For more complete documentation of all the contributions of the Pope on the subject of women, cf. P. Vanzan and A. Auletta, *L'essere e l'agire della donna in Giovanni Paolo II* (Rome, 1996). Other titles on the subject include: *Dignità e vocazione della donna: Per una lettura della "Mulieris dignitatem"* (Città del Vaticano, 1989); M. Farina, "La *Mulieris dignitatem*: il progetto di Dio appella una nuova autocoscienza femminile. Approccio teologico-fondamentale," *Rivista di Scienze dell'educazione* 27 (1989): 11-24; Idem, "La questione donna: un'istanza critica per la teologia," *Ricerche Teologiche* 1 (1990): 91-120; S. Maggiolini, ed., *Profezia della donna: Lettera apostolica 'Mulieris dignitatem'. Testo e commenti* (Rome, 1988); A. Serra, "La 'Mulieris dignitatem'. Consensi e dissensi," *Marianum* 53 (1991): 512-88; D. Tettamanzi, *Grandi cose ha fatto con me l'onnipotente: Meditando con il Papa la "Mulieris dignitatem"* (Rome, 1988); M. Toso, ed., *Essere donna: Studi sulla lettera apostolica "Mulieris dignitatem"* (Turin, 1989); P. Vanzan, "'Mulieris dignitatem': reazioni, contenuti e prospettive," *La Civiltà Cattolica* 139, no 4 (1988): 255-58.

In this text the Pope offers us a basic methodological premise for our reflection: only by beginning from the proper anthropological and theological foundations can one grasp the depth of the dignity and the mission of women. In fact, only by going to the root of the personal being of man and of woman, which implies identity and difference, is it possible to consider woman as a being who is "other," and not just "another thing."

The present reflection means then to present the *anthropological and theological foundation* of the dignity and mission of women in the teaching of John Paul II. I will not, therefore, entertain all of the important, and even urgent, questions concerning the dignity and mission of women. However, before entering into the question to be addressed here, I must first make two important clarifications:

Our point of departure is pontifical teaching and not the extensive debate about this thematic as it has developed in the fields of theology, philosophy, and the human sciences, as well as in the cultural and social arena. Obviously, this does not mean that we have disregarded the relevant literature, or that we have not considered the challenges of feminist thought. It means, rather, that our discussion will not on this occasion enter *directly* into the cultural debate by way of examining the positions of others, but will present some suggestions for a fundamental reflection on the theme. Our choice should, however, allow for an adequate response to the legitimate claims of "feminism" and, at the same time, a calm critique of specific feminist positions that are irreconcilable with Catholic doctrine.

In the second place, it belongs to the nature of the Magisterium to enunciate Christian doctrine by affirming its contents and by marking its parameters. The Magisterium directs itself, therefore, to all the People of God, and becomes a point of departure for further reflection. The avenues opened by the Pope in his teaching on women beg to be probed critically and systematically, by the appropriate theological method. We will develop our reflection in three parts. In the first place, we shall inquire into the anthropological foundation of the man and woman pair. In the second place, we shall ask about its origin. Finally, we shall speak about the purpose of human sexual difference.

II. The Anthropological Foundation: The Dual Unity of Man and Woman

A) One of the preeminent aspects of the anthropology implied in the teaching of John Paul II is constituted by his

reflection on the relation between man and woman.⁴ The pope starts with a series of considerations on the two accounts of creation in Genesis (*Gen.* 1:27 and *Gen.* 2:18–25), which converge in the affirmation that man is made “in the image and likeness of God,” an affirmation that the Holy Father calls “the basis of all Christian anthropology” (*MD*, 6). *Mulieris dignitatem* asserts in section 7 that “man cannot exist ‘alone’ (*Gen.* 2:18); he can exist only as a ‘unity of the two,’ and therefore in relation to another human person . . . Being a person in the image and likeness of God thus also involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other ‘I’” (*MD*, 7). The pair, man and woman, appears, in this way, to be the expression of the ontological principle of dual unity, according to which unity always presents itself in a contingent reality within an intrinsic polarity (this also holds true for soul and body, and individual and community).⁵

We shall limit ourselves to itemizing, almost by a list of headings, four essential features of the meaning of the pair, man and woman.

1) Man exists always and only as a masculine or feminine being. There is not a single man (or woman) who can by himself alone be the whole of man. He always has before himself the other way of being human, which is to him inaccessible. In this way, we discover in the relation of man and woman the contingent character of the human creature: the “I” needs the other and depends upon the other for his fulfillment.⁶ The duality of masculine and feminine “gender” thus presents itself at once as internal and external to the “I.” Or rather, the “I” registers a lack within himself that opens him to one “outside of himself.” It is in this context that the reflection on the principle of a helpmate (understood not

⁴ See G. Chantraine, *Uomo e donna* (Parma, 1986); C. Giuliadori, *Intelligenza teologica del maschile e del femminile* (Rome, 1991); A. Scola, “L’*imago Dei* e la sessualità umana,” *Anthropotes* 1 (1992): 61–73; idem, “Maria modello del cristiano e della donna,” in S. Maggiolini, ed., *Profezia*, 148–58; idem, “La visione antropologica del rapporto uomo-donna: il significato dell’unità dei due,” in *Dignità e vocazione*, 91–103.

⁵ Cf. A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans), 84–100.

⁶ On this subject John Paul II affirms: “the meaning of man’s original unity, through masculinity and femininity, is expressed as an overcoming of the frontier of solitude. At the same time it is an affirmation—with regard to both human beings—of everything that constitutes man in solitude,” (John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 45).

unilaterally but reciprocally) arises.⁷ This contingency identifies not only man’s limits, but also his capacity for self-transcendence in the discovery of the other to himself as positive for himself. In this sense, contingency reveals that man, like every creature, is a sign: he is not only an individual (identity) but also a person (relation/difference). Accordingly, the Pope says: “Being a person in the image and likeness of God thus also involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other ‘I’” (*MD*, 7).

2) At the same time we can characterize the relation between masculine and feminine as a relation of identity and difference.⁸

The question of identity is easily traced back to the absolute equality of the two (of man and woman) in their being as persons and in everything that derives therefrom. The conciliar text constantly recalled by the Pope to illustrate this claim is taken from the constitution *Gaudium et spes*: “If man is the only creature on earth whom God has desired for its own sake, man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself.”⁹ In this sense the Pope joins with the Western philosophical tradition expressed in the definition of Boethius: “*persona est naturae rationalis individua substantia.*”¹⁰

The question about difference is more complicated. In fact, to think about sexual difference is the very thing that appears problematic. (Psychoanalysis has many things to tell us on this subject). In any case, sexual difference is not reducible simply to a problem of roles; it must be understood ontologically. Dual unity, in this sense, is a phenomenological sign of that which Thomas called the *distinctio realis*, and Heidegger, ontological difference: even in the relation of man and woman, as in the relation between being and *ens*, is expressed the call of Being, addressed, through reality (which is its sign), to human freedom.

It is for this reason that the dual unity of sexual difference does not signify an irenic and symmetrical reciprocity as Aristophanes supposed in Plato’s *Symposium*. Man and woman are not two halves destined to merge so as to regenerate a lost unity. This is evident even at the phenomenological level of the

⁷ John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, 7.

⁸ Cf. A. Scola, *Identidad y diferencia*, (Madrid, 1989).

⁹ *GS*, 24.

¹⁰ *Liber de persona et duabus naturis*, III: PL 64, 1343. This is taken up by Thomas in the *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 29, a. 1.

states of life. Man lives relations not only of a spousal sort, but also of paternity, maternity, fraternity, and so on.

On the other hand, the reciprocity of man and woman "can stand as a paradigm of that community dimension which characterizes man's entire nature."¹¹

There is another aspect tied up with the question of sexual difference that we cannot fail to mention. I am referring to how it is that dual unity inevitably imposes an ulterior and more acute awareness of one's own original dependence. By virtue of his sexual nature, in fact, man discovers death as mediated through his connection with generation. Dual unity places the "I" within the circle of human generations, which follow one upon the other relentlessly. In this way the species itself is preserved, but the individual is exposed to death.

3) From a more theological point of view, human sexuality and, therefore, the difference of the sexes, belongs to man's being as image of God.¹² This statement helps us avoid, in any attempt to define the human being, every move to confine him within the intracosmic (and thereby to reduce sexuality to the level of animality). On the other hand, sexual difference helps us understand that the image cannot be reduced to some purely spiritual element. Besides, the inclusion of sexual difference in the *imago Dei* allows us to speak—under precise conditions, to be sure—of a certain analogy between the relation of man and woman and Trinitarian relations. *Communio* as an essential dimension of man is part of his being in the image of God.

4) What we have said so far allows us to see in spousal love the *analogatum princeps* of every kind of love¹³ and, at the same time, to consider it a privileged metaphor for the relation of man with reality.¹⁴ On this subject the Pope affirms: "The nature of one and the other love (virginity and marriage) is 'conjugal,' that is, expressed through the total gift of oneself. Both types of love tend to express that conjugal meaning of the body which from the

¹¹ H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 365.

¹² We have shown this in A. Scola, "L'*imago Dei* e la sessualità umana."

¹³ This is an intuition dear to Solovyev. Cf. V. Solovyev, *The Meaning of Love* (New York: International Universities Press, 1947).

¹⁴ Scheeben uses the relation between man and woman to define the relation between faith and reason. Cf. M.J. Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, (London: Herder, 1946), 762–96.

beginning has been inscribed in the personal makeup of man and woman."¹⁵

B) These four elements, which characterize the meaning of the relation of man and woman, allow us to conclude that sexuality is an original, not derivative, dimension of man. One cannot construct an anthropology apart from the sexual nature of man. Were sexual difference not essential to the consideration of the person, the relation to the other would be established independent of such difference. Sexuality in that case would be a purely accidental fact. Does not this sort of disincarnate anthropology, so to speak, issue in a negation of the woman as a personal subject of "desire," with the risk of reducing her purely to an object of masculine desire? Similarly, any position that understands the personal dignity of the woman not as its essential premise, but rather only as one of its consequences, would end up compromising the value of maternity and virginity.

The affirmation of human sexuality as an integral part of the *imago Dei*, as we have said above, also allows us to establish a radical differentiation of human sexuality from animal sexuality, with which it obviously maintains solid bioinstinctual connections. Against every Gnostic temptation, we must affirm the fully human, that is, personal, character of sexuality. In this sense, the body expresses the person,¹⁶ and expresses it even in its being masculine and feminine. Every attack upon the dignity of the body (and here unfortunately the woman is more exposed than the man), is an attack upon the dignity of the person.

Another consequence of this conception of the dual unity is the radical elimination of every exclusionary counter position between man and woman. Rather, only in their reciprocal dependence is their personal character fulfilled. This implies the simultaneous affirmation of their identity and difference. The exclusive exaltation of one of the poles over the other cannot help but rupture the original dual unity willed by the Creator. Therefore, it will not be possible to promote the dignity and the rights of women if this characteristic is not respected. On the other hand, it is obvious that every form of "chauvinism" contradicts the creative design. Thus the fact that the current debate on the question of women is posed in terms of *reciprocity*, having evolved from its earlier forms of *emancipation* and

¹⁵ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, 277–78.

¹⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 61.

separation, is something positive.¹⁷ Without entering here into the merits of particular questions, it is beyond all doubt that the search for equality (or, as we would prefer to say, identity), with respect to sexual difference or diversity, better corresponds to the Christian vision of life.¹⁸

The work in favor of the dignity and mission of women in the Church and in the world can be eminently creative, by defending all dimensions of the being of the woman, those she shares with the man by virtue of their common identity, and those proper to her by virtue of her being woman.

III. *The Origin of the Dual Unity of the Man-Woman Pair*

The anthropological affirmation of the dual unity, of the man and of the woman, is decisive. However, it needs to be deepened. We cannot, in this place, even hint at the philosophical foundation of dual unity, which would require that we articulate the terms of an adequate ontology for the anthropology underlying our discussion. We will, rather, remain at the theological foundation which, starting with the data of revelation, provides a better explanation as to why God wanted us as man and woman.

For this task we must fix our gaze upon the fullness of revelation, and therefore upon Jesus Christ: "eternal truth about the human being, man and woman—a truth that is immutably fixed in human experience—[who] at the same time constitutes the mystery which only in 'the Incarnate Word takes on light . . . (since) Christ fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear,' as the Council teaches" (*MD*, 2). In the revelation of the Son of God incarnate, we should therefore be better able to shed light on dual unity, even the dual unity of man and woman.¹⁹

In the event of the incarnation a new, definitive, relation between God and man is established. In fact, through the hypostatic union the Person of Jesus Christ constitutes the place of the encounter between God and humanity. This encounter can

¹⁷ Cf. M. Farina, "La questione donna," 111–12.

¹⁸ Cf. A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 92–93.

¹⁹ For this reflection we draw inspiration from C. Giuliadori, *Intelligenza teologica*, 163–74.

be read as a spousal union; indeed it constitutes the new spousality: "Only the supreme act of God's love who, emptying himself of his divinity, gives himself entirely, opens the possibility of a renewed union."²⁰ The dual unity of man and woman is remade in the hypostatic union of Christ which becomes its foundation. "Through the union of the two natures in Christ the global plan of God is manifest, that plan which, beginning with the one flesh of Adam and Eve, through the one flesh of the Redeemer, reaches the one flesh of the Mystical Body within which, through the travail of the Paschal Mystery, man and woman reach the perfection of their likeness to God."²¹

Everything we have said so far concerning the Christological foundation of dual unity begs for further clarification in turn. In fact, the Incarnation of the Son can only be conceived from within the Trinitarian relations. It is within the dynamic of the divine Life, within the relation between the Father and the Son and the Spirit, within the so-called "processions," that we must look for the possibility of the Incarnation. Otherwise stated, the Word's becoming flesh presupposes his eternal procession from the Father and, in common with the Father, from the Spirit; it presupposes the intra-Trinitarian life as a unity of nature and a trinity of persons. The mystery of the Trinity, therefore, is the ultimate foundation of dual unity.

The relations between Trinity and dual unity, however, are not simply the final outcome of a complex theological reflection. There is an aspect that makes them truly accessible and it is this: in dual unity we find an analogy of the Trinitarian communion. In fact, as the Holy Father suggests in *Mulieris dignitatem*, man is not only image of God on account of his being free and rational, but also because he is a being who is fulfilled in communion, as relation (cf. *MD*, 7).

The image of God is completed in interpersonal communion. In this key thesis, developed in *Mulieris dignitatem*, in the context of a reflection on women, and not yet explored adequately by theology, one can observe one of the more significant doctrinal contributions of the papal Magisterium. Its importance interests the entire field of dogmatic theology.

However much these considerations may appear inaccessible, they are far from abstract, for they possess a determinative relevance for human life in its concreteness.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

In the first place—and this point seems to me particularly important—we must admit that a culture that does not accept the revelation of the Trinitarian God ultimately renders itself incapable of understanding sexual difference in a positive sense. It is this that prevents us from calmly accepting the personal identity of the diverse two, of man and woman. Not for nothing does the open acceptance of homosexuality belong both to classical paganism and to the paganism of the present day. If, from the beginning, there is no possibility of a difference that does not alter identity, as occurs, in the full sense, in the life of the Triune God from whose loving design man originally comes forth as a sexually differentiated being, any subsequent difference will be seen as the result of a fall or as the fruit of violence. For this reason, a society that loses its reference to the personal Triune God, to the Other, is unable to understand sexuality as original to man. In fact, such a society cannot avoid lapsing into a negative vision of sexuality. Sexuality either becomes an object of taboo; or it is trivialized, having been assumed to be something self-evident, because tied exclusively to those characteristics that belong to man as an "animal." In any case, it remains marginal to serious discussion. The result of all this will be the censure or the insignificance of sexuality.

Another consequence of lack of understanding of the Trinitarian and Christological foundation directly concerns the institution of the family, founded on marriage. In fact, to speak about Trinitarian unity and the hypostatic union as the ultimate foundation of the dual unity of man and woman, shows us that difference, without confusion and without separation, is something positive, something that exalts, not destroys, unity. This enables us to see that unity is the full meaning of difference. Difference, or alterity, is a path to a more complete unity. This alone suffices to explain why, in the sacrament of marriage, through which the woman constitutes with man *one flesh*, the salvific will of the God of Jesus Christ is expressed, the will of him who asks man not to separate what God has united. Indissolubility constitutes the destiny and the very core of the relation of man and woman in marriage. It is for this reason that indissolubility is at the heart of the vocation of marriage. In fact, marriage is a vocation, in the true sense of the word, precisely on account of indissolubility. Here spousal love approaches its summit, and the vocation of marriage displays its greatest dignity.

Allow me to offer one final, and very general remark. The retrieval of the Trinitarian reflection as the foundation for anthropology can only help to deepen the notion of person, all too

often identified erroneously with that of the "individual" or of the "spiritual subject."²² Certainly, the notion of the person, rightly understood, supplies the adequate tools for a critique of both the liberal and collectivist system, by supplying the basis for a correct relation between State and civil society.

IV. The Reason for the Dual Unity of Man and Woman

Up to this point we have concerned ourselves with the anthropological foundation of the dignity and mission of the woman (dual unity), and of its theological root (both Christological and Trinitarian). In this third and final part of our argument we must take up the question concerning the purpose for dual unity. In fact, only a reflection that grasps the origin and end together can be said to be truly complete.

Let us begin with a statement from Balthasar: concerning the mystery of man and woman, "the fullness of mystery is only attained in the mystery of Christ and his Church (Eph 5:27, 33)."²³ One can see in fact that the pair Christ and Church presents itself as the original pair. The pair man and woman is, in a certain sense, derived from it. And it is derivative according to a well-known classical principle, according to which the end, or destiny, of a reality is included in its origin.²⁴ Dual unity finds its definitive archetype in the marriage between the Crucified and Risen Lord and his Body which is the Church (cf. *MD*, 23–27).

The Pauline image of the Church as Bride of Christ (cf. Eph 5:25–32) follows the history of salvation. In that history Yahweh elects the Hebrew people, whose complement, in the fullness of time, is constituted by the new people of God. This spousal dimension of the relation between the God-Man and the

²² Cf. A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 77–78.

²³ H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 289.

²⁴ On this note Balthasar affirms: "the difference is part of the *imago Dei*: 'Let us make man in our image and likeness . . . In the image of God he created them. Male and female he created them' (Gen 1:26–27). If this were not so, Christ could neither have pointed to the relationship of the sexes to describe his mysterious union with the Church, nor have given to the sacrament of marriage the power and the real possibility of symbolizing this perfect relationship in the relationship of the sexes" (H.U. von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983], 103).

Church is well expressed by Augustine: "all of the Church in fact is the spouse of Christ and its principle and first fruit is the flesh of Christ."²⁵

The Pauline image enables us to assert that the Church places us before God as his feminine interlocutor, and from him receives all of its fruitfulness.²⁶ The Lord, in fact, loves his people as his spouse and for its salvation offers his own life. From the sacrifice of the cross flows the obediential love of the Church, which is also the *forma humanitatis*. In this spousal relation

The man-woman polarity is linked to the mystery of the Christ-Church relationship (Eph 5), where nuptial love not only reaches its fullest form, but where at the same time its connection with death through the closed circle of generations for the sake of the species is broken. This is so not only because death is conquered in Christ, but also and more precisely because Christ inaugurates a new form of fruitfulness which is not identical to human procreation. This is a fecundity for the kingdom, which becomes the eschatological sign of the marriage between Christ and the Church; it is a virginal fecundity or nuptiality which is not at all asexual.²⁷

The principal way to grasp the spousal bond between Christ and the Church in all of its profundity is the figure of Mary. In fact, in the virginal maternity of Mary, the meaning of the mystical marriage of the Lamb is revealed with intense light. Concerning this, Balthasar enlightens us once again: "The fact that the Church can become 'Mother' of those who believe in Christ always presupposes that Mary conceived the Messiah and brought him to birth."²⁸

Inasmuch as Mary is Mother and Virgin, she is the archetype of the Church. In her person is concentrated both the maternity of the Church, whose womb is the baptismal font, and the perfect obedience of faith, which the tradition ties to virginity in a special way.

Mary is also the archetype of every human being. It is she who realizes, in a humanly preeminent way, the supernatural

²⁵ St. Augustine, *In ep. Joh. Tr.* 2, 2.

²⁶ Cf. H.U. von Balthasar, "Who is the Church?" in *Sponsa Verbi: Explorations in Theology*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 143-91; idem, *Man in History: A Theological Study* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 306-14; idem, *Elucidations* (London: SPCK, 1975), 64-72.

²⁷ A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 98.

²⁸ H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3, 291.

destiny of becoming sons in the Son.²⁹ Mary conceives all of her life in function of the Son: in her is fulfilled, as in no other creature, the preestablished design of the Father, from the moment she was preserved from original sin. Her entire life, from the immaculate conception to the Assumption, is an affirmation of the will of the Father that she follow the Son.³⁰

Mary is furthermore the archetype of women,³¹ as *Redemptoris Mater* has reminded us.³² According to the thought of John Paul II this particular connection between Mary and woman has its foundation in the mystery of the divine maternity of the Virgin (*MD*, 3-5). In the mystery of the *Theotokos* the relation between Mary and Eve receives a new light: inasmuch as she is the mother of believers, the Virgin, daughter of Eve, mother of the living, becomes the new Eve (*MD*, 9-11).

The reference to Mary as archetype of woman has to do with certain dimensions regarding woman's dignity and mission. I refer to spousality, maternity, and woman's prophetic "genius." The first refers back to everything that has been said concerning dual unity, that is, to the spousal nature of the human being (*MD*, 6-7). The theme of maternity opens up for us the path on which we will be able to grasp the particular bond which unites women with life.³³ As regards "prophetic genius," (*MD*, 29-30; *Letter to*

²⁹ Cf. A. Scola, "Maria modello del cristiano e della donna," 148-58.

³⁰ This theme was developed by the Holy Father in the encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, 44-47.

³¹ Cf. John Paul II, *Catechesis at the General Audience* (September 6, 1995) 3.

³² "This Marian dimension of Christian life takes on special importance in relation to women and their status. In fact, femininity has a unique relationship with the Mother of the Redeemer, a subject which can be studied in greater depth elsewhere. Here I simply wish to note that the figure of Mary of Nazareth sheds light on womanhood as such by the very fact that God, in the sublime event of the incarnation of his Son, entrusted himself to the ministry, the free and active ministry of a woman. It can thus be said that women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own true advancement. In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement" (*RM*, 46).

³³ Cf. e.g., John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace 1995* (December 8, 1994), 3: "This invitation which is particularly made to women that they become educators of peace, flows from the understanding that to her God

Women, 11) this is particularly tied to the logic of love which, in the end, is the only thing credible to man.

In this ecclesial and Marian light it is possible to touch upon two consequences.

The Marian ecclesial archetype shows that the essential content of maternity is not only the act of generation but also the task of education. From this point of view, emphasizing the woman's importance within the family in no way offends against her dignity and her rights. The issue concerning the different familial *states*, viz. paternity, maternity, fraternity, and so on, would take us too far afield. I will limit myself to saying that assisting the child to recognize his dependence on the father, who is the sign of divine Paternity, belongs objectively to the educative task of the mother. Fathers are often absent from their families these days, but they are so also because mothers do not always direct their children to them.

I will close with a brief remark about the relation between man and woman and the constitution of the Church. The Church lives by a double principle, the Petrine and the Marian.³⁴ The *sacra potestas* is ultimately connected to the Petrine dimension. But the power of the Church has the form of a witness unto martyrdom. In this sense, as John Paul II teaches us with his style of governing, Peter depends upon Mary. The Marian dimension, in fact, profoundly expresses the nature of the Church, which is born from the heart of one who is justified when he welcomes the incarnate Word of God, making of his life an offering pleasing to the Trinity.—*Translated by Margaret Harper McCarthy* □

entrusted, in a special way, man, the human being"; cf. also idem, *Evangelium vitae*, 58; idem, *Message to the Secretary of the International Conference on Population and Development* (March 18, 1994).

³⁴ Cf. G. Chantraine, "Principio mariano e principio petrino," in *Dignità e vocazione*, 154–63.