

(English translation)

Roccaporena di Cascia, 1 June 1989

## Women: Builders of Peace and Unity

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we know, the purpose of this meeting is to examine in depth the Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, which has evoked much admiration and gratitude towards the Holy Father and met with approval in the most diverse environments. In this Letter, today the most significant and authoritative document on the dignity and vocation of women, John Paul II emphasizes the reality and role of women as, I believe, no one has ever done, after Jesus.

In the light of this document, I will now say something about "Women and their contribution of peace and unity".

First of all, how are women defined by the *Mulieris Dignitatem*?

This will be studied in depth during these days. Now, I will mention only a few points.

The Holy Father makes the original identity and vocation of women flow from the very depths of the Word of God.

Scanning over the history of salvation, from the "*Proto-evangelium*" to the Book of Revelation, he describes, on the basis of biblical-theological anthropology, the identity of women in God's universal plan for humanity, as he has revealed it to us and as he continues to guide its fulfilment in history.

The Pope begins by recalling the figure of Mary, the Mother of God, "*Theotokos*" (cf. MD 4-5), and he shows us the extraordinary dignity to which he has elevated women in her.

Thus he puts into evidence how union with God, to which every person is called, is realized in Mary in the most eminent manner: for this reason, Mary, the "woman", is the representative of the whole human race, the archetype of every man and woman. On the other hand, in the "*Theotokos*" there is - as affirmed by the *Mulieris Dignitatem* - a form of union with the living God which can only belong to the "woman" (...): the union between mother and son" (MD 4). Thus Mary, who reaches the fullness of perfection also in "what is characteristic of woman" (MD 5), is, in a sense, the archetype of women.

The Pope also affirmed that it is in the light of this reality "Woman-Mother of God", that every reflection on women should be made.

Thus, beginning with the texts of Genesis on the origins of humanity, the basis of all Christian anthropology, the Holy Father presents God's plan for man and woman in all its greatness.

God created both in his image, not only as individuals, but in their common humanity, as a "unity of the two". Therefore woman and man are essentially equal. They are both persons and as such they are called to participate in the intimate life of God. They are called to live in a communion of love, in the likeness of God who is Love, who is unity in the Trinity, and to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God. In the "unity of the two", man and woman are "called to exist mutually 'one for the other'" (MD 7). Consequently, each one can find self-realization only "through a sincere gift of self" (GS 24).

Therefore, while Trinitarian unity is the gift that God has inscribed in the human being, it also constitutes a responsibility on the part of every person.

Sin, which is the rejection of God's love and the egoistic affirmation of self, causes a break not only in union with God, but also within one's own "I", in the mutual relationship between man and woman and in their relationship with the external world.

Then soaring over history, from the dawning of creation to our world today, the Holy Father shows all the value of the redemption which introduced a new process into history and restored the splendour of God's work.

He underlines how significant it is that the first foretelling of salvation, contained in the "*Proto-evangelium*", already refers to the "woman". And he links this reference to the new and definitive Covenant which God establishes with humanity, now no longer turning to men but to a woman.

In fact, when the moment comes to carry out the greatest work in history - the reconciliation and reunification of all people with God and with one another - God turns to Mary and asks for her free consent so that His Son, the Redeemer, may become incarnate in her. Thus, notes the Pope, the New Covenant begins with a woman, 'the woman' of the Annunciation at Nazareth. Herein lies - he affirms - the absolute originality of the Gospel" (MD 11). It is a "sign" that points to the fact that in Christ "there is neither male nor female" (Gal 3:28). The mutual opposition between man and woman is essentially overcome, because in Him we are "all one" (cf. MD 11).

This "newness of life" emerges very clearly from all of Jesus' words and teaching which, also with regard to women, was revolutionary for his times, but perfectly in harmony with the Father's plan.

The women that Jesus meets find themselves, their freedom and their place in society. His works and words clearly show that women have the same dignity as men (cf. MD 16).

The Pope draws attention to evangelical equality also in the relationship between husband and wife, no longer understood as the one-sided subjection of the wife to the husband, but of mutual subjection (cf. MD 24), as an expression of mutual love.

And he reminds us that in the "spousal" symbolism of Scripture, the entire Church, men and women, is called to respond - as a bride - to the love of God.

What comes to light in the Church is the reality of love, of holiness, to which we are all primarily called, the royal priesthood, which we must all live. And "in the hierarchy of holiness, it is precisely the 'woman', Mary, who is the 'figure' of the Church. She 'precedes' everyone on the path to holiness; in her person 'the Church has already reached perfection'" (MD 27).

Therefore, due to their singular relationship with Mary, women are particularly called to reflect love in the world, the love of the Persons in the Trinity. They are called to bear witness to this love and to bring it into the created world up to its eschatological fulfilment, as understood from the Pope's reference to the "woman clothed with the sun" in the Book of Revelation.

These are the two themes I wanted to underline. The first affirms that women are equal in dignity to men. The second, that women have a special vocation to love.

Women are equal in dignity to men: in general, this truth has not been observed, under various aspects.

Discrimination against women, for a number of reasons, has been manifested for centuries and continues to be manifested today too, even though in recent times, at least in the more developed world, women have attempted to react.

They began to do so particularly in the last century. Intolerant of the various conditionings they had to live with, they struggled to obtain respect for their rights and equality with men in all fields: from the juridical to the professional, to the cultural, to that of acquiring full decision-making powers in institutions, in political procedures, in the business world....

The journey has been a difficult one: there have been high moments, but also defeats; important goals have been reached.... As a result, we have in different parts of the world today, including Italy, magnificent women, also in positions of great responsibility, who demonstrate who women are and what they can do.

Thus we are no longer in the times of Teresa of Avila - "the most saintly of women and the most womanly of saints", as they say. She asked the Lord to have justice for women, and in no uncertain terms, she prayed in this way: "When I look at our times, I do not find it right at all that virtuous and strong hearts are scorned for the mere fact that they are of women .... You are a righteous Judge, not like judges in the world who, being, after all, men and sons of Adam, refuse to consider any woman's virtue as above suspicion."<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, we have also passed the times, much closer to us, in which the little Thérèse of Lisieux severely judged the situation of women and consoled herself thinking that Jesus - these are her words - "in heaven, will certainly show that his thoughts are not those of men, because then, the last (the thoughts of women) will be the first..."<sup>2</sup>

Yes, the situation of women has changed noticeably and there are many signs of new developments.

Moreover, today women are conscious of their identity. Unlike in the past, they intend to give all of their creative and irreplaceable contribution, in solidarity not only with one another but also with men, in order to weave that network of new relationships among individuals and nations, wherein lies the future of the world.

However, even when women have attained every legitimate goal, will they feel totally fulfilled? No, something deeper is needed.

Women will find the fullness of their being only in that Jesus who showed an immense love for them, giving them their full dignity; in that God who created them as they are: women, in all their femininity, with all their characteristics. They too cannot help but repeat with Augustine: Lord, "our heart is restless until it rests in you."<sup>3</sup>

Women will have to make the experience of a profound encounter with Jesus, of a new meeting with him.

Only Christ can totally fulfill women, just as it was only Christ who totally fulfilled them in the past.

Who can deny that Catherine of Siena, Rita of Cascia, Rose of Lima, Claire of Assisi, Joan of Arc... were perfectly successful, fulfilled women?

To meet Jesus!... which means to allow oneself to be illuminated, penetrated, inflamed, transformed by his message.

Jesus, the Son of God Love, came on earth to live and die for love and to restore all things and persons through love; to teach love to everyone, for this is the heart of his doctrine; to call everyone to love: the vocation to which women are particularly sensitive.

In fact, women are especially called to love. This does not mean that men are not. History offers countless examples of men who were giant figures of love, of divine charity. But this does not negate the fact that women are particularly inclined.

In fact, the charity that Christ brought has specific qualities: concreteness and sacrifice.

Charity is certainly not a love that stops at sentiments or compassion.

Charity is true not if it theorizes, but if it becomes concrete, if it is service, if it goes out to others at all times. Jesus showed this to us by washing the feet of his disciples.

"It is commonly thought," says the *Mulieris Dignitatem*, "that women are more capable than men of paying attention to another person" (MD 18).

<sup>1</sup> S. TERESA DI GESU', Cammino di perfezione, La redazione. Autografo di El Escorial, 1565: IV,1.

<sup>2</sup> S. TERESA DI GESU' BAMBINO, Scritto autobiografico A, n.184. In Gli scritti, Roma: Postulazione Generale dei Carmelitani Scalzi, 1970: 185-186.

<sup>3</sup> S. AGOSTINO, Le confessioni, 1.1, Roma: Città Nuova, 1965: 5

Furthermore, charity is primarily sacrifice, it is living for others, it is forgetting self.

And women - another statement made by the *Mulieris Dignitatem* - "often succeed in resisting suffering better than men" (MD 19).

Thus women have a special inclination towards love, towards charity, that charity which is the greatest charism (cf. 1 Cor. 13:13). In our day, the Church and humanity seem to be particularly called to this charism, if the Church emphasizes, as it did in the Second Vatican Council, the need to mirror itself in the early Church when Christians were one heart and one soul out of love, if it speaks of and strives towards the civilization of love.

But in our times, where can women find the possibility of a new encounter with Jesus and his message?

We know that the question of women today is a sign of the times. And this also indicates the will of God. But God who is Love, who is Providence, does not stop at giving indications. He opens ways, gives answers, offers possibilities.

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When traveling and visiting people and groups in different continents, one can notice how he is working also in favour of women. One cannot help but notice something new about women. Indeed, one gets the impression that in our world, today, a new type of woman is emerging. It is possible to meet her in the movements, groups, associations and new religious families that have arisen before or after the Council, in Italy and abroad, all expressions of the Church, in which we cannot help but recognize the action of the Holy Spirit. I have a more direct experience with these.

These women are present almost everywhere: in families, offices, schools, parliaments, theatres, hospitals, in Church organizations.... They are single, married, mothers, young and adults.

In fact, the spiritualities of these new ecclesial groups, at least some, have certain elements in common to which women are particularly sensitive. Undoubtedly, they are of interest to everyone, men and women alike, indeed to every social class and vocation, but they are particularly suitable to the laity, and in a special way, to women.

The Marian background which usually characterizes these spiritualities attracts women.

They give special attention to the Word of God, not only as something to be proclaimed, but to be lived with radicalness and perseverance by those who adhere to them, in likeness to the Mother of Jesus who conserved it in her heart. Mary was more life of the Word than the Word proclaimed.

These spiritualities encourage people to share their faith by communicating their experience, as Mary did with Elizabeth. Moved by the Holy Spirit, Mary communicated, with feminine exuberance, her great and divine experience in the *Magnificat*.

These spiritualities give life to the community, small or large examples of what the great family of God should be, in which the unifying capacity of women, already manifest in the natural family, obtains marvellous results.

Above all, these spiritualities are based on the "*porro unum*" of Christianity, love, the "fulfilment of the law" (cf. Rm 13:10).

Women have found in this love "the hidden treasure" for themselves and for every woman.

They know that widespread efforts are being made in the world to guarantee women's rights, and they are involved in this work when necessary. But they are neither overly distressed nor complacent. They know that there are cultures in which women are even in a state of slavery, so there is still much to be done.

But it is not primarily in "doing" that they place their hopes. It is not only in this way that women will be fully happy.... The way is another, as we said earlier.

Having come into contact with a Work of the Church, they have encountered Jesus, a living Jesus. And, just as when he was physically present, now too they feel that his love and message give them what is most important.

They live this message in a new way, meeting the challenges of the Church today, supported by those sources of God that the Church offers and suggests: the sacraments, the word, prayer....

They have a great faith in God Love and often they want to respond to his love by loving him in their brothers and sisters. This is not, I repeat, a privilege only of women, but they are more inclined and bring to this endeavour all the wealth of their femininity. Like springs of pure water in a world dried up by secularism and materialism, they quench the thirst of many by offering peace, serenity and solutions to problems and anguish. Their love and light overflows onto many. They are not lacking in wisdom because whoever loves is enlightened: "I will manifest myself to the one who loves me" (cf. Jn. 14:21), says Jesus. Their joy spreads to others and many learn how to love.

Thus they put into practice the very heart of Christianity: they live the commandment that Jesus calls "new", and it is typically "his". It is the law of heaven which he brought on earth and which reflects the life of the Trinity: "Just as I have loved you, you also must love one another" (Jn. 13:34). Over and over again they make this love the foundation of their lives, creating relationships that are always new, among individuals and groups, sharing with everyone sufferings and joys, as well as material and spiritual goods.

Through mutual love, they contribute towards the realization of a special and very precious presence of Jesus in the midst of men and women everywhere in the world. Through reciprocal charity, in fact, it is possible to "generate", as Paul VI would say, the presence of Christ among men and women<sup>4</sup>, as Jesus promised when he said: "Where two or three meet in my name (which means in my love), I shall be there with them" (Mt. 18:20).

This presence of Christ in the small or large community united in his name comes into special evidence today.

Women strive to bring the presence of Jesus into the family. On the basis of their new awareness of equal dignity with men also in matrimony, they do all they can to make the "gift of self" a living and constant reality, to make "living for the other person" an ever-new commitment for each member of the family. This leads to resolving problems, to smoothing out contrasting opinions, to knowing how to forgive, in a harmonious sharing of tasks and responsibilities which gives the family a new peace and opens it to all humanity.

These women are involved in all sectors of society, in work and in social endeavours. And precisely because they know how to go out to others, attentive to the needs of each person, they give new impetus to a wide range of projects and initiatives, in an effort to re-humanize structures and imbue them with new vitality.

They are involved in resolving the crucial problems of humanity: consequently, they give their attention to creating a more equitable distribution of the riches and goods of life; to international solidarity. They are capable of seeing in local achievements, small-scale solutions that can be applied on a large scale. They are sensitive to current ecological problems.

Women understand that the history of humanity is a slow and laboured rediscovery of universal brotherhood in Christ and they work to bring this about at all levels.

They have a universal love in their hearts for all people. There is no discrimination, there are no exceptions.

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<sup>4</sup> PAOLO VI, Discorso alla parrocchia di S. Maria Consolatrice (Roma, 1 marzo 1964). In: Insegnamenti di Paolo VI, II/1964. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965: 1073

Living for love and for mutual love, living in order to "generate" the spiritual presence of Christ among people, makes women feel particularly close to Mary who physically gave Jesus to the world.

But they try to imitate Mary in everything, because she is the model of the virgin, fiancé, wife, mother and widow. At the same time, she is open to and interested in the vast problems of humanity, as we can see in the *Magnificat*.

Or better still, perhaps it is Mary herself who models these women on herself, feeling that she too has been engaged by God to give back to women their dignity, a demand of our times. Above all, she teaches them the primary secret of true Christian love: the cross, sacrifice. It was especially through the cross that Jesus showed his love to the world. Through the cross, Mary, sharing in her Son's passion, became the mother of all humankind.

In following Mary, these women must take the same way so that, to some extent, they too can become mothers of many others. And they are.

A very strong characteristic of these women is their spiritual maternity, and it is one of the greatest gifts that God can give to a woman. This maternity makes them fruitful not only in human society, but also in the Church.

They contribute to bringing about the living presence of Christ among people, and the effects of his presence are immense. Through them, he conquers hearts, converts, removes divisions between generations, among people of different races, among different nations, between the rich and the poor. He forms new people; he calls people to follow him in many different ways; he renews portions of the Church.

And with a love that leads to believing: "May they all be one so that the world may believe" (Jn 17:21), women are able to open fruitful dialogues with Christians of other Churches, with the faithful of other religions and with all people of good will.

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So there are women who are a real hope and example for many others, because the Holy Spirit is at work in their favour. And who knows what surprises He is still preparing in the laboratories of the Church and elsewhere.

In the coming third millennium, may Mary help women to be a real, concrete and vast response to the loving attention that the Holy Father has expressed in the very beautiful *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

And may Rita of Cascia, who lived charity in a radical way, who heroically forgave the men who killed her husband, and who suffered the wound in her forehead, remind women that their vocation lies primarily in this, in knowing how to love and suffer. Even though both are inexhaustible sources of joy; both are conditions for becoming builders of unity and peace.