

LETTER TO THE BISHOPS
OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
ON THE COLLABORATION
OF MEN AND WOMEN
IN THE CHURCH
AND IN THE WORLD

INTRODUCTION

1. The Church, expert in humanity, has a perennial interest in whatever concerns men and women. In recent times, much reflection has been given to the question of the dignity of women and to women's rights and duties in the different areas of civil society and the Church. Having contributed to a deeper understanding of this fundamental question, in particular through the teaching of John Paul II,¹ the Church is called today to address certain currents of thought which are often at variance with the authentic advancement of women.

After a brief presentation and critical evaluation of some current conceptions of human nature, this document will offer reflections – inspired by the doctrinal elements of the biblical vision of the human person that are indispensable for safeguarding his or her identity – on some of the essentials of a correct understanding of active collaboration, in recognition of the difference between men and women in the Church and in the world. These reflections are meant as a starting point for further examination in the Church, as well as an impetus for dialogue with all men and women of good will, in a sincere search for the truth and in a common commitment to the development of ever more authentic relationships.

I. THE QUESTION

2. Recent years have seen new approaches to women's issues. A first tendency is to emphasize strongly conditions of subordination in order to give rise to antagonism: women, in order to be themselves, must make themselves the adversaries of men. Faced with the abuse of power, the answer for women is to seek power. This process leads to opposition between men and women, in which the identity and role of one are emphasized to the disadvantage of the other, leading to harmful confusion regarding the human person, which has its most immediate and lethal effects in the structure of the family.

A second tendency emerges in the wake of the first. In order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied, viewed as mere effects of historical and cultural conditioning. In this perspective, physical difference, termed *sex*, is minimized, while the purely cultural element, termed *gender*, is emphasized to the maximum and held to be primary. The obscuring of the difference or duality of the sexes has enormous consequences on a variety of levels. This theory of the human person, intended to promote prospects for equality of women through liberation from biological determinism, has in reality inspired ideologies which, for

example, call into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality.

3. While the immediate roots of this second tendency are found in the context of reflection on women's roles, its deeper motivation must be sought in the human attempt to be freed from one's biological conditioning.² According to this perspective, human nature in itself does not possess characteristics in an absolute manner: all persons can and ought to constitute themselves as they like, since they are free from every predetermination linked to their essential constitution.

This perspective has many consequences. Above all it strengthens the idea that the liberation of women entails criticism of Sacred Scripture, which would be seen as handing on a patriarchal conception of God nourished by an essentially male-dominated culture. Second, this tendency would consider as lacking in importance and relevance the fact that the Son of God assumed human nature in its male form.

4. In the face of these currents of thought, the Church, enlightened by faith in Jesus Christ, speaks instead of *active collaboration* between the sexes precisely in the recognition of the difference between man and woman.

To understand better the basis, meaning and consequences of this response it is helpful to turn briefly to the Sacred Scriptures, rich also in human wisdom, in which this response is progressively manifested thanks to God's intervention on behalf of humanity.³

II. BASIC ELEMENTS OF THE BIBLICAL VISION OF THE HUMAN PERSON

5. The first biblical texts to examine are the first three chapters of Genesis. Here we "enter into the setting of the biblical 'beginning'. In it the revealed truth concerning the human person as 'the image and likeness' of God constitutes the immutable *basis of all Christian anthropology*".⁴

The first text (*Gn* 1:1-2:4) describes the creative power of the Word of God, which makes distinctions in the original chaos. Light and darkness appear, sea and dry land, day and night, grass and trees, fish and birds, "each according to its kind". An ordered world is born out of differences, carrying with them also the promise of relationships. Here we see a sketch of the framework in which the creation of the human race takes place: "God said 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'" (*Gn* 1:26). And then: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (*Gn* 1:27). From the very beginning therefore, humanity is described as articulated in the male-female relationship. This is the humanity, sexually differentiated, which is explicitly declared "the image of God".

6. The second creation account (*Gn* 2:4-25) confirms in a definitive way the importance of sexual difference. Formed by God and placed in the garden which he was to cultivate, the man, who is still referred to with the generic expression *Adam*, experienced a loneliness which the presence of the animals is not able to overcome. He needs a *helpmate* who will be his partner. The term here does not refer to an inferior, but to a vital helper.⁵ This is so that *Adam's* life does not sink into a sterile and, in the end, baneful encounter with himself. It is necessary that he enter into relationship with another being on his own level. Only the woman, created from the same "flesh" and cloaked in the same mystery, can give a future to the life of the man. It is therefore above all on the ontological level that this takes place, in the sense that God's creation of woman characterizes humanity as a

relational reality. In this encounter, the man speaks words for the first time, expressive of his wonderment: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (*Gn* 2:23).

As the Holy Father has written with regard to this text from Genesis, “...woman is another ‘I’ in a common humanity. From the very beginning they appear as a ‘unity of the two’, and this signifies that the original solitude is overcome, the solitude in which man does not find ‘a helper fit for him’ (*Gn* 2:20). Is it only a question here of a ‘helper’ in activity, in ‘subduing the earth’ (cf. *Gn* 1:28)? Certainly it is a matter of a life’s companion with whom, as a wife, the man can unite himself, becoming with her ‘one flesh’ and for this reason leaving ‘his father and his mother’(cf. *Gn* 2:24)”.⁶

This vital difference is oriented toward communion and was lived in peace, expressed by their nakedness: “And the man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame” (*Gn* 2:25). In this way, the human body, marked with the sign of masculinity or femininity, “includes right from the beginning the nuptial attribute, that is, *the capacity of expressing love, that love in which the person becomes a gift* and – by means of this gift – fulfils the meaning of his being and his existence”.⁷ Continuing his commentary on these verses of Genesis, the Holy Father writes: “In this peculiarity, the body is the expression of the spirit and is called, in the mystery of creation, to exist in the communion of persons in the image of God”.⁸

Through this same spousal perspective, the ancient Genesis narrative allows us to understand how woman, in her deepest and original being, exists “for the other” (cf. *1 Cor* 11:9): this is a statement which, far from any sense of alienation, expresses a fundamental aspect of the similarity with the Triune God, whose Persons, with the coming of Christ, are revealed as being in a communion of love, each for the others. “In the ‘unity of the two’, man and woman are called from the beginning not only to exist ‘side by side’ or ‘together’, but they are also called to exist mutually ‘one for the other’... The text of Genesis 2:18-25 shows that marriage is the first and, in a sense, the fundamental dimension of this call. But it is not the only one. The whole of human history unfolds within the context of this call. In this history, on the basis of the principle of mutually being ‘for’ the other in interpersonal ‘communion’, there develops in humanity itself, in accordance with God’s will, the integration of what is ‘masculine’ and what is ‘feminine’”.⁹

The peaceful vision which concludes the second creation account recalls the “indeed it was very good” (*Gn* 1:31) at the end of the first account. Here we find the heart of God’s original plan and the deepest truth about man and woman, as willed and created by him. Although God’s original plan for man and woman will later be upset and darkened by sin, it can never be abrogated.

7. Original sin changes the way in which the man and the woman receive and live the Word of God as well as their relationship with the Creator. Immediately after having given them the gift of the garden, God gives them a positive command (cf. *Gn* 2:16), followed by a negative one (cf. *Gn* 2:17), in which the essential difference between God and humanity is implicitly expressed. Following enticement by the serpent, the man and the woman deny this difference. As a consequence, the way in which they live their sexual difference is also upset. In this way, the Genesis account establishes a relationship of cause and effect between the two differences: when humanity considers God its enemy, the relationship between man and woman becomes distorted. When this relationship is damaged, their access to the face of God risks being compromised in turn.

God’s decisive words to the woman after the first sin express the kind of relationship which has now been introduced between man and woman: “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (*Gn* 3:16). It will be a relationship in which love will frequently be debased into pure self-seeking, in a relationship which ignores and kills love and replaces it with the yoke of domination of one sex over the other. Indeed the story of humanity is continuously marked by this

situation, which recalls the three-fold concupiscence mentioned by Saint John: the concupiscence of the flesh, the concupiscence of the eyes and the pride of life (cf. *1 Jn* 2:16). In this tragic situation, the equality, respect and love that are required in the relationship of man and woman according to God's original plan, are lost.

8. Reviewing these fundamental texts allows us to formulate some of the principal elements of the biblical vision of the human person.

Above all, the fact that human beings are persons needs to be underscored: “*Man is a person, man and woman equally so*, since both were created in the image and likeness of the personal God”.¹⁰ Their equal dignity as persons is realized as physical, psychological and ontological complementarity, giving rise to a harmonious relationship of “uni-duality”, which only sin and “the structures of sin” inscribed in culture render potentially conflictual. The biblical vision of the human person suggests that problems related to sexual difference, whether on the public or private level, should be addressed by a relational approach and not by competition or retaliation.

Furthermore, the importance and the meaning of sexual difference, as a reality deeply inscribed in man and woman, needs to be noted. “Sexuality characterizes man and woman not only on the physical level, but also on the psychological and spiritual, making its mark on each of their expressions”.¹¹ It cannot be reduced to a pure and insignificant biological fact, but rather “is a fundamental component of personality, one of its modes of being, of manifestation, of communicating with others, of feeling, of expressing and of living human love”.¹² This capacity to love – reflection and image of God who is Love – is disclosed in the spousal character of the body, in which the masculinity or femininity of the person is expressed.

The human dimension of sexuality is inseparable from the theological dimension. The human creature, in its unity of soul and body, is characterized therefore, from the very beginning, by the relationship with the other-beyond-the-self. This relationship is presented as still good and yet, at the same time, changed. It is good from its original goodness, declared by God from the first moment of creation. It has been changed however by the disharmony between God and humanity introduced by sin. This alteration does not correspond to the initial plan of God for man and woman, nor to the truth of the relationship between the sexes. It follows then that the relationship is good, but wounded and in need of healing.

What might be the ways of this healing? Considering and analyzing the problems in the relationship between the sexes solely from the standpoint of the situation marked by sin would lead to a return to the errors mentioned above. The logic of sin needs to be broken and a way forward needs to be found that is capable of banishing it from the hearts of sinful humanity. A clear orientation in this sense is provided in the third chapter of Genesis by God's promise of a Saviour, involving the “woman” and her “offspring” (cf. *Gn* 3:15). It is a promise which will be preceded by a long preparation in history before it is realized.

9. An early victory over evil is seen in the story of Noah, the just man, who guided by God, avoids the flood with his family and the various species of animals (cf. *Gn* 6-9). But it is above all in God's choice of Abraham and his descendants (cf. *Gn* 12:1ff) that the hope of salvation is confirmed. God begins in this way to unveil his countenance so that, through the chosen people, humanity will learn the path of divine likeness, that is, the way of holiness, and thus of transformation of heart. Among the many ways in which God reveals himself to his people (cf. *Heb* 1:1), in keeping with a long and patient pedagogy, there is the recurring theme of the covenant between man and woman. This is paradoxical if we consider the drama recounted in Genesis and its concrete repetition in the time of the prophets, as well as the mixing of the sacred and the sexual found in the religions which

surrounded Israel. And yet this symbolism is indispensable for understanding the way in which God loves his people: God makes himself known as the Bridegroom who loves Israel his Bride.

If, in this relationship, God can be described as a “jealous God” (cf. *Ex* 20:5; *Nah* 1:2) and Israel denounced as an “adulterous” bride or “prostitute” (cf. *Hos* 2:4-15; *Ez* 16:15-34), it is because of the hope, reinforced by the prophets, of seeing Jerusalem become the perfect bride: “For as a young man marries a virgin so shall your creator marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (*Is* 62:5). Recreated “in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy” (*Hos* 2:21), she who had wandered far away to search for life and happiness in false gods will return, and “shall respond as in the days of her youth” (*Hos* 2:17) to him who will speak to her heart; she will hear it said: “Your bridegroom is your Creator” (*Is* 54:5). It is substantially the same reality which is expressed when, parallel to the mystery of God's action through the male figure of the suffering Servant, the Book of the prophet Isaiah evokes the feminine figure of Zion, adorned with a transcendence and a sanctity which prefigure the gift of salvation destined for Israel.

The Song of Songs is an important moment in the use of this form of revelation. In the words of a most human love, which celebrate the beauty of the human body and the joy of mutual seeking, God's love for his people is also expressed. The Church's recognition of her relationship to Christ in this audacious conjunction of language about what is most human with language about what is most divine, cannot be said to be mistaken.

In the course of the Old Testament, a story of salvation takes shape which involves the simultaneous participation of male and female. While having an evident metaphorical dimension, the terms bridegroom and bride – and covenant as well – which characterize the dynamic of salvation, are much more than simple metaphors. This spousal language touches on the very nature of the relationship which God establishes with his people, even though that relationship is more expansive than human spousal experience. Likewise, the same concrete conditions of redemption are at play in the way in which prophetic statements, such as those of Isaiah, associate masculine and feminine roles in proclaiming and prefiguring the work of salvation which God is about to undertake. This salvation orients the reader both toward the male figure of the suffering Servant as well as to the female figure of Zion. The prophetic utterances of Isaiah in fact alternate between this figure and the Servant of God, before culminating at the end of the book with the mystical vision of Jerusalem, which gives birth to a people in a single day (cf. *Is* 66: 7-14), a prophecy of the great new things which God is about to do (cf. *Is* 48: 6-8).

10. All these prefigurations find their fulfillment in the New Testament. On the one hand, Mary, the chosen daughter of Zion, in her femininity, sums up and transfigures the condition of Israel/Bride waiting for the day of her salvation. On the other hand, the masculinity of the Son shows how Jesus assumes in his person all that the Old Testament symbolism had applied to the love of God for his people, described as the love of a bridegroom for his bride. The figures of Jesus and Mary his mother not only assure the continuity of the New Testament with the Old, but go beyond it, since – as Saint Irenaeus wrote – with Jesus Christ “all newness” appears.¹³

This aspect is particularly evident in the Gospel of John. In the scene of the wedding feast at Cana, for example, Jesus is asked by his mother, who is called “woman”, to offer, as a sign, the new wine of the future wedding with humanity (cf. *Jn* 2:1-12). This messianic wedding is accomplished on the Cross when, again in the presence of his mother, once again called “woman”, the blood/wine of the New Covenant pours forth from the open heart of the crucified Christ (cf. *Jn* 19:25-27, 34).¹⁴ It is therefore not at all surprising that John the Baptist, when asked who he is, describes himself as “the friend of the bridegroom”, who rejoices to hear the bridegroom's voice and must be eclipsed by

his coming: “He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease” (*Jn3:29-30*).¹⁵

In his apostolic activity, Paul develops the whole nuptial significance of the redemption by seeing Christian life as a nuptial mystery. He writes to the Church in Corinth, which he had founded: “I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a chaste virgin to her one husband” (*2 Cor 11:2*).

In the Letter to the Ephesians, the spousal relationship between Christ and the Church is taken up again and deepened in its implications. In the New Covenant, the beloved bride is the Church, and as the Holy Father teaches in his *Letter to Families*: “This bride, of whom the Letter to the Ephesians speaks, is present in each of the baptized and is like one who presents herself before her Bridegroom: ‘Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her..., that he might present the Church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish’ (*Eph 5:25-27*)”.¹⁶

Reflecting on the unity of man and woman as described at the moment of the world's creation (cf. *Gn 2:24*), the Apostle exclaims: “this mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church” (*Eph 5:32*). The love of a man and a woman, lived out in the power of baptismal life, now becomes the sacrament of the love between Christ and his Church, and a witness to the mystery of fidelity and unity from which the “New Eve” is born and by which she lives in her earthly pilgrimage toward the fullness of the eternal wedding.

11. Drawn into the Paschal mystery and made living signs of the love of Christ and his Church, the hearts of Christian spouses are renewed and they are able to avoid elements of concupiscence in their relationship, as well as the subjugation introduced into the life of the first married couple by the break with God caused by sin. For Christian spouses, the goodness of love, for which the wounded human heart has continued to long, is revealed with new accents and possibilities. It is in this light that Jesus, faced with the question about divorce (cf. *Mt 19:3-9*), recalls the demands of the covenant between man and woman as willed by God at the beginning, that is, before the eruption of sin which had justified the later accommodations found in the Mosaic Law. Far from being the imposition of a hard and inflexible order, these words of Jesus are actually the proclamation of the “good news” of that faithfulness which is stronger than sin. The power of the resurrection makes possible the victory of faithfulness over weakness, over injuries and over the couple's sins. In the grace of Christ which renews their hearts, man and woman become capable of being freed from sin and of knowing the joy of mutual giving.

12. “For all of you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ... there is neither male nor female”, writes Saint Paul to the Galatians (*3:27-28*). The Apostle Paul does not say that the distinction between man and woman, which in other places is referred to the plan of God, has been erased. He means rather that in Christ the rivalry, enmity and violence which disfigured the relationship between men and women can be overcome and have been overcome. In this sense, the distinction between man and woman is reaffirmed more than ever; indeed, it is present in biblical revelation up to the very end. In the final hour of present history, the Book of Revelation of Saint John, speaking of “a new heaven and a new earth” (*Rev 21:1*), presents the vision of a feminine Jerusalem “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (*Rev 21:2*). Revelation concludes with the words of the Bride and the Spirit who beseech the coming of the Bridegroom, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (*Rev 22:20*).

Male and female are thus revealed as *belonging ontologically to creation* and destined therefore *to outlast the present time*, evidently in a transfigured form. In this way, they characterize the “love that never ends” (*1Cor 13:8*), although the temporal and earthly expression of sexuality is transient and ordered to a phase of life marked by procreation and death. Celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom seeks to be the prophecy of this form of future existence of male and female. For those who live it, it is an anticipation of the reality of a life which, while remaining that of a man and a woman, will no longer be subject to the present limitations of the marriage relationship (cf. *Mt22:30*). For those in married life, celibacy becomes the reminder and prophecy of the completion which their own relationship will find in the face-to-face encounter with God.

From the first moment of their creation, man and woman are distinct, and will remain so for all eternity. Placed within Christ's Paschal mystery, they no longer see their difference as a source of discord to be overcome by denial or eradication, but rather as the possibility for collaboration, to be cultivated with mutual respect for their difference. From here, new perspectives open up for a deeper understanding of the dignity of women and their role in human society and in the Church.

III. THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMININE VALUES IN THE LIFE OF SOCIETY

13. Among the fundamental values linked to women's actual lives is what has been called a “capacity for the other”. Although a certain type of feminist rhetoric makes demands “for ourselves”, women preserve the deep intuition of the goodness in their lives of those actions which elicit life, and contribute to the growth and protection of the other.

This intuition is linked to women's physical capacity to give life. Whether lived out or remaining potential, this capacity is a reality that structures the female personality in a profound way. It allows her to acquire maturity very quickly, and gives a sense of the seriousness of life and of its responsibilities. A sense and a respect for what is concrete develop in her, opposed to abstractions which are so often fatal for the existence of individuals and society. It is women, in the end, who even in very desperate situations, as attested by history past and present, possess a singular capacity to persevere in adversity, to keep life going even in extreme situations, to hold tenaciously to the future, and finally to remember with tears the value of every human life.

Although motherhood is a key element of women's identity, this does not mean that women should be considered from the sole perspective of physical procreation. In this area, there can be serious distortions, which extol biological fecundity in purely quantitative terms and are often accompanied by dangerous disrespect for women. The existence of the Christian vocation of virginity, radical with regard to both the Old Testament tradition and the demands made by many societies, is of the greatest importance in this regard.¹⁷ Virginity refutes any attempt to enclose women in mere biological destiny. Just as virginity receives from physical motherhood the insight that there is no Christian vocation except in the concrete gift of oneself to the other, so physical motherhood receives from virginity an insight into its fundamentally spiritual dimension: it is in not being content only to give physical life that the other truly comes into existence. This means that motherhood can find forms of full realization also where there is no physical procreation.¹⁸

In this perspective, one understands the irreplaceable role of women in all aspects of family and social life involving human relationships and caring for others. Here what John Paul II has termed *the genius of women* becomes very clear.¹⁹ It implies first of all that women be significantly and actively present in the family, “the primordial and, in a certain sense sovereign society”,²⁰ since it is

here above all that the features of a people take shape; it is here that its members acquire basic teachings. They learn to love inasmuch as they are unconditionally loved, they learn respect for others inasmuch as they are respected, they learn to know the face of God inasmuch as they receive a first revelation of it from a father and a mother full of attention in their regard. Whenever these fundamental experiences are lacking, society as a whole suffers violence and becomes in turn the progenitor of more violence. It means also that women should be present in the world of work and in the organization of society, and that women should have access to positions of responsibility which allow them to inspire the policies of nations and to promote innovative solutions to economic and social problems.

In this regard, it cannot be forgotten that the interrelationship between these two activities – family and work – has, for women, characteristics different from those in the case of men. The harmonization of the organization of work and laws governing work with the demands stemming from the mission of women within the family is a challenge. The question is not only legal, economic and organizational; it is above all a question of mentality, culture, and respect. Indeed, a just valuing of the work of women within the family is required. In this way, women who freely desire will be able to devote the totality of their time to the work of the household without being stigmatized by society or penalized financially, while those who wish also to engage in other work may be able to do so with an appropriate work-schedule, and not have to choose between relinquishing their family life or enduring continual stress, with negative consequences for one's own equilibrium and the harmony of the family. As John Paul II has written, “it will redound to the credit of society to make it possible for a mother – without inhibiting her freedom, without psychological or practical discrimination and without penalizing her as compared with other women – to devote herself to taking care of her children and educating them in accordance with their needs, which vary with age”.²¹

14. It is appropriate however to recall that the feminine values mentioned here are above all human values: the human condition of man and woman created in the image of God is one and indivisible. It is only because women are more immediately attuned to these values that they are the reminder and the privileged sign of such values. But, in the final analysis, every human being, man or woman, is destined to be “for the other”. In this perspective, that which is called “femininity” is more than simply an attribute of the female sex. The word designates indeed the fundamental human capacity to live for the other and because of the other.

Therefore, the promotion of women within society must be understood and desired as a humanization accomplished through those values, rediscovered thanks to women. Every outlook which presents itself as a conflict between the sexes is only an illusion and a danger: it would end in segregation and competition between men and women, and would promote a solipsism nourished by a false conception of freedom.

Without prejudice to the advancement of women's rights in society and the family, these observations seek to correct the perspective which views men as enemies to be overcome. The proper condition of the male-female relationship cannot be a kind of mistrustful and defensive opposition. Their relationship needs to be lived in peace and in the happiness of shared love.

On a more concrete level, if social policies – in the areas of education, work, family, access to services and civic participation – must combat all unjust sexual discrimination, they must also listen to the aspirations and identify the needs of all. The defence and promotion of equal dignity and common personal values must be harmonized with attentive recognition of the difference and reciprocity between the sexes where this is relevant to the realization of one's humanity, whether male or female.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMININE VALUES IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

15. In the Church, woman as “sign” is more than ever central and fruitful, following as it does from the very identity of the Church, as received from God and accepted in faith. It is this “mystical” identity, profound and essential, which needs to be kept in mind when reflecting on the respective roles of men and women in the Church.

From the beginning of Christianity, the Church has understood herself to be a community, brought into existence by Christ and joined to him by a relationship of love, of which the nuptial experience is the privileged expression. From this it follows that the Church's first task is to remain in the presence of this mystery of God's love, manifested in Jesus Christ, to contemplate and to celebrate it. In this regard, the figure of Mary constitutes the fundamental reference in the Church. One could say metaphorically that Mary is a mirror placed before the Church, in which the Church is invited to recognize her own identity as well as the dispositions of the heart, the attitudes and the actions which God expects from her.

The existence of Mary is an invitation to the Church to root her very being in listening and receiving the Word of God, because faith is not so much the search for God on the part of human beings, as the recognition by men and women that God comes to us; he visits us and speaks to us. This faith, which believes that “nothing is impossible for God” (cf. *Gn*18:14; *Lk* 1:37), lives and becomes deeper through the humble and loving obedience by which the Church can say to the Father: “Let it be done to me according to your word” (*Lk* 1:38). Faith continually makes reference to Jesus: “Do whatever he tells you” (*Jn* 2:5) and accompanies Jesus on his way, even to the foot of the Cross. Mary, in the hour of darkness, perseveres courageously in faithfulness, with the sole certainty of trust in the Word of God.

It is from Mary that the Church always learns the intimacy of Christ. Mary, who carried the small child of Bethlehem in her arms, teaches us to recognize the infinite humility of God. She who received the broken body of Jesus from the Cross shows the Church how to receive all those in this world whose lives have been wounded by violence and sin. From Mary, the Church learns the meaning of the power of love, as revealed by God in the life of his beloved Son: “he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their heart... he has lifted up the lowly” (*Lk* 1:51-52). From Mary, the disciples of Christ continually receive the sense and the delight of praise for the work of God's hands: “The Almighty has done great things for me” (*Lk*1:49). They learn that they are in the world to preserve the memory of those “great things”, and to keep vigil in expectation of the day of the Lord.

16. To look at Mary and imitate her does not mean, however, that the Church should adopt a passivity inspired by an outdated conception of femininity. Nor does it condemn the Church to a dangerous vulnerability in a world where what count above all are domination and power. In reality, the way of Christ is neither one of domination (cf. *Phil* 2:6) nor of power as understood by the world (cf. *Jn*18:36). From the Son of God one learns that this “passivity” is in reality the way of love; it is a royal power which vanquishes all violence; it is “passion” which saves the world from sin and death and recreates humanity. In entrusting his mother to the Apostle John, Jesus on the Cross invites his Church to learn from Mary the secret of the love that is victorious.

Far from giving the Church an identity based on an historically conditioned model of femininity, the reference to Mary, with her dispositions of listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting, places the Church in continuity with the spiritual history of Israel. In Jesus and through him, these attributes become the vocation of every baptized Christian. Regardless of conditions, states of life, different vocations with or without public responsibilities, they are an essential aspect of Christian life. While these traits should be characteristic of every baptized person, women in fact live them with particular intensity and naturalness. In this way, women play a role of maximum importance in the Church's life by recalling these dispositions to all the baptized and contributing in a unique way to showing the true face of the Church, spouse of Christ and mother of believers.

In this perspective one understands how the reservation of priestly ordination solely to men²² does not hamper in any way women's access to the heart of Christian life. Women are called to be unique examples and witnesses for all Christians of how the Bride is to respond in love to the love of the Bridegroom.

CONCLUSION

17. In Jesus Christ all things have been made new (cf. *Rev* 21:5). Renewal in grace, however, cannot take place without conversion of heart. Gazing at Jesus and confessing him as Lord means recognizing the path of love, triumphant over sin, which he sets out for his disciples.

In this way, man's relationship with woman is transformed, and the three-fold concupiscence described in the First Letter of John (*1 Jn* 2:16) ceases to have the upper hand. The witness of women's lives must be received with respect and appreciation, as revealing those values without which humanity would be closed in self-sufficiency, dreams of power and the drama of violence. Women too, for their part, need to follow the path of conversion and recognize the unique values and great capacity for loving others which their femininity bears. In both cases, it is a question of humanity's conversion to God, so that both men and women may come to know God as their "helper", as the Creator full of tenderness, as the Redeemer who "so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son" (*Jn* 3:16).

Such a conversion cannot take place without humble prayer to God for that penetrating gaze which is able to recognize one's own sin and also the grace which heals it. In a particular way, we need to ask this of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the woman in accord with the heart of God, she who is "blessed among women" (cf. *Lk* 1:42), chosen to reveal to men and women the way of love. Only in this way, can the "image of God", the sacred likeness inscribed in every man and woman, emerge according to the specific grace received by each (cf. *Gn* 1:27). Only thus can the path of peace and wonderment be recovered, witnessed in the verses of the Song of Songs, where bodies and hearts celebrate the same jubilee.

The Church certainly knows the power of sin at work in individuals and in societies, which at times almost leads one to despair of the goodness of married couples. But through her faith in Jesus crucified and risen, the Church knows even more the power of forgiveness and self-giving in spite of any injury or injustice. The peace and wonderment which she trustfully proposes to men and women today are the peace and wonderment of the garden of the resurrection, which have enlightened our world and its history with the revelation that "God is love" (*1 Jn* 4:8,16).

The Sovereign Pontiff John Paul II, in the Audience granted to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect, approved the present Letter, adopted in the Ordinary Session of this Congregation, and ordered its publication.

Rome, from the Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, May 31, 2004, the Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

+ Joseph Card. Ratzinger

Prefect

+ Angelo Amato, SDB

Titular Archbishop of Sila

Secretary

¹Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* (November 22, 1981): AAS 74 (1982), 81-191; Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (August 15, 1988): AAS 80 (1988), 1653-1729; *Letter to Families* (February 2, 1994): AAS 86 (1994), 868-925; *Letter to Women* (June 29, 1995): AAS 87 (1995), 803-812; *Catechesi sull'amore umano* (1979-1984): *Insegnamenti II* (1979) – VII (1984): English translation in *The Theology of the Body*, (Boston: Pauline Books Media, 1997); Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educational Guidance in Human Love* (November 1, 1983); Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family* (December 8, 1995).

²On the complex question of *gender*, see also The Pontifical Council for the Family, *Family, Marriage and "De facto unions"* (July 26, 2000), 8.

³Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio* (September 14, 1998), 21: AAS 91 (1999), 22: "This opening to the mystery, which came to him [biblical man] through Revelation, was for him, in the end, the source of true knowledge. It was this which allowed his reason to enter the realm of the infinite where an understanding for which until then he had not dared to hope became a possibility".

⁴John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (August 15, 1988), 6: AAS 80 (1988), 1662; cf. St. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 5,6,1; 5, 16, 2-3: *SC* 153, 72-81; 216-221; St. Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, 16: *PG* 44, 180; *In Canticum homilia*, 2: *PG* 44, 805-808; St. Augustine, *Enarratio in Psalmum*, 4, 8: *CCL* 38, 17.

⁵The Hebrew word *ezer* which is translated as "helpmate" indicates the assistance which only a person can render to another. It carries no implication of inferiority or exploitation if we remember that God too is at times called *ezer* with regard to human beings (cf. *Ex* 18:4; *Ps* 10:14).

⁶John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (August 15, 1988), 6: AAS 80 (1988), 1664.

⁷John Paul II, *General Audience* of January 16, 1980, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body*, (Boston: Pauline Books Media, 1997), 63.

⁸John Paul II, *General Audience* of July 23, 1980, reprinted in *The Theology of the Body*, (Boston: Pauline Books Media, 1997), 125.

⁹John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (August 15, 1988), 7: AAS 80 (1988), 1666.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 6, *l. c.*, 1663.

¹¹Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educational Guidance in Human Love* (November 1, 1983), 4.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Adversus haereses*, 4, 34, 1: SC 100, 846: “*Omnem novitatem attulit semetipsum afferens*”.

¹⁴The ancient exegetical tradition sees in Mary at Cana the “*figura Synagogae*” and the “*inchoatio Ecclesiae*”.

¹⁵Here the Fourth Gospel presents in a deeper way an element found also in the Synoptic Gospels (cf. *Mt* 9:15 and parallel texts). On the theme of Christ the Bridegroom, see John Paul II, *Letter to Families* (February 2, 1994), 18: AAS 86 (1994), 906-910.

¹⁶John Paul II, *Letter to Families* (February 2, 1994), 19: AAS 86 (1994), 911; cf. Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (August 15, 1988), 23- 25: AAS 80 (1988), 1708-1715.

¹⁷Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* (November 22, 1981), 16: AAS 74 (1982), 98-99.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 41, *l. c.*, 132-133; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction *Donum vitae* (February 22, 1987), II, 8: AAS 80 (1988), 96-97.

¹⁹Cf. John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (June 29, 1995), 9-10: AAS 87 (1995), 809-810.

²⁰John Paul II, *Letter to Families* (February 2, 1994), 17: AAS 86 (1994), 906.

²¹Encyclical Letter *Laborem exercens* (September 14, 1981), 19: AAS 73 (1981), 627.

²²Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (May 22, 1994): AAS 86 (1994), 545-548; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Responsum ad dubium* regarding the doctrine of the Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (October 28, 1995): AAS 87 (1995), 1114.