

WOMAN AS MASTERPIECE OF GOD'S CREATION

Pope John Paul II, General Audience, November 24, 1999, Vatican City

1. Among the present-day challenges which the Great Jubilee Year of 2000 compels us to reflect upon, is the respect of the rights of women, as I pointed out in the Apostolic Letter "Tertio Millennio Adveniente" (cf TMA, 51). Today I would like to recall some aspects of the feminine question, which I have already touched upon on other occasions.

Sacred Scripture sheds great light on the topic of the promotion of woman, indicating the project of God for man and woman in the two creation narratives.

The first narrative states: *"So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them"* (Gen 1:27). This affirmation lies at the base of Christian anthropology, as it underlines the fundamental dignity of man as person in his created being, *"in the image"* of God. At the same time, the text clearly states that neither man nor woman, taken separately, is the image of the Creator, but man and woman are his image in their reciprocity. Both represent God's masterpiece to the same degree.

In the second creation narrative, through the symbolism of the woman's creation from the man's rib, Scripture shows that humanity is not complete until woman is created (cf Gen 2:18-24). She receives a name that, according to the verbal assonance of the Hebrew language, is relative to the man (iš/iššah). *"Created together, man and woman are willed by God one for the other"* (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 371). Woman's presentation as a *"help similar to him"* (Gen 2:18) does not mean that woman is man's servant -- "help" does not equal "servant"; the Psalmist says to God: *"You are my help"* (Ps 70:6; cf 115:9-11; 118:7; 146:5). Rather, the expression means that woman is worthy of collaborating with man because she is his perfect correspondence. Woman is another type of "I" in a common humanity, constituted in perfect equality of dignity by man and woman.

2. There is reason to rejoice over the fact that the deepening of the "feminine" in contemporary culture has contributed to a rethinking of the topic of the human person as reciprocal "being for the other" in interpersonal communion. Today the understanding of the oblique dimension of the person is becoming an acquired principle. Unfortunately, it is often unnoticed on the practical level. Among the many aggressions against human dignity, there is a widespread violation of the dignity of woman that manifests itself with the exploitation of her person and body. Every practice which offends woman in her liberty and femininity must be vigorously opposed: so-called "sexual tourism", the buying and selling of young girls, mass sterilization, and in general every form of violence against the other sex.

The moral law requires a very different attitude, preaching the dignity of woman as a person created in the image of a God-Communion! Today more than ever it is necessary to repropose the biblical anthropology of relationality, which helps us to authentically grasp the identity of the human person in his relationship with other people, and particularly between man and woman. In the human person thought of in terms of "relationality" we find a vestige of the very mystery of God, revealed in Christ as substantial unity in the communion of three divine persons. In light of this mystery we can understand well the affirmation of "Gaudium et Spes" that the human person, *"is the only creature on earth which God willed for its own sake, unable to fully realize itself except through a sincere gift of self"* (GS, 24). The diversity between man and woman recalls the necessity of interpersonal communion and the meditation on the dignity and vocation of woman strengthens the communal conception of the human being (cf "Mulieris Dignitatem", 7).

3. This communal attitude, which the feminine strongly evokes, allows us to meditate on the paternity of God, avoiding the figurative projection of the patriarchal type much contested, not without motives, by some currents of contemporary literature. What is attempted is to grasp the face of the Father from within the mystery of God as Trinity, which is perfect unity in distinction. The figure of the Father is rethought in his relation with the Son, who is oriented toward him from all eternity (cf Jn 1:1) in the communion of the Holy Spirit. It also needs to be highlighted that the Son of God was made man in the fullness of time and was born of the Virgin Mary (cf Gal 4:4), and this also sheds light on the feminine, showing in Mary the model of woman willed by God. In Her and through Her the greatest

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event in human history occurred. The paternity of God-Father is not only related to God-Son in the eternal mystery, but also to his Incarnation in the womb of a woman. If God-Father, who "generated" the Son from eternity, valued a woman enough -- Mary -- to "generate him" in the world, thus rendering her "Theotokos" -- Mother of God -- then this is not without significance in order to understand the dignity of woman in the divine project.

4. Therefore the Gospel announcement of the paternity of God, far from being limiting regarding the dignity and the role of woman, is on the contrary the guarantee of what "feminine" humanly symbolizes: acceptance, care of man, generation of life. All of which is, in fact, transcendently rooted in the mystery of the eternal divine "generation". Paternity in God is of course totally spiritual. Nevertheless, it expresses that eternal reciprocity and properly Trinitarian relationality in which every paternity and maternity originates, and in which the richness common to masculine and feminine is founded.

Reflection on the role and mission of woman is well-placed in this year dedicated to the Father, spurring us on to an even more incisive commitment, so that the full place of women in the Church and in society may be acknowledged. ZE99112420

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