

The Dignity of Woman and the Order of Love

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By Fr Pascal Corby OFM Conv.

In pursuing the theme of today's reflection – the dignity of woman and the order of love – we should first define the terms of our investigation.

The **dignity of woman** is primarily an anthropological question. It concerns what a woman is as a human person. According to Christian anthropology, it flows from her creation in the image of God.

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth’. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:26-27).

What does it mean to be created in the image of God? Of what God are we all, as human persons, an image? According to Christian revelation, God is not solitary. He is not monolithic, self-sufficient, or detached. He is a communion of Persons; He is love. In the inner life of the Blessed Trinity, revealed in Jesus Christ, God is seen as communion. And it is in the image of this God that woman, and every other human person, is created.

Drawing on this anthropological foundation, Joseph Ratzinger writes:

“The image of God means, first of all, that human beings cannot be closed in on themselves. Human beings who attempt this betray themselves. To be the image of God implies relationality. It is the dynamic that sets the human being in motion toward the totally Other. Hence it means the capacity for relationship.”

Ratzinger extends this analogy further still. Within the life of the Blessed Trinity, the Persons are defined in terms of relationship: Father, Son, Bond of Love (Holy Spirit). The Father exists as a being ‘for’ the Son. The Son exists as a being ‘from’ the Father. And the Spirit exists as a being ‘with’ both. As Ratzinger explains:

“Man, for his part, is God's image precisely insofar as the ‘from’, ‘with’, and ‘for’ constitute the fundamental anthropological pattern. Whenever there is an attempt to free ourselves from this pattern, we are not on our way to divinity, but to dehumanization, to the destruction of being itself through the destruction of the truth.”

This same truth is reflected in the second of the Genesis creation stories when we read:

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him’” (Gen 2:18).

The original experience of uniqueness (or loneliness), in which the man (Adam) is created alone from the dust of the earth, sets man apart from the rest of creation. He is not like the

rest of the animals. He finds no fulfilment in them. No personal communion exists between him and the rest of creation.

Since it is not good for man to be alone (*Gen 2:18*), God creates one who is like him; with whom he can enter into relationship. Thus, God created us in our sexual distinction. In His divine image, as a God of relation, God creates humanity as man and woman. This distinction is not arbitrary or added as a second thought, but something intrinsic to our being in the *imago Dei*. Sexual difference, manifest in the body, allows man and woman to ‘give’ themselves to one another. Through their bodies, expressive of the whole person, they form a *communion of persons*, as an image of the communion of persons in the Trinity. John Paul II calls this capacity of the body to express the communion of persons the *nuptial meaning of the body*. Human sexuality is therefore integral to the human person; it is a good “of the person,” and oriented towards the goods of communicating life and love.

The dignity of woman is therefore the dignity of man. It is the dignity of the human person, created from and for God; created from and for love.

In returning now to the topic of our investigation – the dignity of woman and the order of love – we must define what we mean by the **order of love**. The order of love concerns the vocation of the human person, created in the divine image, to image God’s love. It both flows from our creation and is the work of redeeming grace. It conforms to our ontological status as rational creatures participating in the *imago Dei*, and in our vocation to love as Christ has loved us (*Jn 13:34*). In this, the order of love incorporates both our potential and our limitations.

The order of love suggests a hierarchy of capacity. Love originates in God. He is love itself. His loving is, therefore, complete, universal, and all encompassing. By comparison, our love, as creatures, is a participation in God’s love. It is analogous, vicarious of His love. And as creatures it is also limited and particular. Realistically, we cannot love like God in His universal concern. To attempt to do so would be both impossible and blasphemous. Indeed, there is something intrinsically disordered in presuming responsibility on a global scale. For the human person cannot love universally. Our love must be rationalised and relativised, acknowledging the disparity between the infiniteness of the demands of love and the finiteness of the human subject. This is precisely what happens in the *ordo amoris* – the order of love – in which the human person’s obligation towards others is hierarchically determined according to the closeness of one’s relationship. Since human limitations dictate that giving to one corresponds to taking or withholding from another, family, friends, neighbours and fellow citizens place a deeper claim upon our time and attention than do those who are distant or unknown. Giving concrete example to this principle, German philosopher Robert Spaemann insists that in the choice between saving the life of one’s own child and the life of another, one does not hesitate in choosing the life of one’s own child.

In setting these parameters, we therefore return to our proposition and ask: what, if anything, is the unique dignity of woman within this order of love?

In his Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), Pope Saint John Paul II reflected precisely on this question. According to the saintly pontiff, the dignity and vocation of women, (while intrinsic to her creation), can only be adequately considered within the context of the vocation to holiness that is ours in Jesus Christ. Through the grace of the Incarnation, in which God has definitively united Himself to humanity, the dignity of the human condition is confirmed and elevated. In God made man, humanity is not only restored to its lost innocence, but raised to new heights. It is proved capable of God – *capax Dei*. This,

according to John Paul, is revealed in a particular way in Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5, in the figures of Bridegroom and the Bride:

*Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 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. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." **This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church;** however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband (Eph 5:21-33).*

According to John Paul, Ephesians 5 does not only offer an allegory between the relationship of Christ and the Church and that of the Bridegroom and the Bride. It "also makes reference to the institution of marriage as recorded in the Book of Genesis (cf. 2:24). This passage connects the truth about marriage as a primordial sacrament with the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God." He then specifically applies this to the dignity of woman:

"The significant comparison in the Letter to the Ephesians gives perfect clarity to *what is decisive for the dignity of women both in the eyes of God - the Creator and Redeemer - and in the eyes of human beings - men and women.* In God's eternal plan, woman is the one in whom the order of love in the created world of persons takes first root."

Just as God's love exists within a communion of Persons, so the love of God implanted in us as created in His image and likeness, is first realised with the creation of woman. In confronting her, man (for the first time) beholds a subject to love. Put more eloquently in the words of John Paul:

"The calling of woman into existence at man's side as 'a helper fit for him' (Gen 2:18) in the 'unity of the two', provides the visible world of creatures with particular conditions so that 'the love of God may be poured into the hearts' of the beings created in his image. The Bridegroom is the one who loves. The Bride is loved: *it is she who receives love, in order to love in return.*"

This, suggests John Paul, reveals the essential dignity and vocation of woman: "*the dignity of women is measured by the order of love*", which ultimately, in the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar, is the only thing credible to man.

But John Paul also qualifies this place of woman within the order of love. He writes:

"When we say that the woman is the one who receives love in order to love in return, this refers not only or above all to the specific spousal relationship of

marriage. It means something more universal, based on the very fact of her being a woman within all the interpersonal relationships which, in the most varied ways, shape society and structure the interaction between all persons.”

While the essence of woman as loved is grounded in spousal imagery, the vocation of woman is not limited to marriage. Indeed, in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II offers two dimensions of a woman’s vocation: virginity and motherhood. Both these dimensions “acquire their full meaning and value in the unique figure of Mary, who as a Virgin became the Mother of the Son of God. These two dimensions of the female vocation were united in her in an exceptional manner, in such a way that one did not exclude the other but wonderfully complemented it.”

In his letter to Women (1995), John Paul again presented the figure of the Blessed Virgin as a model for the dignity of women, this time expressed in terms of what he called the “feminine genius”:

“The Church sees in Mary the highest expression of the “feminine genius” and she finds in her a source of constant inspiration. Mary called herself the “handmaid of the Lord” (Lk 1:38). Through obedience to the Word of God she accepted her lofty yet not easy vocation as wife and mother in the family of Nazareth. Putting herself at God’s service, she also put herself at the service of others: a service of love.”

In setting before us the example of Mary of Nazareth, we come to realise that genius is not determined by doing great things – of power and influence. In the lowly handmaid of the Lord, the feminine genius is characterised by service, by receptivity and by obedience. Again, it is the logic of love. It is the logic of knowing that one is loved, and of being capable of loving in return.

In the figure of Our Lady we perceive a type of the Church – the Bride who is espoused to Christ. The Church is essentially feminine. It is the object of Christ’s love, sanctified by His Precious Blood. The Church learns how to be Bride from Mary, and by extension, from the witness and vocation of women. Some years ago I gave a talk on the feminine genius of the Servant of God, Sr Mary Glowrey of the Sacred Heart. In it I briefly reflected on this feminine posturing of the Church, and how too often we are blinded to the true nature of the Church as it relates to Christ. Sin blinds us to the nuptial bond between Christ and the Church; it threatens the feminine image of the Church. I think that Christopher West puts it well when he says:

“Because of Satan’s deception, we have come to see God’s ‘masculine-bridegroom’ initiative as that of a tyrant with a will-to-rule over us. Hence, we reject our posture of receptivity as ‘feminine-bride’ in favour of being our own ‘masculine’ lords. We want to be ‘like God’ but without God. In this situation, we come to see the ‘feminine’ – which symbolises our true humanity – as a weakness to be dominated and controlled, even snuffed out. Does this not explain, perhaps, why there has been a tendency to favour ‘masculinity’ over ‘femininity’ throughout history?”

Because of this forgetfulness, this tendency to reject the feminine throughout history and even in our own time, we need more urgently the prophetic genius of women to remind us of

our true human dignity as we stand before God. As John Paul suggests, the dignity of woman in the order of love is prophetic of who we all are before Christ. For the analogy of the Bridegroom and the Bride speaks of the love with which every human being - man and woman - is loved by God in Christ.

As John Paul relates, this posturing of the Church before Christ is reflected in the particular dignity and vocation of woman. Through the vocation of virginity, woman recognises her dignity as *she who receives love*. She receives it from the source of love itself, in which she is prophetically espoused to Christ. Like Mary of Bethany, who sat at the feet of the Lord, she lives by divine love. And this love, like the Virgin Mary who is her prototype, becomes fruitful in making a gift of herself to the world.

Motherhood embodies the order of love in another way. The mother too is one who receives love, which becomes flesh in her womb. But while the vocation to virginity might be seen as exemplifying the receptivity of love, motherhood finds its particular dignity in giving. As John Paul writes: "Motherhood implies from the beginning a special openness to the new person: and this is precisely the woman's 'part'. In this openness, in conceiving and giving birth to a child, the woman 'discovers herself through a sincere gift of self'."

In motherhood, the woman spends herself in love.

"Although both [man and woman] are parents of their child, *the woman's motherhood constitutes a special 'part' in this shared parenthood*, and the most demanding part. Parenthood – even though it belongs to both – is realized much more fully in the woman, especially in the prenatal period. It is the woman who 'pays' directly for this shared generation, which literally absorbs the energies of her body and soul."

Through this unique communion with the mystery of life, the vocation of motherhood is, therefore, marked by a particular openness to others. As John Paul writes:

"This unique contact with the new human being developing within her gives rise to an attitude towards human beings – not only towards her own child, but every human being – which profoundly marks the woman's personality. It is commonly thought that *women* are more capable than men of paying attention to *another person*, and that motherhood develops this predisposition even more. The man –even with all his sharing in parenthood –always remains 'outside'" the process of pregnancy and the baby's birth; in many ways he has to *learn* his own 'fatherhood' from the mother. ... the mother's contribution is decisive in laying the foundation for a new human personality."

In conclusion, I shamelessly paraphrase the words of Pope Saint John Paul II at the end of *Mulieris Dignitatem* – in giving thanks for each and every woman: for mothers, for sisters, for wives; for women consecrated to God in virginity; for women dedicated to the service of others, who work professionally, and who at times are burdened by a great social responsibility – for all women as they have come forth from the heart of God in all the beauty and richness of their femininity.

The Church gives thanks for all the manifestations of the feminine 'genius' which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations; she gives thanks for all the charisms which the Holy Spirit distributes to women in the history of the

People of God, for all the victories which she owes to their faith, hope and charity: she gives thanks for all the fruits of feminine holiness.

The Church asks at the same time that these invaluable ‘manifestations of the Spirit’ (cf. *1 Cor* 12:4ff.), which with great generosity are poured forth upon the ‘daughters’ of the eternal Jerusalem, may be attentively recognized and appreciated so that they may return for the common good of the Church and of humanity, especially in our times. Meditating on the biblical mystery of the ‘woman’, the Church prays that in this mystery all women may discover themselves and their ‘supreme vocation’.

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