

The Dignity and Vocation of Women

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ~ Galatians 3:28

THERE IS a common misperception in our society that the Church is, and always has been, “anti-woman,” from St. Paul writing that women should keep quiet in worship to the Church’s prohibition of contraception and of ordaining women to the ministerial priesthood, to name just a few. Yet the reality of the Church’s teachings on women, and how she views and has treated women, is very nearly the opposite of conclusions drawn from a superficial understanding of the foregoing examples. The truth of her teaching is beautiful, inspiring, and demanding, as are all of the truths of God’s Revelation.

Equality from the Beginning

The Church teaches that “man and woman have been created, which is to say, willed by God: one the one hand, in perfect equality as human persons; on the other, in their respective beings as man and woman” (CCC 369; italics in original). This teaching has its origin in the earliest days of creation in the Garden of Eden when we are told in Sacred Scripture that, upon seeing Eve for the first time, Adam exclaimed, “*This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh*” (Gn 2:23). In her, he recognized himself, unlike what he saw in any of the other creatures the Lord had already shown him in the Garden (see Gn 2:19-20). Eve was *like* him; she was for him: “*It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him*” (Gn 2:18). The Church teaches that “[t]he woman, ‘flesh of his flesh,’ his equal, his nearest in all things, is given to him by God as a ‘help-mate’; she thus *represents God from whom comes our help*” (CCC 1605; italics added).

One of the most devastating results of the fall of Adam and Eve was the rupture of their “original unity.” When God asks them about their sin, there is re-



crimination; Adam immediately blames Eve (see Gn 3:12). We continue to live with the consequences of this ruined relationship in every age and in every society. It is within this context that Jesus came, and changed everything.

Jesus and Women

One of the most compelling aspects of salvation history is that, while all previous covenants were between God and men (Adam, Moses, Abraham, Moses, David), his final and eternal covenant, of his own flesh and blood in the Eucharist, began with a woman, Mary, saying “yes” to God’s plan for her life (see Lk 1:38). Aside from Jesus himself, the person held in most reverence by the Church is his mother Mary. Notably, she lived in virtually every state of life, as virgin, spouse to the Holy Spirit (today we call women called to this way of life nuns or sisters), mother, earthly wife to St. Joseph, and widow, eventually living in the care of one of her Son’s disciples, not even her own kin. The Blessed Virgin Mary is viewed by the Church as the pinnacle of humanity, the one on whom the Lord poured out “grace without measure” (St. Anthony of the Desert, Letter V), the model of holiness for all men as well as all women.

There are numerous stories in the Gospels of the remarkable way in which Jesus treated women. We see his revelation of himself to a woman he encountered at a well (see Jn 4:25-26), his mercy to a woman caught in adultery (see Jn 8:2-11) and to a woman who “crashed” a dinner party so that she might repent of her sins at Jesus’ feet (see Lk 7:36-50), and his compassion to a widow whose only son he raised from the dead (see Lk 7:11-15). His friend St. Martha was one of his few disciples who openly confessed Jesus as the Messiah (see Jn 11:25-27). He defended Martha’s sister St. Mary when she sat

at his feet to hear his teaching (see Lk 10:38-42), and again when she anointed him before his death with costly ointment (see Jn 12:1-7). He appeared first after his Resurrection to St. Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons (see Mk 16:9), making her the “apostle to the apostles” and the “herald of the Resurrection.”

The Early Church and Women

From the Church’s beginning, both men and women were baptized (see Acts 8:12) by the leaders of a Church for whom, as Jews, circumcision had been the rite of entry into the religious community, a rite necessarily limited only to males. Throughout the book of Acts and in St. Paul’s letters, women feature prominently. St. Paul had many women friends and fellow-ministers (see, for example, Rom 16:1; Phil 4:3), and he taught that there was equal dignity among all members of the Church, regardless of nationality, legal status, or sex (see verse at beginning).

St. Paul taught extensively on the subject of marriage. For example, he wrote to the Corinthian community that there is to be mutuality in the sexual relationship in a marriage: *“The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does”* (1 Cor 7:3-4). He saw the relationship between husband and wife as a relationship built on the way Christian marriage images the relationship between Christ, the Bridegroom, and his Bride, the Church. Thus, St. Paul wrote to wives: *“As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands”* (Eph 5:24), because they image the Church’s love and obedience towards Christ. To husbands he wrote: *“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church*

and gave himself up for her, so that he might sanctify her” (Eph 5:25-26; see also Col 3:18-19). Husbands are to be subject to their wives by imitating Christ, who humbly and freely gave his very life for the Church. This produces a mutual subjection: *“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ”* (Eph 5:21). Each spouse is truly subject to one another, although the expression of that submission differs: the wife holds a certain primacy in love, and the husband holds a certain primacy in authority. Husband and wife face their challenges and decisions together, each respecting

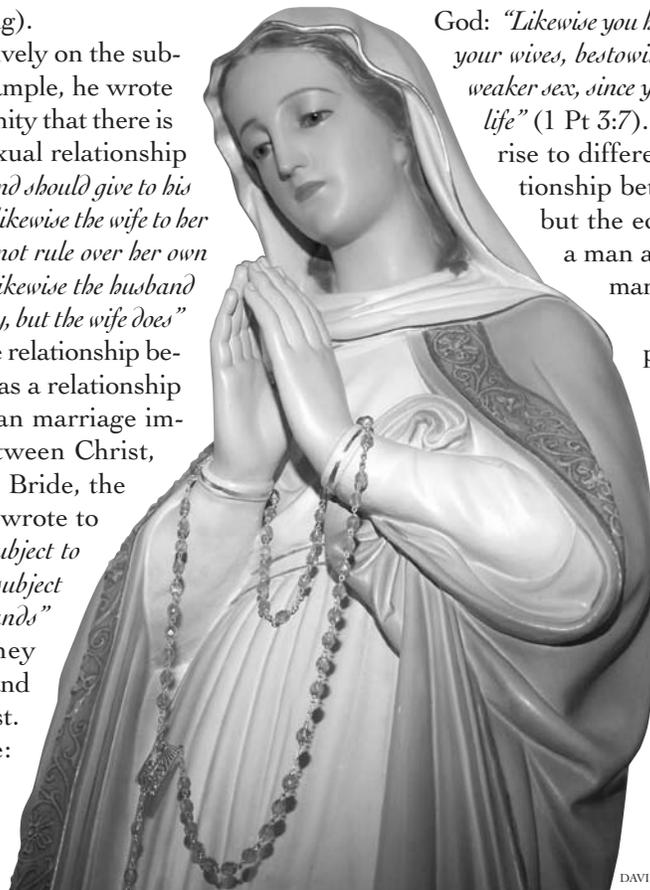
the other’s dignity and role in their marriage, each giving themselves totally to the other (see handout on Marriage, Sexuality, and Contraception). St. Paul also taught strongly against marital separation and divorce and held up the ideal of the mutual consecration of each spouse by the other (see 1 Cor 7:10-14). St. Peter, in his first letter, reinforced this message in a passage that also restates the equal dignity of both spouses before

God: *“Likewise you husbands, live considerately with your wives, bestowing honor on the woman as the weaker sex, since you are joint heirs of the grace of life”* (1 Pt 3:7). Various cultures may give rise to different expressions of the relationship between a husband and wife, but the equality that exists between a man and a woman in a Christian marriage does not change.

But how are we to interpret passages in the letters of St. Paul that seem to demean women or give them an inferior place? The most important thing to realize is that St. Paul is dealing principally with decorum and is encouraging behavior that will not scandalize those who were looking critically at Christianity,

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the upstart new “sect” that was taking the Roman Empire by storm. In a lengthy admonition, St. Paul wrote: *“But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God. Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonors her head it is the same as if her head were shaven. For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to be shorn or shaven, let her wear a veil. For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. (For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.) That is why a woman ought to have a veil on her head, because of the angels. (Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.) Judge for yourselves; is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that for a man to wear long hair is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair; it is her pride? For her hair is given to her for a covering. If any one is disposed to be contentious, we recognize no other practice, nor do the churches of God”* (1 Cor 11:3-16). While to our modern ears this sounds as though Sacred Scripture is teaching a demeaning view of women, the following seems clear: First, for both sexes, there was a cultural decorum whose violation scandalized observers. Even today, most of us would at least be tempted to admonish a man or boy who failed to remove his hat in church, so strong is the cultural acceptance of this idea. And even today, some people regard men who wear their hair long as rebelling against the culture. Attitudes about head covering and hair are very persistent, and they apply equally, but in different ways, to men and women. We would have to regard St. Paul’s views as demeaning to women only if they are also demeaning to men. Second, he is reminding us of a theological truth, that woman was created as a helper to man. Just so we understand God’s viewpoint on whether being a helper

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is degrading, we should recall Jesus’ actions on the night before he died. He, the God-man, washed the feet of his apostles, in this way showing them that they must always be at the service of others (see Jn 13:3-16). Third, St. Paul expects that both men and women will pray and prophesy. The roles do not differ, only the outward expression of these roles in conformity with the expectations of the society that the Church was evangelizing.

Later in the same letter, St. Paul wrote: *“As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church”*

(1 Cor 14:33-35). This, too, appears to be an issue of decorum for a community known for its turbulence. St. Paul is discussing “speaking in tongues,” which evidently had gotten out of hand, scandalizing unbelievers. While we can’t know the complete reason for St. Paul’s admonition, it was perhaps more practical for him to begin settling the community down by asking its women to back off, for it was likely they, not their husbands, who had first converted to Christianity, and were thus more solid in their faith and did not need to “display” zeal as much as did their husbands.

Finally there is this well-known passage: *“I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling; also that women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion. Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty”* (1 Tm 2:8-15). Again, St. Paul is saying several things. First, he is admonishing men and women not to engage in the unseemly behavior that seems most characteristic of



each sex, at least as he had experienced it: the men jostling for primacy and the women “dressed to kill.” These are recognizable behaviors in our own society, and needed to be suppressed then as now. Second, St. Paul is forming his disciple St. Timothy in how to conduct worship. It should not be forgotten that Christianity began in the midst of many religions, some of which had women priestesses and “sacred” prostitutes. The Church needed to ensure that women behaved with dignity and that the male priesthood founded by Christ (see handout on Women and the Priesthood) not be confused with the priesthood of other religions. Third, St. Paul sees in the fall of Adam and Eve a transgression of the created order — Eve, in effect, took it upon herself to make a decision that was not hers alone to make. Last, St. Paul sees the vocation of motherhood as the usual path to sanctity for women, which indeed it has been in all ages. Only those who themselves disdain motherhood (and fatherhood) will perceive this path to holiness as inferior.

Just as St. Paul accepted slavery (see, for example, Col 3:22; Ti 2:9-10), he accepted the customs of his day regarding women. For him, as for the Church ever since, the way to revolutionize human society and achieve justice is to constantly and steadfastly preach the sublime and equal dignity of all (see Phlm vv 15-17). The Church changes the world by converting hearts.

Women and the Church after the Age of the Apostles

From the close of the age of the apostles until now, we can see the Church defending women. She condemned fornication, promiscuity, adultery, divorce, incest, polygamy, prostitution, and homosexuality. She discouraged early marriage for girls (marriage

at twelve was common). She forbade abortion and infanticide (which was especially common for girl infants). She taught a high view of the dignity of marriage and the blessings of children, and honored women who took vows of virginity and thereby asserted their personhood against their fathers. Her message of the equality of men and women before God, and of the equality of personhood and dignity between women and men, resonated with the women of the Roman Empire in the first few centuries of Christianity, and they responded in great numbers to Christianity, evangelizing their pagan husbands. Over the centuries, the Church worked to equalize the treatment of women in civil law and culture as well as within the Church. Once a formalized system of communal religious life was institutionalized in the sixth century, women as well as men sought out this way of dedicating their lives completely to their Lord, and women as well as men were accorded great power in their communities by the Church. For nearly a millennium, women had far more rights in civil law and society in the culture created by the Church than they have had in the most recent few hundred years, until the late twentieth century when women regained much lost ground in civil law.

Yet the Church does not subscribe to the agenda of those who believe that equality means ignoring the differences with which God endowed us. She has never taught that men and women are the same, but that “in virtue of their rebirth in Christ there exists among all the Christian faithful a true equality with regard to dignity and the activity whereby all cooperate in the building up of the Body of Christ in accord with each one’s own condition and function” (CCC 872). Therefore, men and women are called to discover their true selves by what Pope John Paul II called a “sincere gift of self.” *The more we give ourselves away for the Kingdom of God, the more we find ourselves* (see Lk 17:33). Our model is Christ, who completely laid down all that he was — his pride, his power, his friends, his mother, his followers, and even his life — so that we might someday live forever with him in heaven. He completely emptied himself for the good of everyone else and, in that action, most fully exemplified the glory of God (see Phil 2:5-11). He is the one whom all are called to imitate. This “gift of self” is the fundamental attitude with which the Christian must approach the world — not looking for how much power, fame, or wealth can be attained, but by how much we can be of service to build up the Body of Christ and transform the world by the use of our God-given talents and gifts.

The Vocation of the Laity

Lay people, those who are neither ordained nor take religious vows, are called to redeem the world in the daily details of their lives. “By reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will.... It pertains to them in a special way so to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are closely associated that these may always be effected and grow according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer” (CCC 898; see handout on The Priesthood of the Faithful). Most often, men and women are called to live in marriage and to make a sincere gift of themselves to their spouses and to the children sent to them by God.

In bearing and raising children, women with their unique anatomy, physiology, and psychology — all gifts of God our Creator—take the lead in the practice of self-donation by being open to all the demands of pregnancy and the raising of children that men cannot experience. During pregnancy, a mother lays down her life for the child within her. Throughout the infancy and early years of each of her children, a mother continues this self-donation, especially in meeting the needs of her baby to be held and to be nourished from her own body.

Our culture often scorns motherhood, seeing pregnancy as the involuntary nurturing of an “interloper,” thinking that the work of raising children is demeaning, and believing that these endeavors are the surest path to an unhappy, unfulfilled life. Yet God has given women, not men, the immense gift to be the first and most profound witnesses to their children of the great joy to be found in making a sincere gift of oneself for the good of another. It could be said that women change the world “one diaper at a time.” By making a sincere gift of herself and joyfully tending to her children’s needs, a mother forms not only herself but each of her children into an image of Christ. For example, breast-feeding is a mother’s first opportunity to teach her children about Jesus’ giving us his body and blood for food in the Eucharist, out of his love for us. Parenting in this way produces the next generation of holy men and women, who will continue to redeem the world one day at a time, one diaper at a time, one scraped knee at a time, one relationship at a time, so that “the laity consecrate the world itself to God, everywhere offering worship by the holiness of their lives” (CCC 901). The Church, dispenser of graces and the spiritual nourishment of the Eucharist, refers to herself

as “Holy Mother Church,” forever emphasizing the immense dignity of human motherhood.

Some Christian women are called not to the vocation of marriage and motherhood, but instead to virginity and a more complete service to God alone. Within the call to virginity, women are called to “be fruitful and multiply” spiritually through the power of the Holy Spirit within them. This call to virginity can be either as a single person in the world or as one who “profess[es] virginity or consecrated celibacy which enables them to give themselves to God alone with an undivided heart in a remarkable manner” (CCC 2349). In the Church’s teaching, “virginity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is an unfolding of baptismal grace, a powerful sign of the supremacy of the bond with Christ and of the ardent expectation of his return” (CCC 1619) (see handout on The Consecrated Life: Living Vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience).



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The vocation to holiness is the call from our Lord from the moment of our conception. The Church considers our specific careers and accomplishments merely as the fruits of vocation, when rightly pursued. Equality before God does not mean sameness, for the rich diversity of human gifts is necessary to build up God’s kingdom in this world and in the next (see 1 Cor 12:4-6). The vocation of women, as wives and mothers, as single women in the world, or as consecrated virgins, is as essential to the Church’s mission and holiness as the vocation of men as husbands and fathers, as single men in the world, or in religious life and as ordained priests. What is not variable is that, regardless of our sex, we are called to holiness.

(CCC 355, 369, 372, 400, 872, 898-902, 922-925, 931-932, 971, 1603-1605, 1618-1619, 1655-1658, 1888-1889, 1934, 2040, 2331, 2334-2335)