

Contemporary Catholicism on Femininity: An Appreciation

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In a frank reflection Joanna Bogle, writer and journalist, helpfully offers a short case study concerning the necessary interaction of Catholic tradition and contemporary culture.

The arrival in the Church of new groups of Anglicans, whose journey to Rome was begun by the decision of the Church of England to ordain women, has thrown a new spotlight on the whole topic of the Church and women. "They think we're all misogynists" sighed one of the group heading for the Ordinariate, who had had spiteful - there is no other word for it - letters and messages from those opposed to his decision.

Easy to brush it off, or to say it doesn't matter. But it does. There are a good many people who, without really thinking about it, are convinced that the Catholic Church is "against women", that it oppresses women and that intelligent RC females somehow manage to steel themselves against this and cope by denying a reality all too evident to everyone else.

For some years now, I've been grappling with this. At first, the issues seemed simple - hard-line feminists eager to promote abortion as "a woman's right to choose" who saw the Catholic Church as the Number One Enemy, and then, alongside, tiresome women within the Church who offered spurious, and often downright silly, tirades on the priesthood, or invented self-pitying quasi-liturgical rituals to demonstrate women's empowerment in the face of male oppression. It was fairly easy – and rather fun – to ridicule these last, and I had a very enjoyable time in the 1990s when a group called the "Catholic Women's Network" fell for a spoof which I wrote about a group of well-to-do ladies sitting round a swimming pool with wine and salads bemoaning their lot and denouncing the Church's teachings on marriage and sexual morality.

At the same time, it was clear that, for all their wrong-headed and occasionally malicious attacks on the Church, these ladies were giving voice to something which was also generally felt within society and particularly by younger women who knew nothing of the Network or its antics but who were not comfortable with answering the Church's critics. These younger women, including Catholics - born post-Vatican II by a good many years, and growing up in a society which sets much store by "equality" and assumes a high level of independence and assertiveness on the part of its young - were not to be placated by 19th century images of saints, by bland claims that "the Bible says women should just keep quiet and obey their husbands" or by coy

assertions that feminine wiles and feminine charm would ensure that they would find ways to cope with any unpleasantness that came their way.

I came to see, and to say, in debates and discussions on this subject, that the feminists, and those who gave them a measure of support, were raising some good questions but coming up with the wrong answers. The Church too, I note, tends to take this line, and is right to do so. No sane mother fails to listen to her daughters. What emerges as a crude and insolent expression of anger may actually include some genuine questions that need real answers, and possibly even some genuine grievances distorted or enlarged by ignorance and prejudice. Mothers need to be good listeners.

After all, shorn of its insolence, the question "Why can't women be priests?" is a good one, and indeed productive of some useful teaching on the nature of the priesthood and of the Church, of Christ as Bridegroom and the Church as Bride, and of a greater meaning in all this than we had perhaps realised. The Church has some crucial insights here, and it seems likely that they will be explored and presented in greater depth and with greater understanding as the years go by. The whole history of the Church shows us that teaching is developed and deepened in response to heresy. Developed - not changed. The differences between men and women, and the part these play in God's plan and purposes, are greater and more significant than we had perhaps hitherto supposed. As the Church explores this, our understanding of the significance of a male priesthood is likely to grow. In doing so it will give us a greater understanding of the dignity and importance of both men and women, bringing insights into all sorts of aspects of the Mass (its nuptial meaning, its unity with the Marriage Feast of the Lamb in Heaven) and much more.

Role Models

And this discussion takes place in a culture in which the Church honours the role and achievements of women: in the recent past we have perhaps too often simply taken for granted the women saints, but it's time to take a good look at the great range of them. There they are, from the very earliest days - greeting the risen Lord in the Garden, suffering death in Rome's Colosseum rather than deny their faith in him, giving themselves in service to the Church and to the poor and sick and lonely and imprisoned. As mystics and missionaries, heroic martyrs and courageous founders of religious orders, in public life as sovereigns or in quiet service in convent or school, the Church's women saints are testimony to the fact that Mother Church takes legitimate pride in her daughters. And, no, she doesn't think that they are of less worth than her sons. She sees and rejoices in the complementarity of the two sexes, knowing - and teaching - that this is part of God's plan, not to be downplayed or ignored, much less regarded as a nuisance.

We should therefore approach the "women thing" with some confidence, with good humour and goodwill. It doesn't get us anywhere merely to sneer: the young man who

denounced the ageing and muddled ladies of a rather sentimental group – whom he had never met – as "feminiNazis" had hoped to raise bellows of raucous laughter from his young hearers but was greeted with silence. It won't do just to produce insults. This merely gives younger women a sense that the Church doesn't have any answers. But she does have answers and we must listen to them, develop them, teach them, explore them, taking them into the places where a confused generation is looking for insights in what life is all about and why we're all here, and how we can work together.

Social Advances

We do need to see things in the perspective of our times. The present Pope, and Pope John Paul II, both brought real insights into this discussion. For the first time in modern history, we have had Popes who as young priests met and worked with women at university as a matter of course and on ordinary terms. They saw nothing strange or unusual in tackling academic subjects with women, talking through large topics, assuming academic standards. They worked with women who expected to take degrees and go on to professional jobs of all kinds, or to have doctorates or professorships, or to write and publish on a range of subjects, or to hold public offices. And the tragic circumstances of post-war Poland – and of post-war and bombed-out Germany – meant that contacts and relationships which might previously have been formal and remote were rather different.

More importantly, there was a common recognition within society – the more significant because it all felt easy and natural – that women playing a full role in academic and professional life was something that had been long overdue and was here to stay, and that the Church should be entirely at ease with that. So when the Second Vatican Council said that "The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved" it was saying something that everyone could see was true, and had important implications. And it went on: "That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling".[\[1\]](#)

Throughout the 1960s and 70s and 80s of the 20th century, the Church was – slowly – grasping the reality of the situation. Sometimes the period of reflection preceding a magisterial response to new ideas can seem unfortunately extended. Paradoxically insights into the dignity of women in our civilisation flowed from the fact that it was a Christian civilisation imbued with a recognition of the dignity of the human person.

A parallel can be made with other social changes. In the 1820s and 30s, industrialisation took root in the scientifically and politically advanced Christian

lands of Europe and North America, and the faces of many cities changed dramatically. People flocked from the countryside, and the old patterns of life – farming communities centred on a village with its church – vanished for many people as they made their homes in crowded city dwellings and worked in factories. This continued throughout the 1840s, 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. Finally, in 1893 – at the very end of the century, and when two or three generations had lived their lives in the industrialised world – the Church under Leo XIII produced a document exploring the social and financial implications of it all and giving some guidance. The document was *Rerum Novarum*, "Of new things". Well, hardly very new by then. But the document did offer magisterial insights and wisdom.

Magisterium

So with the changing roles of women. The 1970s saw developments. Pope Paul VI declared Catherine of Siena to be a Doctor of the Church, and he hinted that there was much more to be done here, and that new things would be happening over the next years: "it is evident that women are meant to form part of the living and working structure of Christianity in so prominent a manner that perhaps not all their potentialities have yet been made clear". Indeed. And the Church in the 20th century hadn't always got its language and style right: *Casti Connubii* in the 1930s says wise and true things about marriage and family life, but didn't somehow quite manage to tackle the emerging questions being raised by women as educational opportunities for them expanded and new responsibilities came their way in public, commercial, and professional life.

It fell to others – notably, in the 1930s, Edith Stein, later St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross – to explore this new territory of women's education and its implications at a spiritual and cultural level. And – partly under the influence of her writing – a Pope in the 1980s began to say fresh and interesting things about women, answering some of the challenges posed by feminists and adding a large and interesting perspective.

Clearly, the role of Mary is central in any Christian discussion about women, and Pope John Paul brought this out in his letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*:

"Thus the 'fullness of time' manifests the extraordinary dignity of the 'woman'. On the one hand, this dignity consists *in the supernatural elevation to union with God* in Jesus Christ, which determines the ultimate finality of the existence of every person both on earth and in eternity. From this point of view, the 'woman' is the representative and the archetype of the whole human race: she *represents the humanity* which belongs to all human beings, both men and women. On the other hand, however, the event at Nazareth highlights a form of union with the living God which can *only belong to the 'woman'*, Mary: *the union between mother and son*. The Virgin of Nazareth truly becomes the Mother of God."[2]

The Church has always honoured Mary, always seen her role as crucial – and in doing so has found her a sure anchor in holding fast to truths that need to be taught with clarity. When the Church at the Council of Chalcedon needed to affirm the full divinity and full humanity of Christ it was through expounding the teaching that Mary, his Mother, was fully *theotokos*, God-bearer, truly Mother of God, that this was done. Mary is the key. And "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."^[3]

Modern Pressures

Today's young Catholics face many pressures. Most young practising Catholic women definitely want to marry. How to find a suitable spouse? How to affirm chastity without seeming to be a prig? How to communicate a sense of shared values in a culture so often very much opposed to all that is dignified and truly human in our deepest relationships?

Girls are also trained to think of careers. The whole vast range of jobs and professions is there for them to consider, and throughout their secondary education they are being urged to look at all of the options available. A young Catholic should be aware that each person has a mission in life and should fulfil it, and that true fulfilment involves looking at the whole of life's responsibilities – home and family and community as well as just work. John Henry Newman was writing for all the men and women of the Church when he wrote "God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission: I may never know it in this life but I shall be told it in the next..."

Endless talk of "choices" can itself be confusing and worrying – for both men and women alike – and a real difficulty for young people in the West today is that of making a definite commitment: to a job, to a way of life, and, very notably, to marriage. There is talk of "commitment-phobia", and it is something of which girls often accuse young men – although the female sex is hardly immune. It affects even quite small things such as social events ("I might go to Sue's party – not sure. I'll let you know..." The facebook/twitter/mobile phone culture of course feeds into this with its possibilities for endless changes of plan).

The Church needs to offer not only sound doctrine and moral teachings – on marriage, on priesthood, on male/female relationships – but also inspiration and guidance. Most young people do know that the Church teaches, for example, that abortion is wrong (sometimes it's about the only thing they do know about the Catholic Church!), but they have only very hazy ideas about what the Church really

says on human dignity, the value of each one of us, the beauty of human love, the value of authentic family life, the mutual companionship of men and women. There is a tendency to assume that the Church is out of touch and out of date, that it doesn't recognise the realities of modern life.

Understanding the Church's Teaching

We need to be informed, and to offer the true message of the Church when challenged. It really won't do to offer – as happened at a church in the USA attended by a friend – leaflets urging women to "be veiled" at Mass as a sign, apparently, of submission to male authority (surely a very odd reason to give for putting on a hat?). It won't do to invent a panicky post-feminist theology on muddled foundations.

And it is no use quoting St. Paul on women speaking in Church as the reason for a male priesthood. The Church specifically doesn't use this as a proof-text on ordination. The issue here is priesthood, and the specific bond between Christ and his Apostles. You can't duck this, and if you have an inadequate theology of priesthood you will run up a good many blind alleys. Women can certainly be teachers, and millions have given excellent service to the Church and to society in this capacity. They can speak up in church too – most parish Rosary groups are led by women. They can organise and run Catholic organisations, launch new ones, take initiatives and chivvy the clergy into action where necessary – was it not Mary Magdalen who ran to tell the Apostles about the Resurrection?

Pope John Paul gave real and useful guidance in *Mulieris Dignitatem*. He spoke of the "genius" of women, of the special gifts they bring, of their necessary skills in "humanising" modern society, in reminding people of their true worth. In a powerful climax to the document, he gave public thanks to women, hinting that perhaps this was slightly overdue from the Church, that it came from the heart, and that it carried a genuine desire to ensure that women should not be slighted or marginalised within the Church or by Christians in everyday life:

"Therefore *the Church gives thanks for each and every woman*: for mothers, for sisters, for wives; for women consecrated to God in virginity; for women dedicated to the many human beings who await the gratuitous love of another person; for women who watch over the human persons in the family, which is the fundamental sign of the human community; for women who work professionally, and who at times are burdened by a great social responsibility; for '*perfect*' women and for '*weak*' women - for all women as they have come forth from the heart of God in all the beauty and richness of their femininity; as they have been embraced by his eternal love; as, together with men, they are pilgrims on this earth, which is the temporal '*homeland*' of all people and is transformed sometimes into a '*valley of tears*'; as they assume, together with

men, *a common responsibility for the destiny of humanity* according to daily necessities and according to that definitive destiny which the human family has in God himself, in the bosom of the ineffable Trinity."[4]

And this means that the Church defends women – their rights, their dignity, and their specific needs, including those relating to the indispensable role of motherhood.

Motherhood is so important that the Church can never see it as just an optional extra, a biological experience, a burden or a hobby. A mother has a particular dignity of her own, a particular status, extraordinary responsibilities, the greatest of joys. To be a mother is one of the most basic and natural of longings, and it is a terrible distortion of reality to see it as merely a lifestyle choice.

Pope Benedict has spoken of this and followed up with practical and assertive statements emphasising the real needs and aspirations of today's young men and women. He spoke rather movingly to a major gathering of municipal leaders in Italy about the importance of allowing people to have a family life, and of the sadness caused when economic and social factors block this: "The desire for fatherhood and motherhood is engraved in the human heart. Many couples would like to welcome the gift of new children but are compelled to wait. It is therefore necessary to give motherhood concrete support as well as to guarantee women with a profession the possibility to reconcile family and work."[5]

The Church, in speaking about women, still has lots more to say. The whole understanding of the role of Mary, the understanding of Christ's relationship with his Church as that of Bridegroom and Bride, and the understanding of men and women as a gift to one another – all this is crucial.

Back in 2004 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith brought out the importance of St. Paul to this theme:

"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."[6]

Charity and Trust

We don't need to be afraid: people are genuinely seeking answers to the puzzle that is humankind, and we have so much that is glorious and precious to present and to

teach. And people need a practical and honest vision which can be offered as a realistic way ahead, devoid of angry rhetoric: "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".^[7]

So it is also relevant that men face specific problems today: they can be denied their true role as fathers through unjust divorce laws; boys and young men grow up without good role models; fatherhood and manliness are often denigrated; and men are often depicted as fools or buffoons in the media in ways that would be unacceptable in portraying women. Unsurprisingly, some react to all this by being rude about women.

Debates and discussions about all of this are not always going to go smoothly. But the rule of kindness and courtesy – not always afforded to the Church by her enemies, but always incumbent upon her to observe in both internal and external debates – still holds. Pope Benedict reminded us of this just recently, speaking of St. Peter Canisius, a great preacher and teacher at the time of the Reformation: "In a historical period marked by strong confessional tensions, he avoided – and this is something extraordinary – he avoided giving into disrespect and angry rhetoric. This was rare at that time of disputes between Christians." A message for us all there.

[1] Vatican II: Closing Message.

[2] Apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the occasion of the Marian Year. John Paul II 1988.

[3] *Letter to the Bishops of the World on the Collaboration of men and women in the Church and in the World*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2004.

[4] Apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the occasion of the Marian Year. John Paul II 1988.

[5] Pope Benedict XVI, address to the Administrators of Lazio Regions and Municipality of Rome, January 2010.

[6] *Letter to the Bishops of the world on the collaboration of men and women in the Church and in the World*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2004.

[7] Ibid.