

What have the popes said about women, for heaven's sake?

Richard Leonard

SOME YEARS AGO, when I told a friend of mine that I was doing graduate research for a thesis on what popes had said about women over the last century, she replied, 'That will be a slim volume of bad news'. I think it is very difficult for men in the Church to appreciate fully just how much some women have suffered, and continue to suffer, as a result of various declarations from the Vatican.

That being said, recent commentaries on Vatican teaching about women's vocation and dignity are not as strong as they could be because they lack an appreciation of the context from which the Vatican speaks. With over sixty statements to, or about, women in the last century, papal teaching is not as slim a corpus of work as my friend imagined and not all of it has been bad news. In fact, as I will now briefly chart, there have been significant developments.

The popes speak to their 'beloved daughters'

Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* taught that although people have different gifts and talents, God has granted to each woman and man equal dignity and this must be respected (section 26). Leo argues that *all* people have a right to participate in society (71). He saw women's participation, however, in terms of the home: 'a woman is by nature fitted for home-work, and it is that which is best adapted at once to preserve her modesty and to promote the good bringing up of children and the well being of the family'.¹

Pius X 'spoke rarely on social problems and made little original contribution when he did'.² In the only recorded speech this pope made about women he said, 'There is much to admire in the feminist desire to elevate women intellectually and socially, but the Lord protect us from political feminism'.³

In their mariological teaching, Leo XIII and Pius X both held Mary as a model for all believers. In 1904, Pius summed up the piety of the age in *Ad diem illum*: 'Such was Mary . . . that her life is an example for all . . . Have then before your eyes, as an image,

the virginity and life of Mary from whom as from a mirror shines forth the brightness of chastity and the form of virtue' (16).

Benedict XV was anxious about women who had entered the workforce during World War I. He saw that women were in occupations 'ill befitting their sex' and others 'abandoned the duties of housewife for which they were fashioned, to cast themselves recklessly into the current of life'.⁴

Pius XI's encyclical, *Casti connubii*, of 1930 extolled the virtues of 'the honourable and trusting obedience which the woman owes to the man' (74). He was not impressed by modern feminism. 'Many of them [feminists] even go further and assert that such a subjection of one party to the other is unworthy of human dignity, that the rights of husband and wife are equal' (74). Pius saw this attitude as a dangerous 'debasement' of the 'rational and exalted liberty which belongs to the noble office of a Christian woman and wife'. It is not that the woman should be 'raised' to the status of men, but 'if the woman descends from her truly regal throne . . . she debases her womanly character and the dignity of motherhood' (75). This exalted vocation of wife and mother is hers as a result of 'the natural disposition and temperament of the female sex' (76).

In *Quadragesimo anno* Pius XI was the first pope to give unqualified support to the principle of a 'family wage'. He believed that until this wage is in place universally 'women and children should not in any way be abused by those who control the means of production' (71).

On Christmas Day 1931, Pius XI issued an encyclical entitled *Lux veritatis*. Pius addresses himself to how mothers, especially 'those mothers of our day who, wearied of childbearing, or of the matrimonial bond, have neglected or violated the obligation they assumed, should look and meditate intently upon Mary . . .' In doing so Pius hopes that these mothers will receive through the 'Queen of Heaven' the grace to 'become ashamed of the dishonour branded on the great sacrament of matrimony and be moved, as far as possible, to attain to her wonderfully exalted virtues' (32).

In an *Address to women of 'Catholic Action'* on 26 October 1941, Pius XII spoke of how God intended women to be mothers and created them for that purpose. The pope argued that the role of the husband was to provide subsistence for the family and that the mother's role was to 'apply vigilant diligence to caring for those thousand particulars . . . which create the elements of the internal family atmosphere'. The fullness of a woman's vocation, however, is found

precisely in bearing a child. 'This is the sanctity of the nuptial bed. This is the loftiness of Christian motherhood. This is the salvation of the married woman' (1). Pius XII dismissed women who did not want children or wanted to plan their families. 'The mother who complains because a new child presses against her bosom seeking nourishment at her breast is foolish, ignorant of herself, and unhappy' (6).

After World War II was over, Pius XII gave an address to members of various Catholic women's associations on 21 October 1945. *Questa grande vostra adunata* ('On women's duties in social and political life') was to be the most authoritative declaration of a pope on women up to that point. Pius XII argues against those who maintain that gender differences come from socialization. He believes there are distinctive and complementary qualities that delineate the sexes. Christian women, true to their particular qualities, have two choices by which they can develop their gifts: to be married to a man and have a family or to choose voluntary celibacy in religious life (4-8).

The higher calling in the pope's mind is religious life. There are, however, two other choices open to women, most obviously motherhood, which is 'a woman's function, a woman's way, a woman's natural bent . . . To this end the Creator has fashioned the whole of woman's nature: not only her organism, but also and still more her spirit and most of all her exquisite sensibility' (11-12). The other choice Pius XII offers is the life of one who 'remains unmarried despite herself'. This call to a single life is definitely, in the pope's mind, the poorest choice and is understood, almost, in terms of personal failure. 'In the impossibility of marriage she discerns her own vocation and, sad at heart, though resigned, she too devotes herself entirely to the highest and most varied forms of beneficence' (9-10).

Catholic women are called to do all they can to fight political doctrines and social programmes that undermine the family and the home (26). The trench to which women were called, however, was mainly at the polling station.

Mariology during the years 1939-1958 reached great heights, but what is striking about all this marian teaching is the broad way Pius XII interprets Mary as model. She is not a paradigm only, or especially, for women but is consistently held up as a model for all. 'Christians should conform their lives to the example of the . . . Virgin . . . [for she] . . . urges us to that innocence and integrity of

life which flees from and abhors even the slightest stain of sin' (17-18).

A sign of the times: shifting of focus

John XXIII in *Pacem in terris* surveys the rights and responsibilities of people in the world and then looks at the 'signs of the times'. In this context he turns to women and sees the participation of women in the public and social life of the world as a 'sign of the times'. *Pacem in terris* affirms women's equality to men and argues that the modern world cannot tolerate women being treated as inferior, or minor, in any way. Women are to be encouraged to reach their full potential for the benefit of all society (35-37, 44-45).

Gaudium et spes taught that all people had rights to education, cultural expression and social development. Women become the Council's example of how this must happen. 'At present women are involved in nearly all spheres of life: they ought to be permitted to play their part fully according to their own particular nature. It is up to everyone to see to it that women's specific and necessary participation in cultural life be acknowledged and fostered' (60).

Paul VI's *Octogesima adveniens* affirms women's equality with men in the sight of God, but goes further and argues that this equality gives them an equal right to participation in all facets of social, cultural, economic and political life (13). This is a universal truth and each local church is encouraged to read the 'signs of the times' in their nation and act (42). Later Pope Paul recounts how in spite of the Church's repeated call for change in the social hierarchy, discrimination on racial, gender, cultural and religious grounds still exists (47). Fundamental to this situation is that these structures of injustice must be eradicated and the equal participation of all people guaranteed (22). Members of the Church must see this as a personal responsibility (50).

On 31 January 1976, an all but forgotten 'Commission on the Role of Women in the Church and the World' presented its report to Paul VI. Among its recommendations it suggested to the Holy See and bishops that women should have a greater presence within the curial departments; be given greater access to all non-ordained ministries; be granted more opportunities for spiritual, doctrinal and pastoral formation. To religious congregations, the commission submitted that the formation of religious take into account the necessity of working in close collaboration with women; that teach-

ing orders revise what image of woman, and women's relationships to men, they present and how they present them.

Within two years, Paul VI approved *The declaration on certain questions regarding the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood*. The argument of this declaration is that the Church does not have the power to change its teaching on an exclusively male priesthood because this is an 'immutable' truth handed down through the centuries of the Church's tradition (18–24). All the other arguments of this document, with the exception of the last one, hinge around this point. They are: that the Catholic Church has never had a woman priest or bishop (6–9); that Jesus only gave an apostolic mission to his male apostles and not even to his mother Mary (10–13); that the early Church did not have a mandate from Jesus to ordain women, so it did not do so (14–17); finally that maleness is, therefore, an essential element of sacramental ordination (18–24).

The other argument that the Congregation puts forward is that only a male can act in the person of Christ at the eucharist (25–33). 'There would not be this "natural resemblance" which must exist between Christ and his minister if the role of Christ were not taken by a man. In such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ. For Christ himself was and remains a man' (27).

This declaration insists that this does not take away from the dignity and vocation of women in the Church. The congregation argues that on the contrary, it adds to it, making clear the gender roles appropriate to men and women revealed by Christ in the natural order (29, 30, 36–40).

Marialis cultus was Paul VI's major contribution to mariology. Pope Paul is at pains to place Mary in a christological frame of reference (26–27). Consequently, unlike his predecessors in several of the documents we have looked at above, Jesus, not Mary, is held up as the primary person to imitate: 'Christ is the only way to the Father, and ultimate example to whom the disciple must conform [his] own conduct' (57).

Mary remains a model of holiness, a reason for divine hope, an intercessor and a powerful aid as all men and women strive to become like Jesus, 'within whose mystery . . . [man] alone finds true light' (57). This movement away from presenting Mary as 'the' model for all believers and as the prototype for virgins and mothers

is an extremely important development of the Catholic tradition's reflection on Mary's role in people's lives.

Make Mary your model

John Paul II in *Laborem exercens* argues against women working outside the home where there is no significant economic need to do so. Rather, a 'single salary given to the head of the family for his work, sufficient for the needs of the family without the spouse having to take up gainful employment outside the home', would be the best situation. To counterbalance the economic hardships for some families this would obviously entail, the pope also argues for the just remuneration of mothers who are raising families (19).

In *Familiaris consortio* John Paul makes three points in relation to Christian anthropology and women's status: they have equal dignity with men and consequently they have 'inalienable rights proper to a human person'; 'God manifests the dignity of women in the highest form possible by assuming human flesh from the Virgin Mary . . . and presenting her as the model of redeemed woman'; the works and actions of Jesus towards women confirm their dignity and equality in the sight of God. This can be especially observed in the Easter appearance of Jesus to a woman before the other apostles (22).

Familiaris consortio goes on to recognize that the modern world is transforming the idea that women are exclusively meant to be wives and mothers. It warns against this move, when a fruitful family life is the price that has to be paid: ' . . . True advancement of women requires that clear recognition be given to the value of their maternal and family role, by comparison with all other public roles and other professions'. The document concludes that men 'truly esteem and love women'. The pope warns against women renouncing their femininity to imitate men inside or outside the home (23).

Finally, John Paul calls for an end to any offence against the dignity of women, where they are regarded 'not as a person but as a thing, an object of trade, or the service of selfish interest and mere pleasure'. To this end he calls the whole Church to action so that 'the image of God that shines in all human beings without exception may be fully respected' (24).

In the final section of *Redemptoris Mater*, John Paul II takes up Mary's relationship with women directly. While Mary is a model and image for all people (5-6), she 'takes on special importance in relation to women and their status' (46). Mary remains a model for

women in 'the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement' (46).

Mulieris dignitatem

Promulgated on 15 August 1988, *Mulieris dignitatem (MD)*⁵ is the most comprehensive document ever written by a pope about women. There are four significant areas of development in papal teaching on women: first, the affirmation of their equal dignity with men (pp 20–27). Mary Ann Glendon observes that in contrast to the secular emphasis on women's 'rights', *MD* focuses on women's 'dignity'. 'In my view, this is a good sign . . . It alerts us to the irony in our contemporary situation where women have more "rights" than ever before, yet their dignity, their intrinsic worth as human beings is jeopardized in a variety of ways that seem to be distinctively modern.'⁶

The second area is the description of male domination as a consequence of original sin (36–41). In *MD* a new era in official church teaching is inaugurated. *MD* affirms, on the one hand, the equality men and women share as a result of being God's creation, and then has to confront the issue of what went wrong in this gender harmony. A correlation, therefore, is made between the rupture of the relationship between God and humanity and the oppression of women by men.

The third is the unequivocal condemnation of the abuse of women (pp 37–38; 48–49). In strong language, *MD* deplors anything that takes away from equal respect and dignity for women. This teaching, however, emphasizes that men not only offend the rights of women in abusing them, but also deprive themselves of their own God-bestowed self-worth.

The fourth area is the call for co-equal responsibility for the family. *MD* clearly affirms the necessity for both parents to take responsibility for a child's upbringing (68). This is essential if marriage and family life are to reflect, as they should, the mystery of generation founded in God who is both mother and father of all creation (67). The document calls for a change to the concept of family care as 'women's work'. In doing this it challenges universal assumptions about gender classifications within the family models that have dictated the expectations of behaviours, attitudes and motivations 'appropriate' to males or females.⁷

There are, however, a similar number of areas in *MD* that have caused disappointment and discussion amongst Catholic thinkers: its mariology; the masculine/feminine distinction and complementarity questions; the presentation of women's vocation in terms of motherhood or virginity, and the arguments put forward to exclude women from ordained ministry.

MD reinforces a very classical mariology. Presented as the virgin mother, offering herself in fully graced freedom to be the mediatrix of salvation, Mary now reigns as Mother of God. Many women do not find here an example they can relate to, nor can they perceive themselves through Mary.

It is not that women of the Church want to disregard Mary, but they do want to 'liberate' her from the distortions of the classical Catholic tradition. It is Third World women who are leading the way. 'It is incumbent on the church of the poor, which is embodied today in the course taken by the base communities, to reflect ever more on the person and mystery of Mary within its context of oppression, struggle, resistance and victory.'⁸ Mary, for some modern women, does not become an example of passive obedience who is vindicated by God, but an image of independence, a negation of the myth of feminine evil and a rejection of religion's fall into servitude to patriarchy.⁹

One of the most striking features of *MD* is the distinction it makes between masculinity and femininity. As Jackie Latham has pointed out, its use of masculine and feminine traits is an echo of nineteenth-century positivism. 'The problem with this view is that anatomical and physiological differences are called on to determine the socially and culturally conditioned roles that have been assigned to the two sexes.'¹⁰ The legacy of this nineteenth-century movement is then to describe the sociological phenomena involved in role classification by reference to 'nature'.

MD seems to make this same assumption when it instructs women to keep fulfilling the feminine path that is theirs as a result of their female origin in creation (40). It also plays a decisive part in his reflection on whether women can be presiders at the eucharist. The physical fact of maleness presents a 'clear and unambiguous [sign] when the sacramental ministry of the Eucharist, in which the priest acts "in persona Christi", is performed by a man' (94).

A continuing area of tension for some women is the way motherhood and virginity are presented as idealized choices for women. While *MD* extols the virtues of women who become mothers in

both the physical and spiritual sense and strongly endorses virginity as a gift and prototype of gospel values (74), it never criticizes 'the social, cultural and religious institution of motherhood [as] patriarchally shaped and not identical to women's potential relationships to their reproductive powers and children'.¹¹

Consequently many women have found the document's description of their vocation to be oppressive, out of touch and inappropriate.¹² Some mothers have felt that while motherhood is seen as the great task of human 'entrusting', 'this does not mean that women are offered any correspondingly important liturgical service or ordination to the ministries . . . Publicly the ideal of "being a mother" is loaded with sentiment whereas in reality, society (religious society included) exploits mothers.'¹³

Some of the women who are consecrated virgins, or the spiritual mothers referred to in *MD*, seem to understand their vocation in very different terms from those outlined by this document. 'The concept of spiritual motherhood . . . was marked by an androcentric and theocentric view of the universe and also by a deeply dualist view of human nature.' Consecrated virgins put to death 'the things of flesh', and approach the angelic ideal. There is an issue, however, of spiritual motherhood that is alive, especially in developing countries where poor women – widows, married and single parents – who have experienced the pain of suffering, alleviate the 'orphanhood' of the men and women who are facing oppression, torture and death. 'We have seen that true "spiritual motherhood", the sort that really helps life to burst forth, has leaped over the walls of the institution and shown that the gift of begetting the life in the Spirit cannot be contained in prefabricated or carefully guarded models.'¹⁴

MD reiterates much of the teaching of *The declaration on certain questions regarding the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood*. *MD* concludes that, being true to the example of Christ, the Church has no authority from Christ to ordain women (pp 92–94). The whole question of women's ordination is seen within the ecclesial perspective of the Bride of Christ (the Church) being faithful to the Spouse (Christ). *MD* argues that this relationship between groom and bride is consummated at the celebration of the eucharist; consequently the role of each partner needs be 'clear and unambiguous' (94).¹⁵

Interestingly the latest, and most controversial, papal document about women, *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (1994), restates again the arguments developed in the *Instruction* and *MD*, but does not include

this spousal analogy which was so central to the previous teaching on the same question.

Conclusions

In many industrialized countries recent Vatican documents on women's dignity and vocation have generated high emotion. In such a situation, it can be difficult to keep an eye on the developments that have taken place in recent decades. The teaching office in the Church has come a long way from arguing that the salvation of married women is found in the nuptial bed. It has stopped teaching that women should stay out of the workforce, but continues to call for those women who want to stay at home and raise children to be properly remunerated by society for this extraordinary service.

Papal teaching has consistently and directly condemned the objectification and abuse of women and, following on the apology the Jesuits issued to women at their 34th General Congregation, the Vatican followed suit in late 1995. The brief outline of papal documents above alerts the interested reader to the fact that there have been significant advances in how the popes think about women in the Church and society.

There is, however, still much to be done. The dignity of women is something on which all people of good will agree. All Christians, everywhere, need a fierce and heroic commitment to this teaching. The focus now is on the vocational side of this discussion. On 21 May 1998 the pope told bishops from the USA on their *ad limina* visit that 'The genius of women must be ever more a vital strength of the Church of the next millennium, just as it was in the first communities of Christ's disciples' (Vatican News Service). To that end the Vatican could follow up suggestions that if the relatively recent stipulations that cardinals must be bishops (1960) and priests (1917) were abrogated, the unique gifts, experiences, indeed the 'genius' of women could be a great asset in the College of Cardinals. Second, whether the Church feels itself authorized to admit a woman to the diaconate needs to be clearly established as soon as possible. Third, the recommendations of Paul VI's Commission of 1976 could be implemented. In particular women should be welcomed into high-profile positions in the Roman Curia; particularly those that deal with instructions and decisions that directly affect the life of Catholic women. Finally, the more inclusive mariology of Paul VI may serve this discussion more generously in the next century. Mary is not a model for women and Jesus a

model for men. Jesus is the image to whom all believers must conform their life and Mary is the example that such a conformation is possible.

Whatever the next chapter holds in this modest volume of mixed news, it requires of all of us a sense of history, intelligence and a memory which understands we are discussing passionate and important earthly issues, for heaven's sake.

Richard Leonard is an Australian Jesuit priest. He is the author of *Beloved daughters: one hundred years of papal teaching about women* (Melbourne: David Lovell, 1995). A graduate of the London International Film School, he has written, produced and directed documentary films with Albert Street Productions for Australian television.

NOTES

1 R. Camp, 'From passive submission to complementary partnership: the papal conception of a woman's place in church and society since 1878', *The Catholic Historical Review* vol 76, no 3 (1990), p 510.

2 R. Camp, *The papal ideology of social reform* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), p 14.

3 R. Camp, 'From passive submission', p 512.

4 Quoted in Camp, *ibid.*, p 512.

5 I am aware of five English language versions of *MD*. Some of these do not agree about section numbering, so I will refer to the pages of my working copy, which is published by St Paul's Publications, Homebush (November 1988).

6 M. A. Glendon, 'A greater attention to women's dignity', *L'Osservatore Romano* 45 (1988), p 5.

7 L. Davidson and L. K. Gordon, *The sociology of gender* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1979), pp 11-13.

8 I. Gebara and M. C. Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, mother of the poor* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1989), p 169.

9 M. Daly, *Beyond God the father* (Boston: Beacon, 1974), pp 84 and 86.

10 J. Latham, 'Male and female he created them - not masculine and feminine', *The Month* 22 (1989), p 385.

11 Cahill Sowle, 'Feminist ethics', *Theological Studies* 51 (1990), p 58.

12 For a full discussion of the many reactions see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Anne Carr (eds), 'Motherhood', *Concilium* 206 (1990).

13 J. Kohn-Roelin, 'Mother-daughter-God', *Concilium* 206 (1990), p 66.

14 I. Gebara, 'The Mother Superior and spiritual motherhood: from intuition to institution', *Concilium* 206 (1990), p 44.

15 See Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Women priests?', *New elucidations* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), p 195. One can see von Balthasar's theology having a bearing on the pope's additions to the 1976 teaching. Von Balthasar argued that the Church was possibly the last community to have a 'genuine appreciation of the differences between the sexes'. He protested that 'every encroachment of one sex into the role of the other narrows the range and dynamics

of humanly possible love'. This point was observable for him in the life of the Church, in how Mary is called 'Queen of the Apostles', 'without claiming apostolic powers for herself. She possesses something else and something more.' The 'more' and the 'else' is motherhood, the feminine principle of 'active fruitfulness which is already superior to that of the man'. Hence, what is true for Mary is true for all women, that is, motherhood is a higher calling than that to be priest, which is 'appropriation as expropriation; leadership, but from the last place'.