

WOMEN AND VOCATION

Laura L. Garcia, Ph.D.

Boston College

In 1988, ten years into his pontificate, John Paul II issued an apostolic letter *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year*. The very title provoked strong reactions among some women, including Catholic women, who argued emphatically against the very idea of a vocation entrusted especially to women. If a vocation is a role, and a role is a circumscribed set of tasks, then a vocation for women can only mean a restricted social role, or so many readers assumed. That the title explicitly tied the theme of women's vocation to the Marian year only made things worse. Hadn't feminist theologians shown that Mary's role was a wholly passive one, in which she simply serves as the 'receptacle' for Jesus before his birth and a meek but dutiful wife and mother thereafter, remaining in the home and uttering nary a recorded word after the wedding at Cana? What these reactionaries failed to notice was the revolutionary thrust of this document by John Paul II. It contains an agenda that, if taken seriously, could transform the social landscape of the entire world.

This revolutionary vision draws upon riches of the past, but places them in new relationships with each other and sheds new light on them. It's as though male/female relations had been drawn in two dimensions and now is discovered to have new depths as well, a third dimension—like the back of the wardrobe in the Narnia stories of C. S. Lewis. From this perspective, everything about men and women, God and the world, looks different. Here I focus on the two main themes of the letter on women, those of dignity and vocation.

Foundations of Women's Dignity

Mulieris Dignitatem defends the dignity of women with a theoretical scope and insistence that are, in my opinion, unsurpassed. The starting point is the Holy Father's commitment to personalism, the claim that persons

(in this case human persons) have an intrinsic value that cannot be measured, since only a person is brought into being for his or her own sake. The only appropriate response to a person is love, as this is the response commensurate with a being who is rational and free, who sets his or her own goals, who has an inner life, and whose very nature is to be a subject of actions, an agent in the fullest sense, not an object or instrument. Males and females share equally in this dignity, since they are equally persons.

Appealing to this person-centered foundation for human dignity holds several advantages over focusing on other attributes unique to persons, especially their rationality. Aristotle famously (or infamously) invoked the rationality criterion to plump for male authority in politics as well as family life, since he argues that women's intellectual powers are more readily influenced by their emotions or passions. If the intellect is the "most rational" of the rational faculties and passions occupy the "lower" part of the soul (the part shared with lower animals), then an intellect more influenced by or open to emotional content is automatically inferior and less suited for governing. Interestingly enough, contemporary studies of the brain indicate that female brains have more and stronger connections between the two sides of the brain, and that both sides of a woman's brain remain active at all times while men can operate with the calculating side of the brain alone. Hence, an uncritical use of Aristotle's criterion could seem to support the claim that men have greater human dignity—that they are paradigmatically human, while women are defective examples of humankind.

On the other hand, if the dignity of men and women rests not in their rationality (narrowly conceived) but in their personhood, then there are no grounds for placing one ahead of the other. Personhood is an essential feature of any being that possesses it, and non-personhood is an essential feature of any being who is not a person. It would not be possible for someone who is a person to become a non-person, or for a non-personal being to become a person. This is one reason for holding that human zygotes and human embryos are indeed persons. Personhood is tied to the essence or nature of a being, and so it can be neither acquired nor lost: once a person, always a person. Further, personhood does not come in degrees; it specifies a kind of being, not an attribute of a kind. A human who exercises none of the characteristic capacities of personhood (who is asleep or in a coma) remains a person in the same sense as any other. This means there can be no grounds for

treating men and women as participating in personhood to a different degree, regardless of differences in characteristic patterns of brain function or other such attributes.

John Paul II grounds the equal dignity of women and men theologically as well, arguing especially from the creation narratives in the book of Genesis, but also from the teachings of Jesus and St. Paul on marriage. In texts where many have found justification for male primacy and authority, the Holy Father finds instead a reaffirmation of the reciprocity intended in creation. He understands the second creation account in Genesis 2 as revealing “the fundamental truth . . . concerning man created as man and woman in the image and likeness of God. . . . The woman is another ‘I’ in a common humanity. From the very beginning they appear as a “unity of the two”, and this signifies that the original solitude is overcome, the solitude in which man does not find ‘a helper fit for him’ (Gen. 2:20).”¹ The “help” the woman brings is not only in the mission of “subduing the earth” but also as a life’s companion in fulfilling the call to “be fruitful and multiply”, which is why the man and woman leave their original families to become “one flesh”.

Meditating on passages such as these, Pope John Paul II concludes: “The fact that man ‘created as man and woman’ is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a ‘unity of the two’ in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life.”² Existing as male and female, and especially as coming together in the union of marriage, human persons are a window into the divine—an icon, in a wide sense a sacrament, of the Holy Trinity. The doctrine that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a communion of persons, enables us to understand (at a distance) how God in himself is Love. The union of man and woman in marriage, becoming one flesh, also has a moral dimension, shown by Jesus’ rebuke

¹John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women), section 6. Further references in this essay refer to the same document, with the section number indicated in parentheses. Available on-line at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html

²*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 7.

to the Pharisees in Matthew 19: “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”³

The Key to Understanding Vocation

A vocation is a call—in its etymology and in its reality.⁴ God is the giver of all our gifts, talents, and opportunities, and he calls us to fulfill ourselves by giving ourselves to others. You may have heard a man criticized for thinking he is God’s gift to women, but there is a grain of truth here, however shallow and distorted. Each human being is a gift, God’s gift to the others. Our task is to discern what it is He wants from each one of us. This is largely a question of discerning the specifics of our vocation, first whether we are called to marriage or to celibacy, and beyond this to where we can best use God’s gifts to us—our time, our talents, our strength, and our love. But some aspects of the human vocation apply to everyone, since all are called to a life of service and all are called to cultivate the earth. Similarly, given the complementarity of women and men and the need of each for the contribution of the other, we can speak of a general vocation for women and a general vocation for men. We must keep in mind, however, that a vocation in this general sense does not tell us very much by itself about the specific roles of men and women in marriage, family and society. We will return to this point later on.

Mulieris Dignitatem explains that women exercise both a *prophetic* and a *priestly* role in the world. The prophetic role of women resides in their femininity, the clearest expression of that receptivity which is the vocation of all human beings—to respond in love to God’s loving invitation. The feminine is the archetype of the Bride, “the one who receives love in order to love in return.” The order of love enters the world through a

³An extended discussion of this point can be found in John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), p. 47 (from the General audience of November 14, 1979).

⁴While my dictionary acknowledges the root of this term in the Latin *vocare* (“to call”), it bows to contemporary culture in defining vocation as “a strong feeling of suitability for a particular career or occupation.” Note the subjective turn in the current definition.

woman, at the assent of Mary of Nazareth. In like manner, each human person enters the world by way of a woman, who is the first to accept and welcome that new life. The prophetic role of a woman is expressed simply by who she is:

This concerns each and every woman, independently of the cultural context in which she lives, and independently of her spiritual, psychological and physical characteristics, as for example, age, education, health, work, and whether she is married or single.⁵

Simply in virtue of their feminine nature, women are a sign of the greatest of all truths—that “every human being is loved by God in Christ.”

The *priestly* vocation of women is linked to this prophetic role, for love is received in order to be returned. Like man, woman can find herself only by making a sincere gift of herself. The first dimension of women’s priestly mission concerns the good of human persons, since women are especially attuned to the needs of individuals and to the dignity of each human life. “The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that *God entrusts the human being to her in a special way*. . . . *A woman is strong because of her awareness of this entrusting.*”⁶ Men are also entrusted with human persons, of course, and in a sense everyone is entrusted to everyone else in a mutual responsibility that calls us to the virtue of solidarity. But women, generally speaking, have particular gifts which enable them to understand and respond to persons. Perhaps more than men, women *acknowledge the person*, because they see persons with their hearts. They see them independently of various ideological or political systems. They see others in their greatness and limitations; they try to go out to them and *help them*. In this way the basic plan of the Creator takes flesh in the history of humanity and there is constantly revealed, in the variety of vocations, that *beauty*—not merely physical, but above all spiritual—which God bestowed from the very beginning on all, and in a particular way on women.⁷

The second dimension of this responsibility for persons is that women are called to *foster a civilization of love*, a culture that always keeps sight of the dignity of human persons. In a world increasingly focused on technical achievement and material prosperity, women speak for the intrinsic and measureless value of persons. They speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves, who are powerless to defend their rights. “In this sense, our time in particular *awaits the manifestation* of that “genius” which belongs to women, and which can ensure sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance: because they are human!—and because “the

⁵Ibid. 29.

⁶Ibid.

⁷*Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, 12. (June 29, 1995)

greatest of these is love”(cf. I Cor. 13:3).⁸ Every woman is a potential mother, whether or not she becomes a mother biologically or through adoption, since the essence of motherhood does not lie in purely biological factors. Rather,

A mother welcomes and carries in herself another human being, enabling it to grow inside her, giving it room, respecting it in its otherness. Women first learn and then teach others that human relations are authentic if they are open to accepting the other person: a person who is recognized and loved because of the dignity that comes from being a person and not from other considerations, such as usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty or health. This is the fundamental contribution which the Church and humanity expect from women. And it is the indispensable prerequisite for cultural change.⁹

Considerations like these have led many women, in and outside of academia, to rethink their understanding of what it means to be a woman, and of what would truly promote the dignity of women *as women*. While human dignity requires respect for personal freedom, we also know that freedom cannot serve our good if it is cut off from the truth—the truth about what perfects us and what enslaves us. With this in mind, the Siena Symposium has proposed a renewed study of feminism in its previous incarnations, as well as a deeper study of the writings of John Paul II and others on women. Professor Mary Lemmons, a philosopher at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, coined the term “personalist feminism” for this new vision of women and women’s vocation.

Personalist Feminism

Though many today reject the feminist label,¹⁰ it has the advantage of drawing attention to the need to defend women in a particular way, given their vulnerability and experiences of injustice, abuse or contempt. A new understanding of women’s dignity and vocation can lead to a new vision of feminism as well, one that captures the positive features of this cry for justice while preserving respect for men,

⁸Ibid.

⁹*Evangelium Vitae*, 99.

¹⁰See for example Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s book, *Feminism is Not the Story of My Life*.

marriage and family life, and for the gifts women bring to fulfilling the human vocation. The following is a tentative definition of personalist feminism, though I welcome any suggestions for revisions or additions.¹¹

- ◆ Personalist feminism assumes a person-centered moral vision, one that affirms the *intrinsic dignity and inviolability of every human being at every stage* of life and development. All human rights find their support in this basic truth about human persons, a truth that gives freedom both its wings and its boundaries.
- ◆ Personalist feminism promotes *the virtue of solidarity* among men and women, among persons of every race, culture and nation, and among workers in every trade and profession. Solidarity recognizes others as brothers and sisters in a common humanity and sincerely seeks to serve the *common good*.
- ◆ Personalist feminism values all human work, especially work that serves the needs of others and calls for personal sacrifice. Work is a school of love and service, a share in the universal human vocation. All morally licit work bears the dignity of the worker and derives its value from the person, the agent of work, rather than from the object of work.
- ◆ Personalist feminism finds positive significance in the fact that human persons exist always and only as male or as female. Men and women are meant to live in relationship with one another, in a complementarity that is not authoritarian but ordered to mutual help and enrichment. The human vocation is addressed equally to men and to women: to renew the life of humankind in each generation and to build a society worthy of human persons. This universal task falls in a new way upon women as they have recently attained unprecedented levels of cultural influence and leadership.
- ◆ As those completely entrusted with human life in its beginnings, women are responsible in a special way for persons, especially the most vulnerable, and for keeping in view the human implications of all work and all social policies. Women can bring to the culture what it needs the most, by insisting on the value of *persons over things*, of being over doing and having. Women tend to have greater sensitivity to persons and relationships, and to see the value of every human life simply because it is human. Personalist feminism strongly resists any structure, law or policy that treats human beings as objects or commodities.
- ◆ Justice demands that the intrinsic personal dignity of women be upheld, abhorring all violence against women's bodies, hearts, or consciences. The intellectual and spiritual resources of women should be welcomed and respected in every corner of the public life, so women can bring to these settings their complementary gifts, perspectives, and priorities.
- ◆ Personalist feminism calls for greater understanding, gratitude, and respect for motherhood and work in the home, and for a willingness to accept as valuable the things women have always valued. We invite every woman, whatever her state in life, whatever her strengths and limitations, to rejoice in her personal riches as a woman and to work for a world that recognizes the priceless value of each woman, each man, and each child.

¹¹The definition proposed here draws on the discussions of the Siena Symposium at the conference on *John Paul II and the Vocation of the Professional Woman*, University of St. Thomas, June 2004, but it is my own attempt at a working definition. Any deficiencies are, of course, my own.