

THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN ACCORDING TO THE CHURCH

by

Raimondo Spiazzi, O.P.

The theological nature of the "Declaration on the question of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood", issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith by order of the Sovereign Pontiff, does not exclude but presupposes and involves consideration of the contemporary socio-cultural context. Within this context the entry of women into all areas and all levels of public life, is one of the characterizing phenomena. John XXIII recognized this, in fact, in a page of the Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (AAS 55, 1963, pp. 267-268), from which the new document starts.

This great innovation of our century, which matured gradually among the ideological and social ferments of the nineteenth century, has certainly brought about a change in living conditions, outlook and behaviour. This change has exercised a determinant influence on the relations between man and woman, on the conception, the constitution and the life of the family, and on the organization of society, giving rise to new demands and creating problems unknown before.

Careful and responsible reflection on the new reality, on the part of the Church, prompted in her pastors and teachers certain reserves. And these reserves still hold good when faced with the excesses of feminist movements and the risks of easy illusions and confusion that could alter the meaning of things (that is, of femininity, of the family and of society), with harmful consequences on the moral, civil and religious plane. But it also led to a new ecclesial awareness of the role of woman and her rights and duties in regard to active and responsible participation in the life of the civil and ecclesial community.

**THE MAGISTERIUM OF THE CHURCH
AND WOMEN'S NEW PROBLEMS**

Pius XII particularly dedicated his attention and exercised his magisterium to clarify this crucial problem of contemporary society. He did this in the post-war period just when all the ideological and passionate charges that had accumulated in the hearts of human beings in decades of experiences, tensions and struggles, exploded in the political field. It is enough to glance through the analytical index of his *Discorsi e Radiomessaggi* to realize how he insisted on this matter in his interventions. They were all characterized, certainly, by concern to safeguard the originality of woman's nature, and her specific functions and personal dignity, in the new condition of society. But they were also marked by recognition of the aspirations and possibilities opened to woman by the evolution of the last half century and by the call to active commitment both in social and political life and in the apostolate of the Church. These pages constitute — also on this point — a milestone in the development of the social and pastoral doctrine of the Church. They are still relevant today, even if so many new aspirations for woman's advancement have emerged in the last twenty years, in a situation of culture and work that is deeply changed.

In fact there has come to the fore more and more a central problem concerning woman's status, formulated, according to current fashion, in terms of struggle of liberation. It is the demand to be liberated from the institutionalized egoisms, as one could call them, which in certain places, classes and environments lead to the subjugation and exploitation of women. Interest in this problem has become generalized, with the result that, on the hand, demands for radical changes have emerged, sometimes giving rise to disorderly and demagogic demonstrations. On the other hand, a juridico-political evolution has emerged which has recognized women as having many rights and has offered them many possibilities of achievement on the civil plane.

Perhaps feminist irredentism has neglected the interior aspect of the problem. The liberation from psychisms, frustrations and complexes, unleashed under strong pressure of external factors and especially pressure of propaganda exploiting the occasion, can lead

to extreme aberrations, the effect and sign of a dreadful degradation cultural even more than moral. In this direction it is painful, for example, to see women and especially girls being recruited and joining marches to demand at the top of their voices the new "rights": sexual freedom, free management of their own body, the faculty of freely having an abortion and at the expense of the State, etc. It is indeed a disheartening sight. Fortunately, it is a question of agitated and whipped up minorities, but still they represent a pathological phenomenon which must be taken into account and for which a remedy must be found, especially by creating conditions of social life in which another more fundamental problem of woman's advancement can be solved: that of her positive elevation on the cultural, civil and spiritual planes. This inevitably involves also an adequate formation, corresponding to the requirements of femininity.

In the last few years the magisterium of the Church has pointed out several times the paths to take — and the criteria to adopt — for woman's real advancement, beyond all those mystifications and blunders which end up by leading them to loss of their own authenticity and, all things considered, to new forms of slavery.

PAUL VI's INTERVENTIONS

Paul VI's interventions, on this matter, are countless. Mention should be made here particularly of the address delivered on 6 December 1976 to participants in the National Congress of the Italian Women's Centre (cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, English-language edition, 16 December 1976). In it the Pope stresses forcefully the principles according to which it is necessary to work for women's advancement according to the model proposed by the Church.

This advancement, for Paul VI, is beyond dispute, just as it is certain that it is far from being implemented. "We are fully convinced," he declares "that the participation of women at the various levels of social life must be not only recognized, but also fostered and above all warmly appreciated; and certainly there is still a long way to go in this direction". But as the Second Vatican Council taught, women ought "to play their part fully according to their own particular nature" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 60), which, the Pope adds, must not be renounced.

From a biblical and Christian point of view, it is necessary to recognize in woman the same "image and likeness" of God (Gen. 1, 26, 27), which "she has in common with man and which makes her fully his equal"; but this image "is realized in her in a particular way, which differentiates woman from man, no more, however, than man is differentiated from woman: not in dignity of nature, but in diversity of functions". So Paul VI adds at once the wise warning that "it is necessary to beware of a cunning form of belittlement of women's status, in which it is possible to fall today, by refusing to recognize those diversifying features stamped by nature on both human beings. It belongs on the contrary to the order of creation that woman should fulfill herself as a woman, certainly not in a competition of mutual oppression with man, but in harmonious and fruitful integration, based on respectful recognition of the roles peculiar to each. It is therefore highly desirable that in the various fields of social life in which she has her place, woman should bring that unmistakably human stamp of sensitiveness and solicitude, which is characteristic of her".

In the allocution to members of the "Study Commission on woman's functions in society and in the Church" and to members of the "Committee for Women's International Year", on 18 April 1975, Paul VI had already spoken of the different riches and dynamisms characteristic of man and woman, which must lead to a world that is not leveled and uniform, but harmonious and unified (cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, English-language edition, 1 May, 1975). For the Church, therefore, the equality of the sexes is not identity. The juridical parity recognized in the most recent constitutions and legislations does not mean confusion of roles and cancellation of original characteristics. Advancement cannot have as its purpose oppression or the conquest of hegemony, but must aim at the harmonization of functions and implementation of the complementarity on the psychologico-affective, operational, spiritual and structural plane (in the family and in society). This, according to the Bible, is willed by the Creator. It is also obvious from an objective examination of the human reality of the two sexes.



With these indispensable clarifications and, where necessary, reserves in judgment on ideologies, laws and methods of action of our times, the Church gives her full and sincere support and

encouragement to all initiatives that wish to implement the justice often lacking in women's status. The Pope says so, referring to the Council: "The whole Church follows with great interest and trepidation the various women's movements which aim at reaching 'parity with men in fact as well as of rights' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 9). In Christianity, in fact, more than in any other religion, woman has had right from the beginning a special status of dignity... And after summing up the testimonies of the New Testament on the new importance given to women by Jesus, the Apostles and the first communities, the Pope points out that from these texts "it is clearly evident that woman is given a place in the living and operating structure of Christianity, such an important place that perhaps all its virtualities have not yet been clarified...". And here is the conclusion, of great topical interest: "Like the Church of origins, so also the Church of today cannot but be on the side of woman, especially where the latter, from being an active and responsible subject, is put in the humiliating position of a passive and insignificant object: as in certain environments of work and in certain of the lower forms of instrumentalization of the mass media, in social relations and in the family. One would think that for some people woman represents today the easiest instrument to give expression to their tendencies to violence and tyranny. In this way the harsh attitude of even vehement retaliation characteristic of some women's movements, can be explained and, in part, understood...".



"On the side of woman", therefore: for her liberation and true advancement; for overcoming discriminations contrary to God's plan, and in the first place discrimination based on sex (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 29): this is the position of the Church emphasized by Paul VI and recalled from the first page of the new Declaration of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

But at this point one may ask the question: if things are so, how can one explain the negative solution that the Declaration itself gives to the question of woman's admission to the ministerial priesthood? What is the reasoning, in relation to the premises on liberation and advancement, that leads the Declaration to conclude by reaffirming and strengthening discrimination based on the difference of sex?

Well, a dispassionate and calm reading of the Declaration makes it possible to draw from the authentic sources of Catholic doctrine and discipline — that is Holy Scripture and Christian tradition and practice going back to the apostles and to the first communities, and therefore to Jesus — the reasons for the attitude of the Church, never modified in two thousand years of historical experience. As will be explained in subsequent articles, the Declaration connects these reasons with the mystery of God's eternal plan regarding the organization of the means of salvation in the economy of grace carried out in the world by Christ. But in clarifying this doctrine with theological reasons, albeit not demonstrative but connected with other certain points of revelation (analogy of faith), the Document lists some arguments which — beyond the theological sphere of the question dealt with — can give strength and at the same time balance to the whole religious and civil project for the advancement of woman.

In the first place the value of a "sign", which is inherent in the sacraments is extended to the person of the minister. It makes it possible to see in the priest the reflection of the image of Christ, who "was and remains a man". But it also makes it possible to connect the relationship between the man-priest and the community of the faithful in the logic of the union or Covenant between God and mankind, which is presented in the Old and in the New Testament as a nuptial mystery. The man-priest, by virtue of his Ordination, operates in the name, in the place of and by virtue of Christ: *in persona Christi*, as St. Thomas says (cf. III, q. 83, a. 1, ad 3), and the Council confirms (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 33; *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 10, 28; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, nn. 2, 13 etc.). The Declaration clarifies and completes this traditional doctrine, explaining that it is a question of a reflection of Christ as "author of the Covenant, bridegroom and head of the Church", the eternal Word who, to carry out God's plan historically, became incarnate in our human nature according to the male sex, certainly not to affirm a natural superiority of man over woman, but raising to the summit of creation — where the mystery of Incarnation is placed — the duality, complementarity and correlativity of the sexes.

The symbolism of this mystery, which pervades the historical fact of the existence of Jesus-the man, in requiring that the priesthood should be conferred on persons of the male sex, does not

mortify the figure of woman, but stresses, if anything, the importance of the sexual difference, which "in human beings... has an important influence, much deeper, for example, than ethnical differences: the latter do not affect the human person as intimately as the difference of sex, which is directly ordained both to the communion of persons and to the generation of human beings." This adds up to a reaffirmation of the intrinsic value, the dignity, the relative autonomy, the originality of function, the necessity of intervention also of the female sex. This means that woman, in the bride-Church of which she bears the image in herself, and by extension of point of view and application of principles, also in the world, is worthy of respect and of advancement, as a woman and not according to other considerations.

This conclusion can be reached without straining the meaning, it seems to us, starting just from the thesis emphasized by the Declaration.

MANY MANSIONS IN THE CHURCH

The Document prompts another consideration. Before concluding, it points out that in the Church no one, either male or female, can claim the right to priestly Ordination. This applies even when it is claimed on account of a deep feeling that one is called to the priesthood, or that one can reach the fullness of his character as a Christian, or even of his own human condition, only within the priesthood. Actually, the priesthood "is not part of the rights of the person", but is a gift and a power that is conferred by means of the Church on those whom the Church herself judges suitable — thus confirming the vocation with her objective judgment — according to the requirements of God's plan and Christ's institution.

But right from the beginning the Declaration recalls and singles out for praise women who, as history shows, "have played a decisive role in the life of the Church and carried out tasks of considerable value." The Declaration mentions the Foundresses of great religious families, the outstanding teachers of doctrine and spiritual life, those who provided works of assistance and charity, the women apostles in mission countries, "as well as those Christian wives who exercised a deep influence on their families and, in particular, transmitted the faith to their sons". It could be added that there is hardly a country, a community, in which there do not exist the signs of the

incalculable benefits received from some of these outstanding women: whether they be the great accomplisners of works of charity or apostolate, or humble, silent collaborators — Sisters and lay women — of the Church and of the groups of which she is made up, in doing good in all its forms. Which of us does not remember some of these marvellous creatures, to whom perhaps he owes a lot of the good received and accumulated from childhood? Who does not meet them continually at every cross-roads along the ways of the Church?

It can be deduced from this daily reality that there are "many mansions" in the Church and that there is room for a great wealth of ministries and charisms, without any need that they should be reduced, so to speak, to the priestly condition. The priesthood is one of many ministries. It implies a sacramental character of its own and charisms of its own, its own "professional graces," which are certainly of superior level. But it is not the only form or the only source of the apostolate. It is just this non-exclusiveness of the priesthood that emphasizes the greatness that can be reached by men and women outside the hierarchical line but always in the communion of the Church. This is proved by the innumerable doers of good whom we can find in history. Already in the time of the Apostolic Communities so many noble figures of women-apostles stand out. There are, for example, Priscilla, Lydia, Phoebe, recalled with gratitude and affection by St. Paul, and above all there is the Virgin Mary. And these figures remain throughout history right up to the Church of today, in which women are called to new roles at the level both of the parish and of the diocese, and even in various organisms of the Holy See, as the Declaration recalls.

"THE GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN ARE THE SAINTS"

This Document, if read well — that is, seriously and serenely — can serve to give new impetus to the initiatives of the laity and especially of women in the apostolate, helping them all, and the latter particularly, to avoid the danger of "clericalization" that is latent under certain demands for the priesthood. It will be a question, for everyone, of recalling that the Virgin Mary, as Innocent III wrote, although superior in dignity and excellence to all the Apostles, did not receive, like them, the keys of the Kingdom (cf. *Corpus Iuris*, Decret. lib. 5, tit. 98, *De Poenit* c. 10 Nova: quoted

by the Declaration). The late Cardinal Journet, when asked one day what he thought of the possible admission of women to the priesthood, replied simply as follows: "In the Church there is the greatness of hierarchy and the greatness of charity: the Blessed Virgin was placed at the summit of the latter greatness."

The Declaration of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith also follows this line. After saying that "the Church is a differentiated body, in which each one has his function; the tasks are distinct and must not be confused. They do not give rise to the superiority of some over others; they do not furnish any pretext for jealousy; the only superior charism, which can and must be desired, is charity (cf. 1 Cor. 12-12)," concludes with the following memorable words: "The greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven are not the ministers, but the saints".

This is the context of faith and spirituality that the Church considers the advancement of woman. For the Church the thread of the subject cannot but be this. But it may take us very far, as can be seen from the final wish of the Declaration: "The Church desires that Christian women should become fully aware of the greatness of their mission: today their role is of capital importance, both for the renewal and humanization of society and for the rediscovery by believers of the true face of the Church". How could we renounce saying, at this point, that if the ministerial priesthood reflects the image of Christ, the head and bridegroom, the Christian woman is called to reflect in herself and reveal the identity of the bride-Church, the supreme figure and type of which is a woman whose name is Mary? The principle of the "eternal feminine" in Christianity did not clothe itself in myths but became history in the Mary-Christ pair. The latter instills in the Church and expands all over the world the redeeming dynamism which aims at "making all things new" and especially at re-establishing in every man and every woman, as in new Adams and new Eves, participating in the 'new life' of Christ and Mary, the original harmony of nature noble, intact and fresh, as it had come from God's hands.