

MOTHERHOOD AND THE NEW FEMINISM

Léonie Caldecott

Last Sunday I was in Loreto. I stood at the back of the Santa Casa, my hands pressed against the stones of the wall behind me, stones which have been worn to a smooth sheen by thousands of hands over hundreds of years. I was waiting for the crush of pilgrims to abate enough to allow me forward to kneel on the altar step, in the place where, as it said above my head: "*Hic Verbum Caro Factum Est.*"

This momentous central truth of our faith seems like a good starting point for my remarks this afternoon. Here the Word was made flesh. I once attended a conference organised by the Pontifical Council for the Laity on the role of women, and found myself in one of those workshops that tend to happen in the afternoons a couple of days into the event. I was with a group of mainly British women, many of them holding official ecclesial posts. A poll was taken on what we were to discuss, and I innocently suggested the central role of motherhood. "Oh please," the others replied, "the Church is always going on about motherhood. Can't we talk about something else?"

It's always important to try and see where other people are coming from, and I do know that there are indeed cultures where women are only valued because they can bear children - the continuation of a family line. However in my own cultural situation, in the UK, we have a situation which has now gone to the other extreme. Women (and more surreally, men) will go to extraordinary lengths to 'acquire' a child; while within the same city, perhaps even the same hospital, other women are going to extraordinary lengths suppress their own maternity. All of these positions - including the bare-foot and pregnant one - say one thing and one thing only about children: that they are a commodity. They are not wanted for themselves, but for the gratification of others. And they also say one thing about motherhood. This awe-inspiring gift has been occluded, demeaned, dethroned. In this context the Church's honoring of motherhood is positively prophetic, even subversive.

Take the extraordinary and compelling words of Blessed John Paul II in his 1988 Encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatem* - On the Dignity of Women. "***The history of every human being passes through the threshold of a woman's motherhood; crossing it conditions 'the revelation of the children of God'***". That last part is a quote from the letter to the Romans. (Rom 8:19).

What does he mean by this? In order to understand, we need to grasp not only the whole drift of this encyclical, but also what he had in mind when, seven years later in *Evangelium Vitae* - *The Gospel of Life*, he challenged us to create a new kind of women's movement - just as in earlier encyclicals he called for a 'new evangelization' and a 'new theology of liberation'. He wrote:

"In transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a 'new feminism' which rejects the temptation of imitating models of 'male domination', in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation" (n. 99).

Through motherhood, JP II went on, women who are mothers "first learn, and then teach others that **human relations are authentic if they are open to accepting the other person**: a person who is recognised and loved because of the dignity which 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 an authentic cultural change."

No one in this room needs convincing about the horrors of what JP II referred to as the 'culture of death'. But what will it take to remedy this state of affairs? This week we are hearing many experiences of the battle-field, inspiring ideas on how to go forward and meet the ever-increasing challenges to the Gospel of Life. All I can do this afternoon is to look at the dignity and role of women as a specific focus, and indeed a resource for change, following as best I can the thought of Blessed John Paul. In his Letter

to Women, written in the same year as *Evangelium Vitae*, he made it very clear that he has some pretty big ideas in mind for women:

“It is my hope, dear sisters, that you will reflect carefully on what it means to speak of the ‘genius of women’, not only in order to be able to see in this phrase a specific part of God’s plan which needs to be accepted and appreciated, but also in order to let this genius be more fully expressed in the life of society as a whole, as well as in the life of the Church.”

In order to reflect on this ‘genius of women’ that JP II refers to, I believe we need to understand the potential of motherhood, or the capacity to bear children, as being somehow paradigmatic of what it means to be female: every woman, whether she has children or not, is by definition a *potential* mother. She must go through the trials and tribulations of feminine biology, even if she is a consecrated virgin. Yet JP II read this ‘data’ in a much wider sense than just the biological one. He linked the potential for motherhood not just to family life, but to society as a whole, offering a vision of what women could contribute to the good of the Church and the world, not only with our bodies, but with our minds and, most importantly of all, *with our souls*.

I’m using the prepositions “us” and “our” not for partisan reasons. You know how secular feminists are fond of saying that “the personal is political”? I suspect the new feminist - the Papa Wojtyla feminist - would want to reverse this and say “the political is personal”. At any rate, the political sphere will always fail to answer humanity’s problems unless it serves the personal and refers itself to persons, rather than power or voting blocks. For a Christian, no end is higher than the respect due to a person created in the image and likeness of God, no matter how imperfect that image has become. And the personal is always relational, an idea that was at the base of everything Karol Wojtyla wrote, both before and after he became Pope.

This understanding - the centrality of the ‘I/Thou’ - lies at the core of *Mulieris Dignitatem*. Before he speaks about the position of women in society, JP II first speaks about the mystery of creation. Echoing that marvellous catechesis which is at the heart of his Theology of the Body, he reminds us of the significance of the Genesis account of the creation of Adam and Eve.

“By reflecting on this account, we can understand even more fully what constitutes the personal character of the human being, thanks to which both man and woman are like God,” he writes. And further, he says: *“Man cannot exist “alone”; he can exist only as a “unity of the two”, and therefore in relation to another human person. It is a question here of a mutual relationship: man to woman and woman to man. Being a person in the image and likeness of God thus also involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other “I”. This is a prelude to the definitive self-revelation of the Triune God: a living unity in the communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”*

In other words, the relation between male and female reveals something which is at the heart of God himself. And by extension, in becoming a mother, a woman activates the trinitarian dynamic which is inherent in the spousal mystery... Without her spouse, the dynamic is not present. It doesn’t just take two: it always takes three. This is the essential building block of a healthy society, because there is an intimate connection between the personal development of the child, and the larger society around that child. If we understood this, and were able to truly communicate this ethos, people might understand much more readily why so much contemporary reproductive technology is both inappropriate, not to mention a criminal waste of resources, even if they were not able to fully understand the moral arguments.

I am thinking here of two recent reports in the print media. The first one is the article in the NYTimes by Ruth Padawer on the practice of implanting more than one foetus in women having fertility ‘treatment’, then eliminating one, or even several, so that she is only left with one child. The article begins with an account of a woman who is glad that the overhead screen for the ultrasound is turned off, so that she does not have to see ‘the two shadows floating inside her. Since making her decision she had tried hard not to think about them, though she could often think of little else.’ The other was a report of a woman who was woken by the phone in the early hours of one of the riots which just ripped apart British cities a few weeks ago, to be told that her child, in his early teens, was on the streets with the other suddenly feral youths, only to express her annoyance that her sleep had been disturbed... Everyone who commented on this could see how shocking it was!

When millions of women in less developed countries are still dying in childbirth simply because they lack basic care, we have to wonder how our own countries can get their perspectives so radically upside down. If we can get people worked up about global warming, why can't we get them to care about the mystery of creation, the human microcosm of the wonder which is our planet, right here, right now, right under our noses? Similarly, if a dawning interest in natural medicine can make us question the over-dependence of our culture on drugs, how can it not make us question the highly dangerous use of artificial hormones, at either end of the reproductive life of a woman, or more questionably still, in practices such as IVF and surrogacy?

Well, last night, someone said to me that the problem is down to a lack of values, and that what is needed is evangelisation. This is true. We have lost the sense of the sacred, and that sense starts with the most basic fact of life: the fact that human beings are created both male and female, and this I/thou dynamic is at the heart of childbearing. Our present Holy Father has also written compellingly of the connection, in Judeo-Christian scripture, between this fact, and the nature of God. In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*. Pope Benedict says that marriage between a man and a woman “*becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people, and vice versa. God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love.*”

There is in fact a wonderful complementarity between the thought of Benedict XVI and that of John Paul II, even if the phrase “new feminism” is associated more with the latter. In any case, the Holy Father is always concerned to build up what we might call the feminine dimension of the Church and of human society. This is even true in the field of economics and business, where his third encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, called for “the logic of the gift” to be brought into economic theory and practice. He argues that even “*in commercial relationships the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift, as an expression of fraternity, must find their place within normal economic activity*” (n. 36).

I don't know what this would look like on a grand scale, but I do know that on a small scale it is in families and the communities often facilitated by women that we can see this gratuitousness in operation - this “*economy of communion*” (a phrase in the encyclical, referring to the economic model developed by Chiara Lubich and the Focolare movement). It is for this reason that women have been at the core of the fair-trade and micro-credit initiatives, which have proved so much more successful in the developing world than the strategies of the multinationals or the World Bank. This gives us the opportunity to see the ideas of JP II, on the central role of women in society, played out for real.

This dimension of ‘gift’ is of course not exclusive to women, but it is very much at the core of JP II's idea of the “genius” of women, linked to our ability to foster personal relationship. “*Being a person means striving towards self-realization (the {2nd Vatican} Council text speaks of self-discovery), which can only be achieved through a sincere gift of self*”.

And Pope Benedict XVI expounds further on the importance of relationality in *Caritas in Veritate*: “*Gift by its nature goes beyond merit; its rule is that of **superabundance***” (34). The feminine genius for relationship and self-gift does indeed have the potential to take us into the realm of **superabundance** - and beyond even strict justice, into the realm of mercy. Above all, Benedict reminds us here, as on other occasions, “*knowledge without love is sterile*” (n. 30).

And isn't this the point? That we in the West, and those who imitate us elsewhere, have begun to worship another god: a self-made deity, or pair of deities, represented in Genesis as wanting to abrogate to themselves the knowledge of good and evil. I don't want to be a loony luddite here (since I am using the technology myself!) but if you take the number 1 as representing the good, and the number 0 as representing evil (or the lack of good), there arises a curious connection between the aboriginal story of the Fall, and the binary basis of computer technology. (I just threw that in to make sure you were still awake!)

Be that as it may, JP II was particularly aware of the danger that technology will dehumanise us. “*In our own time, the successes of science and technology make it possible to attain material well-being to a degree hitherto unknown. While this favours some, it pushes others to the edges of society. In this way, unilateral progress can also lead to a gradual loss of sensitivity for man, that is, for what is essentially*

human.” And once again he focusses on women: *“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 greatest of these is love" (cf. 1 Cor 13:13). (MD??)*

What is so exciting about the thought of both these great popes is the way they connect every dimension of human and ecclesial life, thus giving us a vision of what might be possible if only we take our faith seriously. They join the dots, and so should we. You can't take the threat to motherhood in isolation from other cultural factors. So what, according to this vision, might the answer be? The key for both of these pontiffs is the human capacity for contemplation: an outlook which enables us to maintain a sense of wonder, without which our attempts to build a better and more just world quickly burn out, or become merely ideological.

"Such an outlook arises from faith in the God of life, who has created every individual as a 'wonder' (cf. Ps 139:14)," JPII says in Mulieris Dignitatem. "It is the outlook of those who see life in its deeper meaning, who grasp its utter gratuitousness, its beauty and its invitation to freedom and responsibility. It is the outlook of those who do not presume to take possession of reality but instead accept it as a gift, discovering in all things the reflection of the Creator and seeing in every person his living image" (n. 83).

JPII invited women to create a new feminism based on this premise. He was sure that if only enough women responded to this invitation, the world would be a better place. As Fr Richard Taylor said this morning, the way in which we approach other souls is all important: **“Conversion is often the result of perceived compassion.”** It is not enough to witness to the truth: we have to approach people with what I can only describe as a motherly or fatherly care. There is no doubt in my mind that JPII believed that women had a crucial role to play here, as women who respond to the example of Christ, and who in turn inspire men to genuine spiritual fatherhood - and in MD JPII goes so far as to say that men learn their fatherhood from women. The feminine ability to respond to grace is of course rooted in the Gospels themselves.

“Christ speaks to women about the things of God,” he said. “And they understand them; there is a true resonance of mind and heart, a response of faith. Jesus expresses appreciation and admiration for this distinctly "feminine" response, as in the case of the Canaanite woman (cf. Mt 15:28 - the woman at the well). Sometimes he presents this lively faith, filled with love, as an example. He teaches, therefore, taking as his starting-point this feminine response of mind and heart.”

This is not to assert that women are superior to men (we've been told not to imitate patterns of male domination, remember!), or even that the vocation to marriage and childbearing has precedence over a celibate vocation. Far from it. As JPII says in MD, there is simply a model and a pattern here which is both relevant and complementary to the consecrated vocation, both male and female:

*“It is precisely in the face of the 'mighty works of God' that Saint Paul, as a man, feels the need to refer to what is essentially feminine in order to express the truth about his own apostolic service. This is exactly what Paul of Tarsus does when he addresses the Galatians with the words: "**My little children, with whom I am again in travail**" (Gal 4:19). In the First Letter to the Corinthians (7:38) Saint Paul proclaims the superiority of virginity over marriage, which is a constant teaching of the Church in accordance with the spirit of Christ's words recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (19: 10-12); he does so without in any way obscuring the importance of physical and spiritual motherhood. Indeed, in order to illustrate the Church's fundamental mission, he finds nothing better than the **reference to motherhood.**”*

If it's good enough for St Paul, then it's good enough for me! So let us look for a moment at the existential raw material, so to speak, of giving birth. Of course, the most noticeable thing is that it involves suffering. Women may already suffer when they are pregnant. We certainly suffer when we give birth. An acceptance of that suffering for the sake of the 'other' - the child - is part and parcel of what a mature maternity means.

The human reaction to suffering is often to reject, or at least try and protect oneself from that which makes us suffer. And yet women giving birth must do the opposite: we must embrace, protect, rejoice in

the very cause of our suffering. We must pass through the Cross. This is surely the existential truth at the heart of what St Paul is referring to when he says that women are saved by child-bearing. If this insight on his part is taken in a moralistic, or worse - a chauvinistic - sense, it entirely misses the point. For we are not saved by suffering in and of itself. Neither are we saved by our usefulness to society. We are saved by the passion and death of Christ. The new feminism will, I suspect, be rooted in the central mystery of Christianity: the mystery of fruition through suffering.

More than this: after giving birth, we are asked to be present for our children at every level, not just in early childhood, not just in the teen years, but potentially, at some moments, all through their lives (and by extension, to all those other souls who enter into our children's lives). In this we touch on the Marian mystery. If we have ears to hear, we hear the voice of Christ through our exercise of both psychological and spiritual motherhood. We are asked to *hear this voice, to hear this word, the Logos which gives supreme meaning to each individual life*. Women have the potential to become the locus of everything that makes a society function properly: to be, sometimes invisibly, yet always tangibly, a sphere of *creative influence* in the world.

Finally, I want to come back to that "threshold" on which I was standing in Loreto. The quotation from *Mulieris Dignitatem* with which I began comes at the end of the Pope's comment on a Gospel incident specifically relating to the motherhood of the Blessed Virgin:

"Does not Jesus bear witness to this reality when he answers the exclamation of that woman in the crowd who blessed him for Mary's motherhood: "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!"? Jesus replies: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Lk 11:27-28). Jesus confirms the meaning of motherhood in reference to the body, but at the same time he indicates an even deeper meaning, which is connected with the order of the spirit: it is a sign of the Covenant with God who "is spirit" (Jn 4: 24). This is true above all for the motherhood of the Mother of God. The motherhood of every woman, understood in the light of the Gospel, is similarly not only "of flesh and blood": it expresses a profound "listening to the word of the living God" and a readiness to "safeguard" this Word, which is "the word of eternal life" (cf. Jn 6:68). For it is precisely those born of earthly mothers, the sons and daughters of the human race, who receive from the Son of God the power to become "children of God" (Jn 1:12). A dimension of the New Covenant in Christ's blood enters into human parenthood, making it a reality and a task for "new creatures" (cf. 2 Cor 5: 17). The history of every human being passes through the threshold of a woman's motherhood; crossing it conditions "the revelation of the children of God" (cf. Rom 8: 19).

In his last poetic cycle, *Roman Triptych*, written soon after the dawning of the new millennium,

***Blessed John Paul wrote again of the threshold:
Let me halt before a threshold,
The threshold of pure wonder...
The rushing stream cannot wonder
As it descends, and the woods silently slope,
Following its rhythm.
But man can wonder!
The threshold which the world crosses in him
Is the threshold of wonder.
Once this very wonder was given a name: "Adam".***

In the second part of the Triptych he reflects on the Sistine Chapel. I have always been fascinated by the picture of Eve under the arm of God, looking at Adam as God gives him life. It is almost as though Michelangelo intends us to feel that the idea of Eve actually inspired the bodily creation of Adam....

Yet the rough little house at Loreto still trumps the genius of the Sistine Chapel, for nothing I have talked about today makes sense without that silent thunderclap of salvation history, when the second Adam becomes incarnate in the womb of the second Eve. Here, when we contemplate that momentous event in Nazareth, we are truly standing on the threshold between heaven and earth, looking into the heart

of the meeting between God and creature. As JP II demonstrates, this moment in time connects both with the origin of humanity, and its eschatological end.

“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, 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.”

It occurred to me as I stood at the back of the Holy House, feeling the variation in size and shape of the bricks which form it, the only problem the rest of us have, is that we are clearly *not* immaculate. This is probably one of the few forums in which I can mention the word ‘transition’, and be instantly understood... The moment when a woman giving birth is most likely to be thinking, could I sign off now and go home? Of course she can’t... Every apostolate will have its crunch points, moments when humanly speaking we simply cannot go on. Yet it is in this moment, the moment of impossibility, that the Redeemer awaits us: in this moment we know that the new birth is *very close*. And this is the moment where above all, we have to abandon ourselves. If we try to take charge - if we push too much, too soon - well, damage may occur. Perhaps we also need to be thinking of woman as midwife: standing by the labouring one with calm advice, being attentive to and protective of the ‘crowning’ which heralds the epiphany to come.

The experience of childbirth, one of the few loci of biological realism left in a materially-cushioned culture, can put us in contact with the suffering of the rest of the world. As such it could, if we let it, contribute to a new template for social cohesion. A template in which the worst moments of human existence are redeemed by the knowledge that nothing is meaningless, nothing is in vain. The meaning is quite simply the Logos, the Word made flesh, not an abstraction but a Person, given to us even today, under the form of bread and wine. A body and blood which, like the womb which bore Him, never fails to nourish.

By accepting to be that *threshold* which reveals the children of God, by echoing Mary’s *Fiat* to the unfolding of the Word in our lives, we ordinary, fallen women may then contribute to something much, much greater than ourselves. *Compassion is the crowning glory of witness*, we heard this morning. Blessed John Paul more than hints at this mystery, which echoes the final mystery of the rosary, when he starts to unpack the meaning of the words: *And your sons and daughters shall prophecy*. Here is my final quote from *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

“If the human being is entrusted by God to women in a particular way, does this not mean that Christ looks to them for the accomplishment of the *"royal priesthood"*, which is the treasure he has given to **every individual**? Christ, as the supreme and only priest of the New and Eternal Covenant, and as the Bridegroom of the Church, does not cease to submit this same inheritance to the Father through the Spirit, so that God may be *"everything to everyone"*. Then the truth that *"the greatest of these is love"* will have its **definitive fulfillment**.”

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