

«For a new approach to the question of women in ecclesiology»

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Dear Maria-Lia, dear all coming from all over the world,

I would like to begin by warmly thanking you for having associated me with your meeting in Assisi. Above all, thank you for allowing me to experience, through the dynamism of the Christians you are, the living, ardent Church, the Church so actively engaged in the mission that Christ entrusts her, in the midst of a world often cruelly suffering.

I would add that I am going to speak, for my part, as a Christian woman, as a Catholic theologian, who has just arrived from Paris. This means that what I am about to say will reflect the sensitivity of the Church of Europe to which I belong, with its worries, its problems, its expectations, which are not necessarily the worries and expectations of each one of you, in the many countries you represent. But I firmly believe in the virtue of the encounter of differences, based on our common passion for the Gospel and our common desire to see women achieve a better life, for their own happiness, and for the health and future of their societies.

Opening

My remarks will start from the observation of a paradox.

Let me explain. As we all know, the Catholic Church's relationship with women has changed over the past half century. The status of women and their promotion have become a constant concern of the magisterium. Thus, even before the Council, Pope John XXIII spoke of a "sign of the times" concerning the accession of women to public life. Then Pope Paul VI gave a very vibrant tribute to women in one of his concluding discourses of the Council in December 1965. Then, of course, was Pope John Paul II with *Mulieris dignitatem* in 1988 and countless speeches in which he honored women, in particular by emphasizing their role in promoting peace in the world. Then it was Benedict XVI, then our Pope Francis, concerned about the issue of women from the beginning of his pontificate. All this is the happy side of the story we are living. Yet we also know that, in spite of everything, the condition of women in the ecclesial institution remains a problem. Witness to this is the feedback of synodal preparations for the next synod, as expressed in the various communities of the world. We must agree

that the common experience of women is that of a lack of recognition, sometimes the experience of humiliation, even violence, at least that of being systematically kept away from decision-making bodies.

So how can we understand this paradox? And how can we really achieve progress? On the basis of these questions, I will offer you a few brief thoughts, starting with a reflection on the theme of the “feminine specific”, a very present motive today in the discourse of the Magisterium. Then we will reflect on the *Christian newness*, as St Paul proclaims it. This novelty, which, precisely, concerns especially the relationship between men and women. And this novelty is still far too ignored in our communities¹.

1. On the mention of female “specific”

It is a fact that the magisterial declarations concerning women insist on the specificity of the female identity. Added to this is the no less recurrent warning: this specificity of the feminine would be endangered, if women were to gain functions hitherto reserved for men; women would be in danger of masculinizing themselves, of betraying their nature. Note in passing that this feminine singularity has no counterpart: I mean that there is, symmetrically, no question about what might be the specificity of the masculine. In fact, a very shared belief is that the masculine would have the privilege, not only to express the experience of men, but to express the entire human condition. Speaking of themselves, men would therefore speak of all humans. Under these conditions, we understand that women are supposed not to have to express themselves in their own voice!

In this logic, the feminine perceived as a particular and more limited version of the human condition, is associated with the registering of sensation, sensitivity, emotion, thus marked by a certain psychological fragility. And this is in contrast to the man to whom is associated control, rational discernment, which would make him the natural and legitimate holder of authority. And, moreover, woman would be more immediately exposed to temptation and thus also dangerous for man, as seems to confirm the figure of Eve, as a misogynistic tradition interprets it. It must be admitted that this stereotype of the dangerous woman is the source of fears, that societies conjure up by strict supervision and male control of women, especially exercised on their bodies.

¹ My communication will join thoughts that I developed especially in *L'Eglise, des femmes avec des hommes*, Paris, Cerf, 2019 and *L'Eglise et le féminin, Revisiter l'histoire pour servir l'Évangile*, Paris, Salvator, 2021.

If I recall these things that we know well, it is because they constitute, even today, among us, a kind of unconscious, which could explain many of the resistances to which the need for reform in the Church is confronted. This unconscious explains in particular the delays and the objections that we deplore in the way of considering the «question of women», in an ecclesial institution that remains exposed to the risk of misogyny. And this, even though the Gospel account should inspire us and give us energy to work for the emancipation of women, remembering the way Jesus behaved towards the women who crossed his path. Do we remember enough how he honours them, how he joins them in their greatest humiliations, how he sets an example for his disciples (Let us remember, for example, the widow of the temple mentioned on the threshold of the narration of the Passion, Mary of Bethany, the sinner who throws herself at his feet in the house of the Pharisee...), how He entrusts to them the first proclamation of the Resurrection, or how He freed himself from the taboo of their alleged impurity. In these conditions, the persistence of misogynistic reflexes and the inequalities that follow should constitute for us a provocation to receive a little more the message of the Gospel.

In fact, I would tend to think that a certain way of exalting «the feminine genius», of adorning the Woman with an excellence that sometimes even becomes a superiority over the man, all this exposes to a subtle trap. “*Women have something else, and so much more,*” we often hear say.² Could it not be that this a priori flattering discourse helps to keep women away from male places and roles, which concentrate in the Church the exercise of authority and especially the sacred service of the liturgy? I think we have to dare to raise that suspicion today. Not to yield to malice, but to progress in the truth of a Church more faithful to the Gospel of Christ.

2. Reintegrating women into the Church-Body of Christ

A Church more faithful to the Gospel, would it not be the inclusive Church, which gathers together those who are born again of Baptism, those who, in Christ’s communion, are introduced to filial life, the Church who rediscovers her identity as the Body of Christ, as Saint Paul teaches us to know her? Let us hear again the first letter to the *Corinthians* (1 Cor 12, 12-30), or the letter to the *Ephesians* (Ephesians 4:1-16), where all, men and woman, are "together" in a common identity, since there is only “*one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*” (Eph 4:5). It is in this Church that Christians must be reintegrated. That is, in my view, the first emergency.

² . We should also ask about this “something else”, which is probably largely a male representation of the female, which does not necessarily correspond to what women experience in their intimacy, nor to their deepest aspirations.

It is in these teachings of Paul that we will also find the reality and a healthy intelligence of the charisms, of which it appears that they are not «gendered», as we would say in our current language (I refer to the Apostle's final greetings in the Letter to the Romans, which mention as many women as men). Charisms which, moreover, are given to particular persons constituted as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors or doctors, not for their personal benefit or glory, but for the good of the whole community, at the service of the life and growth of the whole body.

Finally, this Church is the one evoked in the Letter to the Galatians, when it proclaims the Christian newness by proclaiming that henceforth, in Christ, by baptism, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female*" (Gal 3:28). A formidable statement which means that in Christ unequal relations between men and women are overcome. In Christ, all that distorts this relationship (cf. Genesis 3, which mentions violence, domination, evil seduction, which follow transgression), is now surmountable, so that the original truth of humanity is once again accessible to us.

It is therefore this Church, the apostolic Church, that we must find again, and in which we must re-integrate women, before any consideration of the specific nature of their identity. This Church is the one of Christ's disciples, men and women alike, born into the same filial life before any distinction of function, state of life, of sex. And thus, in primary relationship of brotherhood. Let us not forget that the name of the early Church was that of brotherhood (*adelphotes*)!

This must be the starting point of our ecclesiology, in urgent need of renewal. And it is not necessary to recall here that to speak of ecclesiology is not simply to evoke a learned discourse, forged by specialists of theology for specialists. It is speaking of truths that involve practices, affecting the most concrete life of the Church, that refer in particular to the urgent question of ministries today, in the way of defining them, to recognize them and to institute them in and for the ecclesial body.

3. Starting from the common, recognize different styles in the way of following Christ

Honouring diversity after recognizing what is shared

Once the reality of *the common* is clearly assured, which is the foundation of Christian life in all - and only then - it becomes possible, and even very necessary, to rediscover the reality of diversity. But, before going any further, let us repeat that the decisive point is to order the *common* and the *specific*, recognising that to begin by invoking the specificity of the feminine invoke is to be unaware,

to crush the reality of what unites us all in a common identity. It is respect for this good order which constitutes the *sine qua non*, both of the recognition of the baptismal dignity of every member of the Church, and of a right theology of the ministerial priesthood. It is the respect of this order, ultimately, that is the condition for a correct conception of difference.

Finally, it is a question of honouring *diversity*, the richness of creation and life that the biblical tradition valorizes so much. I intend the various ways of living the *sequela Christi*. The latter, in fact, is not practised in quite the same way in the masculine and the feminine. For there are certainly different ways of relating to life, to the flesh, to the other, of relating also to time. In the same way, there are especially different ways of facing the violence of the world. I recall, for example, the book by Svetlana Alexievitch, a Belarusian novelist who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 2015, the title of which is *La guerre n'a pas un visage de femme*³ (War has no woman's face). Many of you who live in countries where the violence of terrorism and war is rampant could bear witness to this truth.

Finally, the difference of the sexes refers to different styles in the way of living the unique human condition as well as the one baptismal condition, knowing that each sex may have a particular ease of living, more specifically this or that aspect of shared life, of the mission entrusted. To say this does not mean to ignore that the life lived has infinitely more complexity and exchange than what a rigid, essentialized vision of the masculine and the feminine would seem to think by assigning both to predetermined roles. In this sense, it seems to me that we must take care, for example, not to involve women too exclusively in the service of others, in the care, as we say, forgetting that this service is the truth of every human existence, and more than ever of every Christian existence, as the Gospel account, which puts us in the presence of a man, Jesus, who was throughout his life in an attitude of service, of the life given to the other. As attest— let us not forget this in this city of Assisi — the figure of Francis, *the Poverello*! And, for example, the eminent figure of Dr Mugwebe testifies also today.⁴

A «God of women»?

Finally, it should probably be added that men and women do not relate in exactly the same way to God. In this sense, we must consider that there is a “God of women”, using the expression of the Italian

³ Svetlana Alexievitch, *La guerre n'a pas un visage de femme*, 1985, French translation Paris, 2004. She evokes the commitment of Russian women during the Second World War, from the memory they have kept of this time of trial, in contrast with the memory of men.

⁴ I would like to point out that Dr. Mugwebe's book, *La force des femmes*, translated in French by Ed. Gallimard, 2021, received a very warm welcome in France.

philosopher Luisa Muraro.⁵ This «God of women» is indeed the «God of all», but a «God of all» who can only be properly approached by being simultaneously the God of men and women!

That would be quite a thought to continue. Let us just say that it would certainly be necessary to contrast a masculine, who is more spontaneously inclined to speak *of* God (it is thanks to this, moreover, that the immense and so rich tradition of theology has been developed) and a feminine, who is more inclined to speak *to* God, to know God in the experience of the encounter of the other, who is also the test of this encounter and, in this case, the ordeal of the night. As such, women more easily gain the recognition that the night is as necessary as the full day to the knowledge of God.

Ultimately, the challenge is therefore to recognize that it is in a polyphonic way, which weaves together the words of men and women, that the face of God must be questioned, that Revelation must be scrutinized, that the Gospel must be proclaimed.

To conclude provisionally...

—so I would suggest that we no longer say “*women have something else, and so much more*”, but “*women have the same thing, differently*”. Either a way of honouring the primacy of *the common* that all share and, simultaneously, a new way of considering the relationship of the sexes within the Church.

It is on this basis that we should be able to tackle with greater freedom and creativity, it seems to me, several burning issues today in the Church of Europe to which I belong. Thus, the female diaconate, envisaged as a ministry shared identically with men through the same institution, and simultaneously exercised by women in their own way. I would add in this regard that the Church in Europe is being preceded by the women of the Amazon, to whom we owe that the question had been revived by the Synod for the Amazon. Another question is that of the *service of the Word*, including in the practice of the homily. I am a direct witness that this diacony of the word is seeking its way in communities in France, but also in Switzerland, and probably far beyond.⁶ It is urgent that we recognize the possibility of a delegation of this diaconia. It would not be a revolution! Let us consider that there existed until the Middle Ages, in the Church, a *munus praedicandi*, a charge of preaching that could be conferred by the bishop to someone other than a priest. Let us not forget the voice of Catherine of Siena. And this is to the great benefit of the understanding of the Word of God, because one and the other do not identify the treasures of the Scriptures in exactly the same way. This means that the

⁵ Luisa Muraro, *Il Dio delle donne*, Milano, 2003, French translation, Ed. Lessius, 2006.

⁶ See E. Bianchi, C. U. Cortoni, F. Mandreoli, R. Saccenti, *Anche i laici possono predicare?* (Can the laity also preach?), Edizioni Qiqajon, Comunità di Bose, 2017; French translation *Les laïcs peuvent-ils aussi prêcher?*, Éditions Lessius, 2020.

proclamation of faith can also grow from taking place through the mouths of women associated with men.

Indeed, the Church can and must become polyphonic in all manner of ways, becoming authentically inclusive. This reality is obviously not foreign to the synodality promoted by Pope Francis. The intervention of Sister Nathalie Becquart sensitized us yesterday to the fact that there is a mutual implication between synodality, “walking together”, and the promotion of women in the Church. But, as we know, this synodality, which began under the impetus of Pope Francis, needs today to be truly unfolded. We must be aware that it remains partly programmatic.

May we work for its realization in the freedom of the Spirit, for the honour of women, for the credibility of faith, and for the greatest glory of God!