Part 1: The Dignity of Women in God's Plan

Before addressing the topic of *Mary, Icon of the Holy Spirit*, I want to speak to how Mary's role in salvation history affirms the dignity of women. I want to dwell for a moment on how Mary's role in the Incarnation, where God entrusted himself to the "free and active ministry of a woman," reveals something essential about womanhood and the dignity of women in God's plan.[1]

Karl Barth, the renowned Swiss Protestant theologian, emphasizes how Mary's role in the Incarnation reinforces the dignity of women. "World history is the story of men! However, *in order to give God alone all the honor* in the greatest work of world history, here God excluded the man and his doing."[2]

Following up on this line of thinking, some argue that references to God by only using masculine pronouns inadvertently communicate that men are superior to women. The Genesis account of Eve tempting Adam has given rise, sadly, throughout history and, in some circles today, to the wrong perception of women. They have been seen as the source of evil, inferior to men in general and morally in particular. Some protest the use of masculine pronouns, and the description of God as being predominantly masculine perpetuates that stereotype and a patriarchal hierarchy. We will see later that the Church's use of masculine imagery when referring to the Triune God is not about gender but is theological language meant to protect certain truths.

Recall that Adam was given the role of ruler and protector of the Garden of Eden. His responsibility was to cultivate and care for creation entrusted to him by God. His dominion was to be distinguished by wisdom, responsibility, and reverence for God's gift of creation.[3]

Adam was present with Eve when she was tempted. He did not intervene, offered no protest, and quickly ate the forbidden fruit himself. That was an abnegation of his role as ruler and protector of the Garden of Eden. That is why St. Paul would say, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned" (Romans 5:12).[4] When the chips were down, Adam was a no-show![5]

---

[1] *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*, 1990. #41, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccscrlife/documents/rc_con_ccscrlife_doc_02021990_directives-on-formation_en.html.

[2] *Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf,* 1927, p. 278.

[3] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html.

[4] Ibid.

[5] That explains why nothing happened after Eve ate the forbidden fruit the Garden of Eden. It was only after Adam ate the forbidden fruit that the consequences were set in motion. "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves" (Gen.3:7). Before Eve was created, God expressly gave Adam the responsibility to cultivate and care for the Garden (Gen.3:15) and this command, "You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. From that tree you shall not eat; when you eat from it you shall die" (Gen. 3: 16-17). When Adam ate from the fruit, he had failed to care for the Garden of Eden as he had been instructed. Consequently, consequences were set in motion, which is how sin and death entered the world.

Referring back to Karl Barth, no wonder God excluded man and his doing when God performed the greatest work in world history and chose a woman to carry the Son of God in her womb. Theologically speaking, God's decision to intervene in this manner makes it very clear that God is taking the initiative and that this is a work of God. Mary's complete and total openness, receptivity, and joy (The Magnificat) at being the handmaid of the Lord epitomizes what should be the relationship between God and the Church.[6] That is also why Mary is considered the model of discipleship.

The Incarnation is God beginning a new creation and reversing the sinful effects of the first one. Mary is the New Eve. The New Adam, Jesus, comes from the womb of Mary, reversing the original creation from which Eve came from Adam's rib. This understanding of the story of the Garden of Eden turns upside down any perception that God created women inferior to men, including in the order of grace.[7]

Consequently, anyone who would question the dignity of women needs to go no further than to ponder the role that Mary has and is playing in the history of salvation. The Holy Spirit affirms several feminine traits through Mary. For example, *the Holy Spirit affirmed fruitfulness and motherhood*, which enabled Mary to conceive and give birth to the Son of God.[8] The feminine traits of *receptivity* and *docility* allow her to be completely open and obedient to the action of the Holy Spirit.[9] Her *intercession directs her tenderness and compassion toward caring for the Church*.[10]

Some writers portray the *relationship between the Holy Spirit and Mary as a spousal union,* though it is mystical and not physical or sensual.[11] If we were to stretch the marital union between the Holy Spirit and

---

[6] God had already promised eternal life to our first parents. Fr. Ron Rolheiser observes that God said "I am going to put you into the garden,…and I am going to give you life." God is talking about eternal life since death would come only through Adam's sin, which had not yet occurred. Note that eternal life is a gift, which is given in love and must be received in love. That is why the Church prescribes we receive Christ in the Eucharist either on the palm of our hand or on our tongue. To reach out and take the Eucharist from the hands of the priest or Eucharistic Minister is prohibited. It is because that gesture recalls the original sin when Adam and Eve reached out to take the forbidden fruit, which was a participation in the divine life. Instead, at Holy Communion, we reverently receive the Body of Christ with love from the priest or Extraordinary Minister of the Eucharist. Christ who is the source of eternal life comes to us in love. We do need not to take Christ but to receive him in love. In this simple gesture, it is as if we are transported to the Garden of Eden but this time getting it right by reverently *receiving* Christ rather than *taking* or *grasping* the Bread of Eternal Life. Taking the consecrated Host hints at an underlying aggressiveness, which got Adam and Eve and all humanity in trouble in the first place. Sin itself is rooted in aggressive acts where we take what we regard is ours and leads to all manner of violence.

[7] As an aside, Mary who is the mother of Jesus is also the mother of God because Jesus is one person, the second person of the Trinity, who is truly human and truly divine. To say that Mary is only the mother of Jesus in his humanity is to deny his divinity. That is why Catholics say that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is also the mother of God. This designation further highlights the dignity of Mary and of all women in the order of grace.

[8] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Pope John Paul II, #723.

[9] *Marialis Cultus*, Pope Paul VI, 1974, #26.

[10] *Letter Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2016, #24,
It is not an accident that since the Church's earliest days, the faithful have venerated her and prayed for her intercession. That is precisely what Jesus intended when, from the cross, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold your son. Son," and to his beloved disciple, "Behold your mother" (John 19:26-27). The faithful have been doing that for centuries in obedience to their divine master who redirected Mary's maternal care to the Church and for the Church to benefit from the graces that flow through her. Mary as the Mother of God, intercessor, and a model of faith and discipleship describe her unique role in the divine plan of salvation.

[11] *Marialis Cultus*, Pope Paul VI, 1974, #26. I want to add that Mary could not be the spouse of the Holy Spirit since she was married to St. Joseph. In addition, because the term "spouse" can imply a certain equality or mutuality that does not adequately capture her relationship with the Holy Spirit, which characterizes her role as a humble servant and disciple rather than as a partner in the divine plan. Some saints and others do refer to Mary as the Spouse of the Holy Spirit. St. Francis of Assisi is an example. However, it is used in a devotional context, which differs from

Mary to its logical conclusion, then the Holy Spirit would be committing adultery since Mary is already married to Joseph. At the same time, we can speak of the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary by whom she conceives and gives birth to the Son of God. This event is unique and unrepeatable.

God, Lord of creation, is free to suspend the laws of nature to serve his purposes, but not free to go against his nature and act immorally. Notice that Mary certainly informed Joseph of her intentions to remain a virgin. He accepted her decision and did not expect to have children. Furthermore, God respects Mary's freedom to accept or decline her vocation to be the mother of the Messiah. Suffice it to say, God is not taking advantage of Mary or Joseph.

Finally, the Fathers of the Church attributed Mary's original holiness and subsequent *consecration* into a Temple of the Holy Spirit to the *sanctifying* work of the Spirit—no other saint, whether a man or woman, can equal or surpass the Blessed Virgin Mary. As the Mother of God, she enjoys a unique and exalted position among all creatures. She is "endowed with the high office and dignity of being the Mother of God" and is "the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit."[12]

In light of the above, anyone who thinks using male language to reference God demeans women and infers women are unsuitable to "image or carry the divine" to the world needs to reset their spiritual GPS and recalculate.

Moving forward, Mary's role is inseparably linked to the saving work of her son. She is "the Mother of the members of Christ" and a "preeminent and singular member of the Church." The Church honors her and turns to her in order to come closer to Christ.[13]

I have been asked if there is any conflict for a male religious order to think, judge, feel, and act like a woman, the Mother of God, or to take direction from her. Concerning the former, Mary is the preeminent disciple of Christ and a model of what it means to be Church. If God can entrust himself to the "free and active ministry of a woman," so can men.

Regarding taking direction from Mary, the Mother of God, we only need to look at our society, where more and more women assume leadership and responsibility in roles traditionally limited to men. Marian congregations of male religious have not experienced that conflict by taking Mary as their inspiration and model. Unbeknownst to them, they were contributing to the creation of a society and the Church that would expand women's leadership roles, a work in progress on both fronts.

The Marists take it a step further and regard her as the first and perpetual superior of the congregation named after her, the Society of Mary. Furthermore, it is considered a privilege and a responsibility to be called a Marist, which we believe is by her gracious choice. In this way, Marists attest to the dignity of women that Mary embodies and invites men and women to acknowledge and respect.

---

making a theological assertion. The intense union of Mary with the Holy Spirit is like or similar to marriage but not equivalent.

[12] *Lumen Gentium*, Pope Paul VI, 1964, Dogmatic Constitution, #53, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

[13] *Lumen Gentium*, Pope Paul VI, 1964, Dogmatic Constitution, #53, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

From the Marist perspective, we can only pray that the whole Church would think, judge, feel, and act like Mary in all things. That is what Fr. Colin envisioned when he expressed his dream that the whole Church would be Marist, in spirit, not necessarily in name. As we will see, in light of what constitutes the beauty of Mary's interior life, it is with fear and trembling that we should proceed to think, judge, feel, and act like her in all things, especially in relation to her son.