

## *Commentary on Pope John Paul II's "A Letter to the Women of the World"*

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In his recent remarks on the role of women in culture and society, John Paul II seems to have jumped the gun on the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women. If the United Nations and the Non-Governmental Organizations can speak as boldly and with a like conviction, and if they can reach agreement on as many vital issues as the Pope has done in his *Letter* of June 29th, then, perhaps all the pain and frustration, the harassment and surveillance, not to mention the sometimes outrageous behaviour of Beijing's security police, will have been worthwhile.

The Pope's *Letter*, which was published on July 10th in *L'Osservatore Romano*, opens with the words: "I greet you all most cordially, Women throughout the world." He goes on to underline the need for the universal recognition of woman's dignity and the respect due her everywhere.

Perhaps one of the reasons the Pope's *Letter* caused such a stir and enjoyed such widespread publicity was because few women, especially the activists among them, thought they would ever live to see the day such radical and feminist ideas would emanate from the Vatican and, more specifically, from the likes of John Paul II. Those who thought they knew the Pope's mind on this matter, found themselves sorely mistaken, and those who were ready to dismiss his views as hopelessly medieval, were, for the most part, pleasantly surprised.

But those who have been following the Pope's talks to the faithful, who gather to pray the Angelus with him each Sunday in his summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, have also noticed something else. He seems to be widening his own traditional views on women, and in so doing is revealing a new ecclesial face and, perhaps, a more progressive papal stance towards women everywhere.

Previously, whenever the Pope spoke of women, his words were directed towards women in the Church and were couched in the old traditional refrains: women were to be good wives and mothers, and their role was limited more or less to one within

the family. Now, however, according to his recent *Letter*, women are no longer to be defined solely by their roles within the family, i.e., faithful wives, loving mothers, obedient daughters and sisters. Their worth, value and dignity is no longer to be seen as directly related to childbearing, but is also made manifest in the work they do outside the home in society.

When Mrs. Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Conference, visited John Paul II prior to the Beijing meeting, he gave her a written *Message*, which he said "was concerned with a broader vision of the situation and problems of *women in general*, in an attempt to promote the *cause* of women in the Church and in today's world..." He went on to say: "I wish that consideration be given to the essential issue of the *dignity* and the *rights* of women, as seen in light of the Word of God."

The Pope intends his *Letter* to be part of a *dialogue* between himself, as the Church's official representative, and all women throughout the world. The dialogue begins with a word of thanksgiving. Quoting from *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the Holy Father writes: "The Church desires to give thanks for the mystery of women, for all that constitutes the eternal measure of her feminine dignity, for the great works of God which throughout human history have been accomplished in and through her" (n.31). He then goes on to give thanks to women, each in her particular role: to women who are mothers...women who are wives...women who are daughters...women who are sisters... and women who work outside the home."

This is the first time in his official writings that the Pope acknowledges publicly and with such strong affirmation the presence of women in every area of life: social, economic, cultural, artistic, and political. "In this way," the Pope says, "you make an indispensable contribution to the growth of a culture which unites reason and feeling to a mode of life ever open to the sense of mystery, to the establishment of economic and political structures ever more worthy of humanity."

The words of gratitude do not stop there. The Pope also thanks *consecrated women* for their contributions to the Church and their openness "with obedience and fidelity to the gift of God's love." And the Pope ends with these words to women everywhere: "Thank you for the simple fact of being a woman."

The Holy Father comments on the role history has played in conditioning our cultural and social responses towards women,

and how throughout history their dignity as women has gone unacknowledged, their rights violated and their role and status misrepresented. He maintains, and rightly so, that women have often been relegated to the margins of society and often reduced to servitude. Nor does the Pope shy away from speaking of the sexual violence done to them, the systematic exploitation of their physical appearance, and the universal failure to recognize their intellectual abilities and their deep sensitivity. When speaking of the violation of their human rights, the Holy Father diplomatically avoids mention of any one particular country by name. But certainly China, with its one child policy, forced abortions and sterilizations, its high incidence of female infanticide, of abandoned female babies, and the traffic in young girls sold into slavery, all this could not have been too far from the Pope's mind as he wrote. Given China's track record of human rights in general and women's rights in particular, it does seem quite paradoxical that the UN chose China as the venue for this Conference.

The Holy Father readily admits that the Church itself is not free of blame in its mistreatment of women in the past and he attacks any notion of stereotyping women within the church into one or the other of two extremes: that of Eve the temptress or Mary the perfect virgin and mother. He calls the whole Church, both men and women "to a renewed commitment of fidelity to the Gospel vision and the attitude of Jesus who transcended the norms prevalent in his culture and treated women with openness, respect, acceptance and tenderness."

Some, while applauding the broadening horizons of the papal attitude towards women, will do so with certain reservations. There are those who will, no doubt, continue to fault him for his regard for human life that will not allow for a victim of rape to undergo an abortion. But perhaps most women will find it even more difficult to understand the Pope's reiteration of his stand against the ordination of women to the priesthood. His argument that their exclusion from the ministerial priesthood in no way detracts from their role in the church, since they continue to share in the common priesthood of Christ, will fall short of convincing many. The point he makes that such a role distinction cannot be judged "according to the particular criteria of functionality typical of human societies" may also prove rather difficult to accept, especially in the knowledge that such an

argument holds no water in a court of law. The Pope argues that God, in the *sacramental economy*, i.e. the economy of 'signs', freely chose to make himself present to humanity through the male icon, and this choice continues for now and forever as the will of God. Such an attitude does not augur well for the cause of equality of men and women in the Church of the future.

During his Sunday Angelus reflections on the theme of women in society, while the Pope repeated material already covered in his *Letter*, he would often elaborate on a particular point in greater detail. For example, on Sunday July 9th, the day before the *Letter's* official publication, he stressed the "complementarity and reciprocity which mark the relationship between the persons of the two sexes".

Here the Pope reminded the faithful of the biblical account of creation in which God after creating the man "took pity on his loneliness and decided to give him a *helper fit for him* (Gn 2:18). Only the woman could fill this void. The Pope was quick to add "the help is anything but unilateral: *a woman is a 'helper' for a man, just as a man is a 'helper' for a woman!*"

In other Angelus addresses, the Holy Father stressed the unique genius of women which is essential to the life of Church and society, and he acknowledged that the role of woman is played out not only in the home but also in "the wider context of all social activities." He was quick to point out that in most societies women have been held back from developing their full potential by cultural traditions and taboos, which have also prevented them from putting their unique gifts to work to develop the potential of those very same societies and cultures. The Pope sees this as an injustice "not only to the women themselves, but to society as a whole."

In his talk on Sunday July 30, the Pope, while stressing the mission of women in society, suggested that the time had come to rewrite history, which has up to the present day concentrated almost entirely on the achievements of men, with little or no acknowledgment of the enormous debt owed to women in every area of social and cultural progress.

On Sunday August 6, the Pope bemoaned the fact that women have too long been denied opportunities for expression outside the limits of the family circle. "Unfortunately, in looking objectively at historical reality, we are compelled to notice with

regret that, even at this level, women have suffered the effects of systematic *marginalization*. For too long their opportunities for expression outside the family have been denied or restricted, and those women, who despite being thus penalized, succeeded in asserting themselves have had to be very enterprising."

The Pope hopes the Beijing Conference will help to "close the gap between the cultural opportunities for men and women," since "women are more than qualified to be protagonists in the world of culture in all its branches. Cultural activity calls into question the human person as a whole, in the twofold complementary sensitivity of man and woman."

A woman can only wonder at this point what the Pope would say if he should ever decide to write a *Letter* to men. Would he have to stress their need for respect and dignity? Would there be any question of their marginalization, exploitation, or the violence done them in and by society? (Would there ever be a need to thank them just for 'being men'?) And beyond all this, will there ever come a day when men and women will be able to talk together freely, with complete openness, equality and mutual respect, in a world in which there will be no more need for special letters that address half of humanity, or special international conferences to remedy the injustices done against half the human race?

Until that day comes, it seems appropriate, in the meantime, to express gratitude to the Pope John Paul II, who in many ways may be said to have written a sympathetic love letter to the women of the world. And he has indeed alerted the whole Church to its need for an authentic *metanoia* in their regard, and by addressing his remarks to all the women of the world, he has opened doors to the possibility of a deeper dialogue between men and women everywhere. Could we add here, thank you for being Pope?

