

Summary of *Mulieris Dignitatem*

This Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD) was written in 1988 on the feast of the Assumption. It is divided into 9 chapters including an Introduction and a Conclusion. The following is a systematic summary for each chapter.

Chapter I - Introduction

The letter was written for two reasons:

1. In 1987, in the light of Vatican Council II teachings, a Synod of Bishops gathered to examine the importance of the Laity in the Church and their mission. One of the Synod's recommendations was that further anthropological studies were needed to understand in the light of Revelation: what does it really mean to be a man or a woman?
2. 1988 was also a Marian Year; hence, the late Pope saw it fit to give his own theological understanding on the importance of the dignity and vocation of women, as Mary, Mother of God and of the Church is a model to be pondered upon and followed.

Chapter II – Woman-Mother of God (Theotókos)

The late Pope explains how the turning-point for all mankind came about through the Incarnation: the Word, the Son of God becoming flesh. This is foundational to our faith as it is through this particular event, that God revealed Himself fully to man and brought about our salvation. What is even more foundational is that this salvific event could only take place because of the response of one woman – the 'yes' that Mary uttered at the Annunciation. Through her 'yes', Mary has joined herself to God in a way not thought possible before: "*Mary attains a union with God that exceeds all the expectations of the human spirit.*" (MD, 3)

This 'fullness of time' as St Paul calls it in his letter to the Galatians, has two important aspects to consider:

1. The pure giftedness of God – God who gives Himself fully as Spirit so that humanity is elevated supernaturally to union with God. Mary here represents all humanity.
2. Mary's response in faith where she exercises free will and shares with both her personal and feminine self in the event of the Incarnation.

So here, the Pope continues, we find a dialogue: the Grace of God through what happened at Nazareth has perfected the '*characteristic of woman, of what is feminine*' (MD 5). Mary's response, on the other hand, in offering herself as the 'handmaid of the Lord', needs to be seen in its deepest meaning i.e. the awareness of Mary of being a creature of God but also in her taking the place with that of Her Son – the Servant of the Lord, who came into the world, not to be served but to serve. (See Mk 10, 45).

Every human person, male or female, is created and called for this full union with God and Mary is '*the most complete expression of this dignity and vocation.*' (MD, 5)

Chapter III – The Image and Likeness of God

The Pope now takes us to the first chapters of Genesis, where we find the foundational truths on the human being, what he calls '*the immutable basis of all Christian anthropology.*' (MD, 6) Referring to both accounts of the creation narratives (Gen 1-2), John Paul II affirms that the human person is the apex of God's creation, and that the personal character is that they are created '*man and woman, equally so*'. Not only, but being created in the image of the Trinity, man and woman are created for a mutual relationship – the man for the woman and the woman for the man i.e. they are called to

exist mutually "one for the other" (MD, 7) In the context of mutual self-gift, we are given the 'indispensable condition for the transmission of life to new generations' (ibid).

Although we were created in the image of God, there is also the "non-likeness" i.e. that which separates us from God, for God is also the complete Other. The Bible is replete with language that we as humans can understand. God reveals himself both as the Lover always in search of His estranged wife but also as a Mother who cares deeply for her child. It also represents God as Father; yet, we need to keep in mind that God is spirit. When we attribute to God the characteristics of Father or Mother, we must not perceive them in a physical sense but deeper in a divine sense. (See MD, 8)

Chapter IV – Eve-Mary

The following three chapters form the core of the document so to speak. Now the Pope moves on to the 'truth about sin' which cannot be read before giving the above framework. Man and woman were given the freedom to respond to the call " *to share in the intimate life of God himself.*" (MD, 9) Yet, both man and woman abused of this freedom and rejected God's call. As seen in Gen 3, sin brought about disruption in the mutual relationship between man and woman (apart from disruption with oneself and with nature). This rejection also forms part of the 'non-likeness' of man to God and it must have offended and wounded God as Father and Creator.

Both man and woman suffer the consequences: man with his toil, woman with her pain. However, the image and likeness of God has not been completely destroyed albeit diminished or obscured (see MD, 9). Part of the consequence of original sin is also male domination over woman. What is revealing is that because of this mutual relationship, whatever diminishes woman, in essence, also diminishes man, thus both are affected negatively.

Nevertheless, here lies also the good news: Gen 3, 15 known also as the *Proto-evangelium*, holds God's promise of salvation. Redemption shall be accomplished through a struggle against evil. Here, the Pope notes the strong emphasis placed on "the woman" – '*Mary assumes in herself and embraces the mystery of the "woman" whose beginning is Eve, "the mother of all the living.... Mary is the "the new beginning" of the dignity and vocation of each and every woman.*' (MD, 11).

Chapter V – Jesus Christ

Taking the life and deeds of Jesus Christ as narrated in the Gospels, we 'recognise what the reality of the Redemption means for the dignity and vocation of women.' (MD12). In his teaching against divorce, Jesus affirms the sacramentality of marriage as depicted in the book of Genesis (cf. Matt 19, 6).

This chapter gives a beautiful rendition of all the women that Jesus meets in the Gospels; how he treats them with love and respect and brings restoration to their dignity through the healings he performs on some of them. Pope John Paul II also notes how Jesus uses women in his parables to expound the reality of the Kingdom of God. He also looks closely at the encounter with the Samaritan woman and the adulterous woman in particular; in these encounters, Jesus presents a fundamental truth directed to men as to their responsibility vis-à-vis women.

In consequence, Jesus' behaviour towards women brings them freedom as they feel loved for who they are. They also hold theological conversations with him (the Samaritan woman, Martha on the death of her brother, the Canaanite woman); the response of faith brings about a resonance in both mind and heart.

Women were also 'in the forefront at the foot of the Cross' proving they were stronger when passing 'the most arduous test of faith and fidelity' (MD, 15). Characteristic of their femininity, they showed also a special sensitivity to Jesus' mystery as they were the first at the empty tomb and to them was entrusted to go and bear witness to him before the Apostles (MD, 16). In all, Christ's attitude to women confirms 'the truth about the equality of man and woman' (ibid). Nonetheless, this equality does not cancel out diversity.

Chapter VI – Motherhood-Virginity

Now the Pope focuses on 'two particular dimensions of the fulfilment of the female personality' – that of motherhood and virginity which are united in an exceptional way in the person of Mary since they co-exist in her.

In the mutual gift of man and woman in marriage, the woman plays a special part as her gift of interior readiness implies a special openness to the new person. Motherhood is specifically linked to the personal structure of the woman; it constitutes a special 'part' in this shared parenthood especially in the prenatal period. This experience of motherhood helps the woman to develop more her predisposition in paying attention to the other. Man always remains "outside" the process of pregnancy and birth and so in many ways, he has to learn his own "fatherhood" from the mother. Thus, whilst parenthood is a common responsibility, the '*mother's contribution is decisive in laying the foundation for a new human personality*' (MD, 18).

Motherhood in Mary takes on an even deeper meaning: through her maternity, '*God begins a New Covenant with humanity*' (MD, 19) and thus in her motherhood is embraced every other motherhood. Mary's motherhood involved as well her listening to every word of God and doing His will: we are invited to contemplate this deeper spiritual meaning of motherhood. The 'pangs of childbirth' are also linked to the Paschal Mystery – Mary at the foot of the Cross, in her total giving up of her Son, was made Mother of all humanity. Here, John Paul II notes that women's sensitivity to suffering plays a role as usually she 'succeeds in resisting suffering better than a man' (ibid).

Virginity and celibacy for the sake of the kingdom are also intrinsically linked with Mary: virginity and celibacy are offered as a special grace from the part of God and they are offered as a special sign of the Kingdom of God to come. Mary, in whom motherhood was a total gift from God, is the prototype of the new creation; she is a sign of eschatological hope. Through her, '*the Gospel puts forward the ideal of the consecration of the person: the person's exclusive dedication to God by virtue of the evangelical counsels: chastity, poverty and obedience*' (MD, 20).

The renunciation of physical motherhood because of the total gift of self to Christ can make possible a different kind of motherhood: a spiritual motherhood that can take on many different forms, as concern for various kinds of people especially the needy. '*Virginity as a woman's vocation is always the vocation of a person – of a unique, individual person. Therefore, the spiritual motherhood which makes itself felt in this vocation is also profoundly personal*' (MD, 21).

Chapter VII – The Church –The Bride of Christ

This chapter starts with the illustration that Paul uses in his letter to the Ephesians where he compares the relationship of Christ with the Church to one of husband and wife. This is not a completely new image since spousal love has been used by the prophets of the Old Testament as a symbol of the Lord's love for his people. Christ has also been addressed by John the Baptist as the Bridegroom.

It is quite evident from this paragraph that the late Pope wants to do away once and for all, the idea that the wife must be subjected to the husband: *'the awareness that in marriage there is mutual "subjection of the spouses out of reverence for Christ" and not just that of the wife to the husband, must gradually establish itself in hearts, consciences, behaviour and customs'* (MD, 24).

The symbolic dimension of this analogy is that the Church is the collective subject – Christ has redeemed all humanity – without exception. Christ is the Bridegroom for he has given himself i.e. he has become a sincere gift and thus all humanity is being called to be the Bride of Christ; thus, being the “Bride” the feminine element becomes a symbol to all that is human (see MD, 25).

Here, now Pope John Paul II tackles the issue of why the ministerial priesthood is for men only: with the same freedom that Christ upheld the dignity of women, he also called only men to be his Apostles. In the Eucharist above all, Christ as the Bridegroom in his sincere gift of self expresses his redemptive act ‘towards the Church as the Bride.’ There is no ambiguity therefore that the priest acting ‘in persona Christi’ is in fact a man.

Nonetheless, all the baptized are to share in the one priesthood of Christ and the Church as Bride is also called to give herself totally to Christ. And so we from the times of the early Church women who worked side by side with men through their own charisms and varied service (See MD, 27).

Chapter VIII – “The Greatest of These is Love”

Although as a society, we pass through various changes, *'there are many realities which do not change and which have their ultimate foundation in Christ'* (MD, 28). One of these immutable truths is that *'woman is the one in whom the order of love in the created world of persons takes first root. The order of love belongs to the intimate life of God himself, the life of the Trinity'* (MD, 29). The order of love is essentially the order of justice and charity. Only a person can love and only a person can be loved – and the dignity of woman is measured by the order of love.

'A woman's dignity is closely connected with the love which she receives by the very reason of her femininity; it is likewise connected with the love which she gives in return. The truth about the person and about love is thus confirmed.' (MD, 30).

In the last paragraph of this chapter, the Pope refers to the woman in labour as depicted in the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible. Here appears the eschatological perspective of the world i.e. that which is to come at the end of times. What has been prophesied in the Proto-evangelium, is depicted here as the woman in pain of labour about to give birth and there stands before her the Evil One. This is also the struggle for man, for his true good, for his salvation; and it is the Eve-Mary, the woman, to whom God entrusts the human being in a special way, hence her feminine vocation. Woman draws moral and spiritual strength when she grows in awareness of her specific feminine vocation and others can turn to her for support. And is this not sharing in the ‘royal priesthood’ of Christ?

Chapter IX – Conclusion

Pope John Paul II concludes his reflections by thanking God for every woman, for those who dedicated their lives in living their true vocation who together with men, therefore ‘assume a common responsibility for the destiny of humanity’ (MD, 31). May we, meditating on the biblical mystery of the “woman” and with the intercession of Mary our Mother, discover more ourselves and our “supreme vocation”.