

MULIERIS DIGNITATEM: A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON THE IMAGE OF GOD

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The apostolic letter, *Mulieris dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women), dated the Feast of the Assumption (August 15), 1988, was released to the public on September 30 of that year.¹ Much of its content was continuous with the Magisterium's teaching of the past (e.g., its support for a gender equity which respects women's maternal roles, its emphasis upon Mary as model disciple/exemplary woman, its presentation of the church as bride of Christ). Some new ground was broken, however. This article seeks to highlight and critique its description of "the image and likeness of God," which contains, I think, two new elements: 1) the idea that women are images of God in a manner different from men and 2) the suggestion that the "unity of the two" in the communion of marriage is an image of the Trinity. It is my contention that these ways of understanding how human beings image God force us to rethink how we understand and express other fundamental theological truths.

The Context and Form of *Mulieris dignitatem*

Mulieris dignitatem was prepared, according to Pope John Paul II, in response to a recommendation from the 1987 World Synod of Bishops for "further study of the anthropological and theological bases that are needed in order to solve problems connected with the meaning and dignity of being a woman and being a man" (MD I.1). It was intended to probe "[t]he reason for and consequences of the Creator's decision that the human being should

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1 *Origins* 18 (1998): 261-283; Latin text in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 80 (1988):1653-1729. Hereafter MD.

always and only exist as a woman or a man" (MD I.1). The problems, which the synod delegates saw as related to "the meaning and dignity of being a woman and being a man", were, and continue to be, varied. The one which seems to generate the most controversy--that of explaining why the Catholic church does not admit women to priestly orders--is indeed substantial, at least from the perspective of women in North America and Western Europe. However, the changing configuration of the family in these same areas and the effects of that upon the next generation may well be worthy of an even greater concern.

The Pope gave the text of *Mulieris dignitatem* "the style and character of a meditation" (MD I.2). This unusual format suggests that the Pope was inviting readers to reflect in a prayerful way, open to a change of heart and mind, upon the subject of women's dignity. Perhaps, too, he wanted to invite people to pull together in an intuitive rather than discursive way the great variety of images connected with women which he wanted kept in mind as his reflections unfolded. The Pope's reflections may have been presented in a mediative form also because of the novelty of some of the insights he offered. The mediative form, a less authoritative type of magisterial document, more readily lends itself to the presentation of ideas which have not usually been emphasized in the Catholic tradition.

New Insights in *Mulieris dignitatem*

1. Women Image God in a Feminine Way

The anthropology of *Mulieris dignitatem* is derived primarily from Scripture. "[T]he revealed truth concerning man as 'the image and likeness' of God constitutes the immutable basis of all Christian anthropology" (MD III.6).

In *Mulieris dignitatem*, the creation stories in Genesis are read in the light of one another and are interpreted as clear statements of humanity's special status before God. While all other features of the created world exist for the good of humanity, only human persons exist solely for their own sake. They alone are offered an opportunity to enter into a relationship of friendship with their

creator. They alone are created in the "image and likeness" of God so that this relationship of friendship will be possible. "This truth [about humanity's image and likeness to God] presents the creation of man as a special gift from the Creator, containing not only the foundation and source of the essential dignity of the human being--man and woman--in the created world, but also the beginning of the call to both of them to share in the intimate life of God himself" (MD IV.9)

The Pope emphasizes that every human person, regardless of gender, bears the image and likeness of God: "both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God's image" (MD III.6). Each human person, whether male or female, bears the divine "image and likeness," not as a kind of external brand but as a distinguishing feature of his or her essential nature. In the individual human person God's image and likeness is seen, at least in part, in human rationality and freedom: "For every individual is made in the image of God, in so far as he or she is a rational and free creature capable of knowing and loving God" (MD III.7). Human rationality is said to be what enables men and women to "dominate" the other creatures of the visible world" (MD III.6). To locate in this way the divine image in capacities of the inner person shared by both genders has been a fairly standard approach in Catholic theology since the fourth century.²

2 Kari Elisabeth Børresen traces the various ways in which Patristic and Medieval writers have dealt with the related questions of what constitutes the image of God in the human being and whether, in the light of Gen 1:27 and I Cor. 2:7, the image of God could be found in both men and women in the following articles: "God's Image, Man's Image? Patristic Interpretation of Gen. 1:27 and I Cor. 11:7" in *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børresen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995 [1991]) 187-209 and "God's Image. Is Woman Excluded? Medieval Interpretation of Gen 1:27 and I Cor. 2:7" in the same collection, pp. 210-235. The view that both men and women bear the image of God--understood in asexual, spiritual terms--seems to be the dominant, but not by any means the only view found in the tradition. Well into the twentieth century, the equal spiritual dignity of men and women was generally coupled with an acceptance of men's greater perfection of body and mind and a consequent acknowledgement of his greater authority in the temporal realm. See Richard L. Camp, "From Passive Subordination to Complementary Partnership: The Papal Conception of Women's Place in Church and Society Since 1878," *The Catholic Historical Review* 76 (1990): 506-525. For a convenient collection of primary sources from the pontificate of Leo XIII to that of Pius XII, see *The Woman in the Modern World*, selected and arranged by the Monks of Solesmes (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1959).

That both men and women bear the image and likeness of God is, according to the Pope, the basis for the application of both feminine and masculine imagery to God. "If there is a likeness between Creator and creatures, it is understandable that the Bible would attribute to him both 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities" (MD III.8; see also VII.23). Some women greeted the acknowledgement that Scripture applies feminine imagery to God with chagrin as an unanticipated novelty³, but others would have been very glad that the Pope was prepared to concede this point. It suggests that notice has been taken of the results of some recent feminist⁴ interpretations of Scripture.

Mulieris dignitatem warns that the limits of any human analogy must be kept in mind when speaking of a transcendent deity. "While man's 'likeness' to God is true, the 'non-likeness' which separates the whole of creation from the Creator is still more essentially true" (MD III.8). What is emphasized in *Mulieris dignitatem* is that God cannot be understood as having "masculine" or "feminine" qualities of a physical sort, so that, for example, "fatherhood" in God must be understood as "completely spiritual and divine in essence" (MD III.8).

The emphasis in *Mulieris dignitatem* upon the equality of the personhood of men and women and the equal dignity accorded to each as bearers of God's "image and likeness" does not prevent the document from suggesting that there is a difference between the ways in which each gender images God. There is, for example, a reference in *Mulieris dignitatem* IV.10 to "an expression of the 'image and likeness of God' that is specifically hers [i.e., the woman's]." References in *Mulieris dignitatem* to women's special

3 See, for example, the reaction of Nancy Marie Cross in "A traditionalist's dilemma: what to do when the Pope goes feminist?" *Crisis* 8 (January 1990):30-34. She gets herself out of her dilemma by making a distinction between saying that "God is X" and "God is like X." While one can say "God is like a mother," one ought to say "God is our father" rather than "God is our mother."

4 By "feminist" I mean at least those reading strategies which aim to ensure that the Scriptural resources which can encourage women's recognition as equal partners with men are not obscured.

calling (VIII. 30) to a "distinctly feminine response" to Christ (V.15) and to what biology and psychology indicate about gender differences (V.18), suggest that women are understood by the Pope to be persons who are similar to men in many respects but different in others.

The Pope, unlike some ancient church writers, does not understand gender differences to arise because women are in certain respects deficient in the gifts which men have. It is clear that the Pope wants to honour women by seeing their differences from men as assets rather than as liabilities. Nor does he, as certain church documents of the not too distant past have done, present the ideal person as one in whom reason takes precedence over everything, and go on to present feminine compassion as a potentially dangerous emotion. If anything, he sees a capacity for love as the most important human feature, and he sees women as those who love and who evoke love in others. In *Mulieris dignitatem* and in the writings of the ensuing decade, he has continued to exhort the human community to recognize and honour what he regards as women's distinctive gifts, "the genius of women."⁵ The Pope believes that a women's special way of being an image of God is to care with love and sensitivity to persons, especially as mothers.⁶ In *Mulieris dignitatem* he had written "[i]n God's eternal plan, 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 VIII.29). The idea that a woman's love reveals something of God comes out evenly more clearly in his 1995 "Letter to Women"⁷ where he greeted mothers of the world, saying to them "[Y]ou become God's own smile upon the newborn child" (Par.

5 The year 1995 was a year rich in such papal statements, several of which have been gathered into a collection by the United States Bishops' Committee on Women in Society and the Church as *Pope John Paul on the Genius of Women* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1997).

6 A woman's motherhood need not, however, necessarily be of the physical sort. Those who consecrate their lives to God and to the service of the community as celibates are mothers of a spiritual sort (MD VI.20,21).

7 *Ibid.*, p.46.

2). For him, women are seen as catalysts of love in a way in which men are not. The way they image God reflects this.

2. The "Unity of the Two" is an Image of the Trinity

In *Mulieris dignitatem*, human beings are said to image God not only as individuals, but in another way as well. Humanity, created as "male and female," is said to image the inner-Trinitarian life of God in the complementary relationship between the genders. Especially in marriage, something of the dynamism of the loving communion of the divine Trinity in which diversity becomes unity is represented. "The fact that man 'created as man and woman' is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a 'unity of the two,' in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life" (MD III.7; see also MD IV.11)

(I might note parenthetically that, prior to the publication of *Mulieris dignitatem*, the view that the loving communion between married partners images God had been presented by Pope John Paul II in a series of talks on the theology of the body given at his Wednesday general audiences between September 5, 1979 and April 2, 1980, published as *A l'image de Dieu, homme et femme: une lecture de Genèse 1-3*⁸. It is interesting to speculate on the origin of the Pope's understanding of married love as an image of God's inner Trinitarian life, and one cannot do much more than this, for neither in *Mulieris dignitatem* nor in *A l'image de Dieu* are references provided from ancient or modern authorities to support the papal statements, although some could have been adduced, for example, from the Eastern Fathers.⁹ Evdokimov attributes the following words to John

8 (Paris: Cerf, 1981). See, for example, p. 77

9 See, for example, Paul Evdokimov's *The Sacrament of Love*, Anthony P. Gythiel and Victoria Steadman, trans. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 117-118 and Demetrios Constantelos' *Marriage, Sexuality and Celibacy: A Greek Orthodox Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life, 1975), p. 25.

Chrysostom, although he does not indicate their precise source: "When husband and wife are united in marriage, they are no longer seen as something earthly, but as the image of God Himself." (p. 118). Karl Barth's famous interpretation of the meaning of the creation of mankind in the image and likeness of God moves in a similar direction. See his *Church Dogmatics* III.1, J.W. Edwards, O. Bussey, Harold Knight, trans., G.W. Bromiley, T.F. Torrance, eds. (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1958), pp. 183-206. However, there is no indication in the footnotes of *A l'image de Dieu* that Barth is among the thinkers to whose ideas the Pope is indebted for his own position.

It is more likely, as Mary Rousseau has suggested in her "Pope John Paul II's Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women: the Call to Communion," *Communio* 16 (1989): 212-232, that the Pope's understanding of the meaning of human sexuality has been developed from his work in phenomenology and on St. Thomas, specifically, from Thomas's understanding of the close relationship between soul and body in the human person and his presentation of the love of friendship as communion. The teaching of Vatican II may also have contributed something. In *Mulieris dignitatem*, a text from *Gaudium et spes* 24 is said to present "a summary of the whole truth about man a woman" (MD III.7). This part of GS 24 reads: "Furthermore, the Lord Jesus, when praying to the Father 'that they may all be one. . . even as we are one (Jn. 17:21-22), has opened up new horizons closed to human reason by implying that there is a certain parallel between the union existing among the divine persons and the union of the sons of God in truth and love. It follows, then, that if man is the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake, man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself." (This passage is quoted also in *A l'image de Dieu*, p. 123.) As one of those who worked on GS at the Council, perhaps he was influential in having such a wording--whose full implications he already grasped--included in the text, or maybe in the decades since the Council he has continued to ponder those words and to draw out the implications he sees in them in his writings as pope--or both.¹⁰⁾

10 While the Pope's view of the relationship between spouses as (at least potentially) an image of God is one which had articulated in a series of talks prior to and in

According to *Mulieris dignitatem's* interpretation of the second creation account, it is the "woman"--she who is described by "Adam" as "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh"--who makes "Adam" aware of his potential for intersubjectivity. "From the very beginning, they appear as a 'unity of the two,' and this signifies that the original solitude is overcome, the solitude in which man does not find a 'helper fit for him' (Gn. 2:20)" (MD III. 6). The presence of the woman which God has given to him does not simply augment the possessions which Adam "has"; it evokes in Adam the latent capacity for that "sincere gift of self" which will enable him to realize fully the potential of his human nature to image God, and therefore he is enriched in his very being. It is primarily in this sense that the woman is a "helpmate" for Adam. She calls him into an "interpersonal relationship" (and similarly the man helps the woman) (MD III.7). *Mulieris dignitatem* concludes that "[b]eing a person in the image and likeness of God thus also involves existing in a relationship, in relationship to the other 'I'" (MD III. 7). The creation of woman in fact sets the stage for the sort of human development which is the prerequisite for the process of divinization or friendship with God: "The calling of woman into existence at man's side as 'a helper fit for him' (Gn.2:18) in the 'unity of the two' provides the visible world of creatures with particular conditions so that 'the love of God may be poured into the hearts' of the beings created in his image" (MD VIII.29).

preparation for the 1980 Synod on the Family, it is interesting to note that, the Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris consortio*, which the Pope wrote afterwards, refers to marriage exclusively as an image of the love of God or Christ for the Church. Neither does the Catechism of the Catholic Church refer to marriage as image of the Trinity. A full exposition of his position in a papal document intended for broad circulation does not seem to have come forth until the appearance of MD. Since its publication, however, this line of thought does not seem to have received a great deal of emphasis. There is a brief reference in *Christifideles laici* (IV.52), but in more recent documents, such as those published during 1995, the complementarity of men and women is emphasized but the Trinitarian sign-value of this is passed over. See for example the Pope's message of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1995, section 3 (*Pope John Paul II on the Genius of Women*, pp. 11-12), his angelus reflection of June 9, 1995, "Complementarity and Reciprocity between Men and Women" (*Ibid.*, pp. 24-25) or his "Letter to Women" of June 29, 1995, sections 7 and 8 (*Ibid.*, 52-53).

The equal dignity of men and women as human persons created in the divine image and related as two subjects in the "communio" of marriage grounds the Pope's insistence that the author of Ephesians summons spouses to "mutual submissiveness" and not simply to what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has called "love patriarchy" in marriage. He writes "in the relationship between husband and wife the 'subjection' is not one-sided but mutual." He maintains that the author of Ephesians who wrote of the relationship between spouses in a manner which was "profoundly rooted in the customs and religious tradition of the time" and yet intended his words "Wives be subject to your husbands" to be "understood and carried out in a new way: as a 'mutual subjection out of reverence for Christ'" (MD VII.24). There is nothing here which suggests much sympathy with movements which claim to find in Scripture a warrant for men to treat their wives as people in need of supervision. Marriage as image of the Trinity suggests a much more egalitarian, cooperative partnership.

Some Possible Implications of These New Ideas

1. The theological implications of accentuating gender differences

The Pope's insistence upon the value of the compassionate care for persons is important and needs to be heard. Contemporary North American society shows how little esteem it gives such "work" in a variety of ways, not least of which is the huge discrepancy between the salaries we pay to those who look after our children and those who look after our other interests. Both men and women need to be reminded that people are more important than things. The Pope, who lost his own mother while still a child and who appears to have felt her absence keenly despite his father's attempts to fill the void,¹¹ has the credibility of his own experience when he writes about the importance of mothering.

11 An account of Karol Wojtyla's youth is given in Jonathan Kwitny, *Man of the Century: The Life and Times of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), pp. 25-105.

Unfortunately many Western women are inclined to receive this aspect of the Pope's message about women with suspicion. They note that the encouragement he gives to feminist aims is often linked to exhortations which have been used in the past to confine women to the domestic sphere.¹² Women who feel that the church itself discriminates against women find it difficult to take seriously papal exhortations to do away with gender discrimination in society, in politics and in the workplace. Some also suspect that the Pope's words, though sincere, might be used to excuse men from accepting obligations which are rightfully theirs (because the compassionate care of persons does not come so naturally to them). I really do not think that the Pope intends either to keep women in the kitchen or to let men off the hook, but many Catholic women find it difficult to see past the possible ways in which the Pope's language can be used against them to the genuinely worthy concerns he expresses.

The Pope makes it clear in this document that every human individual is called to become a person by "a sincere gift of self," as the Fathers of Vatican II taught in *Gaudium et spes* 24. In *Mulieris dignitatem* the focus is on what that means for women. It would be interesting to know how the Pope sees men's distinctive way of living out that challenge. Some of us find that it is the men we know rather than the women who excel in their sensitivity to persons and we wonder if he is doing justice to masculinity. At any rate, it would help us to see more clearly the outlines of what the Pope considers to be common to the humanity of both men and women and what he regards as proper to each.

The degree of difference between the genders does not seem to me to be trivial. If they are very different, and if the differences are serious enough, this could have important christological consequences. It is certainly historically accurate to say that the Word became incarnate as a person of the male gender and *Mulieris dignitatem* is not the first document of the Magisterium to put

12 We are not sure how to take such passages as *Mulieris dignitatem* IV.10 where the Pope writes "[i]n the name of liberation from 'male domination' [seen as a result of sin], women must not appropriate to themselves male characteristics contrary to their own feminine 'originality.'"

considerable emphasis upon the significance of the gender of the Incarnate Word. However, when this emphasis is combined with a view of femininity as being a distinctive way of being human--a way which is not simply an imperfect way of being male but a way which, is different--then it becomes less easy to see maleness, specifically the maleness of Jesus Christ, as representative of all humanity. The patristic "what has not been assumed has not been saved" approach to soteriology in which the Incarnation itself has a salvific effect, even before Jesus' teaching and crucifixion/resurrection take place, seems much less coherent. The mechanics of salvation ("how" it takes place) seem henceforth better explained by reference to the non-gendered effects of sin (punishment due, etc.) assumed by Christ on behalf of all humanity or by Christ's saving revelation accessible to all regardless of gender.¹³

The sections of *Mulieris dignitatem* which stress the closeness of the relationship between Mary and Christ are no doubt intended to illustrate that women as well as men are invited to enter into a personal, transforming communion with God in Christ Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ However, it is important to recall that Mary's union with God as recipient of the power of the Holy Spirit and as mother of the Incarnate One is not the same as the hypostatic union of humanity and divinity in Christ's own person. In Mary, union with the divine is derivative; in Jesus it is constitutive. We are not saved by Mary; both Mary and the rest of us are saved by God in Christ. This remains true even when we acknowledge that Christ's saving work would not have been able to take place had Mary not agreed to be the mother of the Messiah. Mary's fidelity offers a model for all human persons (in so far as we, too, receive an invitation to communion with God as a gift) and for women (in so far

13 Yet the salvific importance of the Incarnation continues to be highlighted in *Mulieris dignitatem* in such passages as the following: "The essence of the new covenant consists in the fact that the Son of God, who is of one substance with the eternal Father, becomes man: He takes humanity into the unity of the divine person of the Word" (MD IV.11).

14 For example, Mary is presented in *Mulieris dignitatem* as the one to whom the New Covenant is announced and the one in whom its transforming effects are first experienced. See MD IV.11 and MD V.19.

as she was a person of a specific gender). However, as a woman, I have always thought it crucial for my salvation that my humanity and the humanity of Jesus Christ be understood to be substantially the same.

In *Mulieris dignitatem*, a further consequence of emphasizing that women, as feminine and not just as human persons, can be images of God is that the denial in MD VII.27 that a woman can be an effective image of Christ in his role as head of the church becomes all the more jarring. Given the document's liberating interpretation of the Old Testament creation narratives which affirms the image and likeness of God in every human person, the reader might have expected that both men and women would be presented as possible images of Christ, himself the image of the unseen God, but this is not the way the argument proceeds. In fact, the initial reaction of the person who gives *Mulieris dignitatem* a quick read may be that the divine image in women seems more readily acknowledged before the Incarnation than afterward.

Taking the spousal imagery of Ephesians 5 as a starting point, the groom-like nature of God's passionate love for the church becomes the leitmotif of the document's presentation of the New Testament material. The masculine character of Christ's spousal love is regarded as of crucial importance. Consequently, in sacramental rituals which call to mind the basic acts of our redemption, the saving activity of God in Jesus of Nazareth can only be imaged by a human person of the masculine gender.

It should be noted at once that the primary justification given by the Magisterium for excluding women from the ordained ministry is not their incapacity to image Christ's bridegroom-like relationship to the church. It is, rather, the desire to act in fidelity to the practice of Jesus himself who is not believed to have included women among the Twelve. That being admitted, it must also be said that in *Mulieris dignitatem*, as well as in other documents of the Magisterium related to the topic, an argument based upon the "male/bridegroom-like character" of God's love for us is offered as an explanation intended to make the practice of Jesus and of the church comprehensible. For many, however, this line of argument does not in fact fulfil its intended function. Furthermore, one begins to suspect that the

Pope's denial that a transcendent God is male in a physical sense may conceal a conviction that, when all is said and done, God is, at least at some level, more masculine than feminine.¹⁵ This suspicion tends to undermine the initially positive sense one gets as a woman from having a papal document acknowledge that women are, as women, images of God.

2. The use of spousal imagery in *Mulieris dignitatem*

When reading *Mulieris dignitatem*, one is reminded of Wojtyła's insistence in *Love and Responsibility* that a person must always be a "subject" or another "I."¹⁶ This is precisely the understanding of the person which underlies the Pope's explanation of the sense in which the woman was "a helper fit for" Adam. The presentation of women as persons whose rights to self-determination need to be respected is important language which needs to be heard in many quarters. It may also need to be given a more attentive hearing in the church itself where women's still-meagre decision-making capacities make it all too easy to dismiss what women suggest about themselves, especially if those suggestions are novel. In his 1995 Letter to Women, the Pope expressed his admiration for women who had "devoted their lives to defending the dignity of womanhood. . . at a time when this was considered extremely inappropriate, the sign of a lack of femininity, a manifestation of exhibitionism, and even a sin!"¹⁷ Dealing with subjects is much more of an adventure than dealing with objects, for they can create situations which are much trickier to evaluate!

15 Thus, for example, Nancy Marie Cross reads *Mulieris dignitatem*'s spousal imagery as attributing to God a basically masculine nature even if God acts sometimes in a maternal way. See "A traditionalist's dilemma: what to do when the Pope goes feminist?" *Crisis* 8 (January 1990):30-34.

16 Treating someone as a person or a subject involves acting towards them in a way which respects their own right to self-determination and not using him or her as an object or means towards some other end. Wojtyła argues that love is "the only clear alternative to using a person as a means to an end." See Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T. Willetts (New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 1980 [1960]), Chapter One, esp. p. 28.

17 *Pope John Paul on the Genius of Women*, p. 50.

Given its treatment of women as subjects, it comes as no surprise that *Mulieris dignitatem* presents the domination of women by men as a consequence of the Fall and, thus, as a situation to be overcome (MD IV.10). There are several passages in the document showing, with considerable insight, the ways in which women suffer when they are treated as objects rather than as subjects. They challenge all of us to look beyond the symptoms of oppression and domination to the underlying social structures which make it possible for some people to treat others in a less than worthy manner.

Mulieris dignitatem acknowledges the symbolic, even mythic, form of the creation stories. This form is kept in mind when, for example, the story of the Fall is described. Rather than dwelling upon the way in which the roles in the narrative are assigned with the woman as the one who "was deceived and became a transgressor" and the man as quasi victim, as the author of I Timothy did, the pope reads the story as an account of the sin of "humanity" as a whole (MD IV.9). In a similar way, at least at times, both genders are presented as gifts to the other and both man and woman are said to have an equal responsibility for cultivating in the "other" a capacity for a loving relationship of mutual respect and submissiveness (MD IV.10; V.15)--a relationship which will ultimately enable the "other" to accept God's own loving approach.

Other passages, however, seem less evenhanded with respect to the genders. These suggest that women are, in fact, the ones whose special gift it is to evoke love in others by loving them first. They are said to be the ones who must teach their husbands what parental love is all about (VI.18). Yet at other times, much is made of the fact that what is called "spousal" love is initiated by the masculine partner. Sometimes it is suggested that women love with a kind of reflective love, giving back what has first been bestowed upon them: "The bridegroom is the one who loves. The bride is loved; it is she who receives love, in order to love in return" (MD VIII.29). This assumes crucial importance when it comes to the application of spousal imagery to the relationship between Christ and the church in the latter part of the document: "Christ is the bridegroom. This expresses the truth about the love of God, who 'first loved us'" (MD VII.25).

Mulieris dignitatem's depictions of the relationship between Christ and the church and of the ideal modern marriage both take the Letter to the Ephesians as their starting point. However, the ideal of marriage, which the Pope takes from Ephesians 5 (one involving mutual submissiveness) seems to me to be at odds with that which is assumed when spousal imagery is used to elucidate the relationship between Christ and the church. Spousal images for God's relationship with us (God as bridegroom/Israel as bride or Christ as Bridegroom/church as bride) work because they assume that the normal marital relationship is hierarchical. The effectiveness of these metaphors in their original contexts relied upon the idea that the husband's status was always higher than that of his wife and much higher than that of an unfaithful wife. What would have been striking about the suggestion that God acts as a loving husband towards Israel or that Christ loves the church as a husband loves a wife was the gratuity of God's love bestowed in such abundance upon such an undeserving recipient. What would happen to Scripture's spousal images for God/Israel and Christ/church if the "mutual submissiveness" ideal of marriage were to become the norm? Would we still be able to grasp the divine condescension conveyed via those images borrowed from a more patriarchal time? It seems to me that the Pope's ideal for contemporary marriage tends to undermine the effectiveness of the spousal image he takes to be central for sacramental theology.

Conclusion

Images and analogies are powerful tools of communication. They direct attention to aspects of persons or things which might otherwise be insufficiently emphasized. Images and analogies can themselves be illuminated by the persons and things to which they refer. Such tools are, however, limited by the differences between

the very items which make such helpful comparisons possible. On account of this, analogies have their limits.

What the Pope has written in *Mulieris dignitatem* about women as images of a loving God and as partners in loving relationships

which mirror the inner life of the Trinity seems intended to foster in church and society a greater respect for women and their concerns. Yet his imagery, helpful in one sense, is not easily integrated with some of the other analogies and models commonly employed in the Catholic tradition to speak of relationships involving human persons and God. The "aesthetic irritation" which arises in consequence of this can have, it seems to me, at least two beneficial results: 1) it can move us to think through again some of our basic theological ideas and 2) it can prevent us from becoming too confident that we have figured out the mystery of God's dealings with humankind.