

## Editorial

### Feminine Genius: A Christian Project

A Christian project of 'Feminine Genius' finds its roots in the life and ministries of Jesus. The Gospels witness to Jesus' recognition of the uniqueness and unity of men and women. As Pope John Paul wrote in his Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, "In all of Jesus' teaching, as well as in His behaviour, one can find nothing which reflects the discrimination against women so prevalent in His day. On the contrary, His words and works always express the honour and respect due to women..."<sup>1</sup> Jesus Christ is the source, centre and limit of a Christian project for the promotion of 'Feminine Genius'.

Jesus, the "only begotten Son of God" (John 1.18), reveals a compassionate and caring God, who is love. God created human beings in God's image, 'male and female God created them" (Genesis 1.27). Humanity at its very beginning is a unity of two in a common humanity. The 'feminine' and the 'masculine' are integral part of God's plan for humanity, and their fundamental equality of dignity and uniqueness of personality are to be nurtured as God given gift and task. Jesus' fundamental call to discipleship is addressed to all - women and men. We are, however, painfully aware of the fact this biblical ideal is far from realisation: As the *Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India* admits in its very first number, "In spite of man and woman being created equal by God, unfortunately, both in history and in today's world there is gross discrimination against women. Still worse, justifications are given for discriminating between man and woman, boy and girl. Sometimes this is also done on the grounds of religious tradition".<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 15 August 1988, 13, <[http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19880815\\_mulieris-dignitatem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html)> (9.6.2016).

<sup>2</sup>Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, *Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India*, New Delhi: CBCI Commission for Women, 2009, 1 <[http://cbci.in/DownloadMat/Gender\\_Policy.pdf](http://cbci.in/DownloadMat/Gender_Policy.pdf)> (9.9.2016).

Christian tradition is not free from such misguided and wrong interpretations. While the first chapter of the Genesis speaks about a fundamental equality and dignity of women and men, the second chapter is interpreted to argue for the superior status of men over women, as Adam was created first, and then Eve from Adam's rib as a 'helper' for Adam (Genesis 2:18-22). This chronological priority does not give any ontological superiority to male race; otherwise the same logic might give superiority to animals as, according to the first creation account, animals were created prior to the creation of men. St Paul, however, uses this reasoning for not permitting women to speak in public: "For Adam was formed first, and then Eve" (I Timothy 2.13). We could interpret this instruction as a particular one to Timothy concerning the local church entrusted to his care, keeping the teaching given to the Galatians as more fundamental: "there is no male and female, for all are one in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 3:28); for such a fundamental unity is more in tune with the life and ministry of Jesus, the ultimate norm for Christian discipleship and interpretation.

Similarly the word 'helper' need not be interpreted for subservience of women; the same word is used for Yahweh as the helper for Israel without the conclusion that Yahweh is subservient to Israel. It is Adam discovering a fitting partner in Eve, "bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2.23). The original divine plan for feminine and masculine is one of covenantal relation with mutual complementarity. The feminine complements the masculine as much as the masculine complements the feminine. God created human beings as male and female to live in a fundamental partnership, in mutual collaboration and conversation.

According to the Bible, the first human being is created from the earth. The name of the first man, Adam, is related to the Hebrew word for ground, *adamah*. God formed Adam from *adamah* (Gen. 2:7), Eve from Adam and placed them on *adamah* "to work on it and take care of it" (Gen. 2:15). Women, in collaboration with men, have significant contributions to offer in transforming the *adamah* into a world of not only human habitat

but also of values. From a Christian point of view, women and men share the gift and task of creative stewardship and mutual partnership; they mutually support each other to live in harmony on earth bringing blessings on the world for the Glory of God. Because God is the Father and Mother of all human beings, they are sisters and brothers to one another. Men and women are formed by nurture and contribute to the wellbeing of the community. It becomes also a religious duty to love and care for all, especially those who are in need, materially, emotionally, and spiritually. When women (also men) move away from this religious duty, they turn also against God. This distorts God's image in women and they move away from God bringing curses rather than blessing on themselves, others, and on the world.

The fall and exile narrative is also often used against women (Genesis 3.1-24). Since the first woman, Eve fell into the Serpent's temptation first (Genesis 3.1-6), women are considered responsible for all the temptations and sins in the world. However, the first man, Adam is equally responsible for the sin, and original sin, in the Christian tradition is the fruit of the sin of the first parents. The male biased Christian tradition, often quoted God's judgement on women, "He shall rule over you" (Genesis 3.16) as a reason for the domination of men over women. This 'domination', however, shows the loss of the fundamental equality and the initial harmony which the man and the woman possess in the "unity of the two." The inequality and the subordination of women and the culture of domination result from sin and it was not according to the original plan of God. Through dominating institutions and structures men dominate and overpower women both at home and society, physically, emotionally, economically, and spiritually.

Even the use of 'feminine genius' perpetuate stereotyped notions of how a woman or man should behave in private and public often favouring men and discriminating against women. The culture of domination and the hegemony of patriarchy make women in the roles of mothers and teachers who are the effective transmitters of the gender hierarchy. Women, thus, become both victims and victimizers of male domination. Only the restoration

of the equality resulting from their dignity as persons can give to mutual relationship of women and men the character of an authentic interpersonal communion and the promotion of a just and compassionate society. The violation of this equality also diminishes the true dignity of man. For whenever man is responsible for offending personal dignity and vocation of women, he acts contrary to his own personal dignity and his own vocation.<sup>3</sup> The woman cannot become the 'object' of 'domination' and male 'possession', according to the Christian vision of humanity. 'Dominion' is not part of the true genius of man; it is a curse, an effect of sin. The overcoming of this evil inheritance is, generation after generation, the task of every human being, whether woman or man.

In the male dominated Christian tradition, the concept of mutuality in conjugal sexuality was often given in terms of rights and duties, based on an interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:3-4: "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does." Though St Paul speaks about the rights and duties both husband and wife in a strikingly similar manner, the patriarchal interpretation is only in favour of men to control the woman and her sexuality. The corresponding right of the wife over the husband is treated as abnormal and perverse.

Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance, and tenderness, transcending the established norms and traditions of his own culture which were often oppressive for women. In this way, he honoured the dignity which women have always possessed according to God's plan; moreover, in his love, Jesus re-established the richness and personal resources of femininity and the genius of woman. Thus, when it comes to a project of the promotion of feminine genius, the Gospel contains an ever relevant message which has its source in the attitude of Jesus Christ himself; he is a promoter of women's true dignity and of

---

<sup>3</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Vatican, 1988, §10.

her vocation corresponding to this dignity. Women become fully feminine through a substantial and creative presence in the world, in conversation and collaboration with men, all of which are sustained by God. An effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion of feminine genius, concentrating on all areas of women's life and beginning with a universal recognition of the dignity of women, is imperative on all men and women of good will. *Journal of Dharma* is making a humble attempt to celebrate certain Christian perspectives and initiatives .

The first entry, "Creation of a Just and Compassionate Society: A Feminine Project" by Shalini Mulackal argues that the creation of a just and compassionate society is possible only when the feminine qualities of the human psyche are recognized as equally valuable and allowed to blossom both in men and women. Jesus' experience of God as *Abba*, his proclamation of the Reign of God and his integrated personality wherein he combines both the feminine and masculine dimensions of the human psyche paves a new way.

The problem of deaconesses in the history of the Church has aroused much interest for theologians and researchers over time, regardless of denomination or spiritual guidance. Although there are conflicting views on their liturgical role, "Role of the Deaconesses in the Ancient Tradition of the Church And Society" by Nicu Dumitrașcu argues that this confusion stems from a terminological confusion between *cheirotenia* and *cheirotesia*. The responsibilities of deaconesses are rather in the social area and catechetical-pastoral activities, especially among women.

"Fundamental Rights and Duties of Women in the Catholic Church: A Study Based on *the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* and *the Code of Canon Law*" by James Mathew Pampara examines critically and creatively the place and role of women in the Catholic Church, examining the long way in her understanding of the fundamental rights of women and the post-Vatican II reform of her canon law; now the Church places women on par with men regarding the fundamental rights and duties. He explores the possibility of ordaining women to the status of deaconess.

The *Gender Policy* of the Catholic Church of India, released on 24 February 2010, is the first official gender policy, published by a Catholic Bishops' Conference in the universal Church. Though the Indian society and the Church still continue to be predominantly

patriarchal, the Bishops' Conference took the courageous step to officially declare a policy for the empowerment of women, and opening doors for more creative roles in the Church. "*Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India: A Contribution of the Indian Church for Women Empowerment*" is an excellent study by Shaji George Kochuthara.

"Gender Equality through the Prism of Ecological Virtues in *Laudato Si*" by Saji Mathew Kanayankal is a discussion on gender equality from the perspective of *Laudato Si*, in which the Pope calls for a 'holistic ethic' and 'ecological integrity' that insists the dignity of human as well as non-human world. It further invites us to review and renew the current misguided anthropocentric and patriarchal paradigm with a broader vision of common good wherein the intrinsic value of nature is recognized and respected paying special care and attention to small and little beings including women, children and indigenous people.

The final article of this issue of the *Journal of Dharma*, "Mother Teresa: An Emblematic Figure of *Raham* – the Womb Love" by Smitha Gabriel throws light on the life and vision of Mother Teresa. Through finding Jesus in the hungry, thirsty and naked (Matthew 25:35), and through strengthening the weakest, healing the sick, nursing the injured, bringing back the strayed and searching for the lost (Ezekiel 34:4), Mother became a good shepherd after the model of Jesus. She taught her sisters to see the broken body of Jesus in the appearance of Eucharist bread (contemplation) and to touch him in the broken bodies of the poor (action). She perceives a unified vision and action of seeing and serving the broken body of Jesus in the poorest of the poor and that gives a transforming effect in the society.

Wishing you critical and creative thoughts and initiatives for the promotion of 'Feminine Genius', may I submit this issue of the *Journal of Dharma* with some of the Christian perspectives and initiatives for your reading and reflection, enjoyment and action.

**Jose Nandhikkara, Editor-in-Chief**