



# The Holy See

---

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 17 November 1999*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. Among the challenges of this historical moment on which the Great Jubilee spurs us to reflect, I drew attention in my *Apostolic Letter Tertio millennio adveniente* to the issue of respect for women's rights (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 51). Today I would like to recall certain aspects of the women's question, which I have also spoken of on other occasions.

Sacred Scripture sheds great light on the theme of women's advancement, pointing out God's plan for man and woman in the two accounts of creation.

The first one says: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gn 1: 27). This statement is the basis of Christian anthropology, because it identifies the foundation of man's dignity as a person in his creation "in the likeness" of God. At the same time, the passage clearly says that neither man nor woman separately are the image of the Creator, but man and woman in their reciprocity. Both are equally God's masterpiece.

In the second account of creation, through the symbolism of the creation of woman from man's rib, Scripture stresses that humanity is not in fact complete until woman is created (cf. *Gn 2: 18-24*).

She is given a name whose verbal assonance in Hebrew indicates a relationship to man (*is/issah*). "God created man and woman together and willed each for the other" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 371). That woman is presented as a "helper fit for him" (*Gn 2: 18*) should not be interpreted as meaning that woman is man's servant - "helper" is not the equivalent of "servant"; the psalmist says to God: "You are my help" (*Ps 70: 5*; cf. *Ps 115: 9, 10, 11*; *Ps 118: 7*; *Ps 146: 5*); rather the whole statement means that woman is able to collaborate with man because she complements him perfectly. Woman is another kind of "ego" in their common humanity, which

consists of male and female in perfectly equal dignity.

2. There is good reason to rejoice in the fact that in contemporary culture reflection on what it means to be feminine has led to a deeper understanding of the human person in terms of his "being for others" in interpersonal communion. Today, to think of the person in his self-giving dimension is becoming a matter of principle. Unfortunately it is often disregarded at the practical level. Thus, among the many assaults on human dignity, that widespread violation of woman's dignity manifested in the exploitation of her person and her body should be strongly condemned. All practices that offend woman's freedom or femininity must be vigorously opposed: so-called "sexual tourism", the buying and selling of young girls, mass sterilization and, in general, every form of violence to the other sex.

A very different attitude is required by the moral law, which proclaims the dignity of woman as a person created in the image of God-Communion! Today it is more necessary than ever to present the biblical anthropology of relationality, which helps us genuinely understand the human being's identity in his relationship to others, particularly between man and woman. In the human person considered in his "relationality", we find a vestige of God's own mystery revealed in Christ as a substantial unity in the communion of three divine Persons. In the light of this mystery it is easy to understand the statement of *Gaudium et spes* that the human being, who "is the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake, can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 24). The difference between man and woman calls for interpersonal communion, and meditation on the dignity and vocation of woman strengthens the concept of the human being based on communion (cf. *Mulieris dignitatem*, n. 7).

3. Precisely this capacity for communion, which the feminine dimension strongly evokes, enables us to reflect on God's fatherhood, thus avoiding the imaginative projections of a patriarchal sort that are so challenged, and not without reason, in some currents of contemporary literature. It is a question, in fact, of discerning the Father's face within the mystery of God as Trinity, that is, as perfect unity in distinction. The figure of the Father must be reconsidered in his relationship to the Son, who is turned towards him from all eternity (cf. *Jn* 1: 1) in the communion of the Holy Spirit. It should also be stressed that the Son of God became man in the fullness of time and was born of the Virgin Mary (cf. *Gal* 4: 4), and this too sheds light on the feminine dimension, showing Mary as the model of woman as willed by God. The greatest event in human history took place in her and through her. The fatherhood of God the Father is related not only to God the Son in his eternal mystery, but also to his Incarnation in a woman's womb. If God the Father, who "begets" the Son from all eternity, turned to a woman, Mary, to "beget" him in the world, thus making her "Theotokos", Mother of God, this is not without significance for understanding woman's dignity in the divine plan.

4. Therefore, the Gospel message about God's fatherhood, far from restricting woman's dignity and role, serves instead as a guarantee of what the "feminine" humanly symbolizes, that is, to

welcome, to care for the human person and to give birth to life. All this is rooted, in a transcendent way, in the mystery of the eternal divine "begetting". Certainly God's fatherhood is entirely spiritual.

Nevertheless it expresses that eternal reciprocity and relationality which are truly Trinitarian and are the origin of all fatherhood and motherhood, and the basis of the riches common to male and female.

Reflection on woman's role and mission is particularly appropriate this year, which is dedicated to God the Father, and spurs us to work with ever greater effort so that all the possibilities that are proper to woman in the Church and in society will be acknowledged.

---

*To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, the Holy Father said:*

*I extend a cordial welcome to the Lutheran visitors from Karlstad in Sweden, and I thank the Saint Louis Cathedral Choir from New Orleans for their song. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially from England, India, the United States and Taiwan, I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.*