



# **Woman's Role In The Renewing Church**

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In his encyclical. "Pacem in Terris",<sup>1</sup> Pope John XXIII mentions the role which the woman plays in public life as a sign characteristic of our times. He observes that this ever growing participation of women in worldly affairs is every bit as significant as two other present day movements: the rise in the socio-economic status of the worker, and the intense longing for freedom on the part of peoples who have been dependent up to the present time. All these movements, the Pope says, are motivated by a basic human desire for recognition of one's human dignity, and the highest possible development of personal talents. The encyclical welcomes such desires, and indicates the means which can lead to solid progress, both for the individual and for society.

The encyclical does not consider these three movements under the aspect of their significance for the Church. This was not the Pope's intention. And yet, there can be no doubt that the principles recommended in "Pacem in terris" for the good of society as a whole, must, above all, be given the serious attention of the Church. The Church has quite successfully come to grips with the problems of the worker, and has even anticipated the appeals for freedom and social development. Before these movements had actually gotten underway, the Church was there, to show their adherents what was

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<sup>1</sup> From April 11, 1963, *AAS.*, Vol. LV, Nr. 5, p. 257-304.

their best course of action, and to negotiate for their most precious rights: recognition of their human and Christian dignity. The Church has likewise been attentive to the question of woman's rights, and should not be accused of closing Her eyes to the matter. For about half a century now, She has supported every initiative made by Catholic women by way of a women's movement. Unfortunately though, there is one thing that cannot be said of the Church in this regard, and that is, that She has attributed to this movement the extraordinary importance that is due to it. Nor has She been willing to let its necessary practical consequences take effect. Not a few Church spokesmen saw in it little more than a Catholic counterpart of the typical women's rights platform which tends to be dismissed with a disdainful smile. Not everyone is given the vision to recognize, from its very outset, the real value of a life-process which has sprung up from invisible sources and revolutionized a society. And it is with just such a life-process that the so-called women's movement is concerned. Now that this movement has had such an impact that the Pope lists it as one of the three most important characteristics of the times, it should be possible for all not only to recognize its significance, but to dispose themselves to meet, without prejudice, the demands of a new reality.

The situation of the woman in social life has undergone a complete transformation. We must earnestly strive to appreciate this fact, and to reflect upon the woman's role in the Church of today and tomorrow. The time is ripe for such a consideration, since the Church itself is presently involved in a strong movement from within. In order to be prepared for future tasks, She is subjecting Herself to an examination of Her pastoral-theological existence, as well as of Her apostolic activities. Any shortcoming on our part, regarding the place and effectiveness of the woman within the Church, is sure to bring with it harmful consequences, whereas each and every attempt to do justice to this new orientation can open up an inexhaustible source of blessings for the woman in the Church, for the Church Herself, and for the whole of human society.

### ***The Woman's Dignity***

The Church, in Her present state of progress, is not going to be content to stand back and repeat the notorious tenet that it was Christendom that first recognized and acknowledged the woman's

dignity. Such a claim not only fails to take the Old Testament seriously enough, but it could easily lead to the false notion that nothing more is required of Her than a mere verbal recognition of the woman's dignity. This implies that it is unnecessary to draw out of this basic recognition the consequences which follow logically from it: those namely, which result from the social development of the woman. The woman's social position at the time of St. Paul belongs long since to history, but the fact that it must have greatly influenced the Apostle's judgment of the woman in the Church, is self-evident. Therefore those whose task it is to explain the Bible must separate from its historical circumstances whatever is of value and transcendence in Paul's epistles, in order that the truth that is contained in them can serve every age of man. The following words of St. Paul to the Galatians clearly express the mind of the Church in Her present state of progress: "All you who have been baptized in Christ's name have put on the person of Christ; no more Jew or Gentile, no more slave and freeman, no more male and female; you are all one person in Jesus Christ." (3, 26-28.)

Even as the same human dignity is shared alike by man and woman, so, too, is the same calling in Christ Jesus. Hence whenever the Council treats of the Church's understanding of Herself, it speaks of the People of God without distinction. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, in its magnificent preface, says that the Liturgy contributes to this, "that the life of the Faithful may be the expression and the revelation of the Mystery of Christ and of the real nature of the Church." The Council's primary concern is to work out what is of common interest and obligation to all the members of the Church. And so, in the new draft of the schema on the Church, the Chapter dealing with the People of God comes before that which treats of the hierarchy—a procedure that should not go unnoticed. The Council sees that being a Christian is the greatest dignity of all, for this dignity, by means of its intrinsic merit and singular value, outshines every other dignity and honor, be it ecclesiastical or secular. By re-stating one of the basic truths of the Church in language so suited to it, the Council Fathers invite all the Faithful to begin to reflect upon their predestination and place in the Church, and consciously to draw the conclusions inferred by their position. The woman is a full-fledged member of the People of God. In her dignity as a human being and a Christian, she is taken seriously and highly esteemed within



the Church, Nowhere else is she so regarded and valued. Consequently, she has a real sense of security in the Church. This sense must develop into a full, clear consciousness, a vivid awareness displaying a strong spiritual and moral power which will serve to safe-guard this dignity, and as a powerful weapon against the abuse of all personal dignities. Such an awareness also makes it easier to cope with an experience which comes up again and again, when some person, even among Church officials, fails to show the woman the esteem due her, or to accept her coöperation willingly. The vision of the Church as a whole is too clear to be dimmed by isolated phenomena of such a kind.

The sublime foundation of the woman's personal dignity in the Church can serve only to awaken in the woman sentiments of gratitude and joy, and in all others, an increased reverence for and acknowledgment of her.

### ***The Woman's Rights and Obligations***

It was not entirely fair to call the advocates of the women's movement "suffragettes". Even today this word tends to occasion a certain uneasiness in many, even priests. But didn't the workers struggle for their lawful rights? And are we not now experiencing the same thing from races and peoples who want to free themselves from foreign domination? Pope John sees such efforts as a natural reaction. In "Pacem in terris", he merely alludes to this, but then adds significantly:

Together with man's consciousness of his rights, there comes, too, the awareness of his duties, so that he who has determined rights has simultaneously the obligation to claim such rights as a sign of his dignity. And on the part of all other men there arise the obligation of acknowledging these rights and of valuing them highly.

Therefore, following upon the personal dignity of the woman are her rights within the Church, as well as an obligation on her part to claim these rights as a sign of her personal dignity. The Pope is implying something here, the effect of which is, up to now, hard to conceive of. It must be determined what rights and duties he is talking about, and what kind of a change is required in order that ". . . all other men" can fulfill ". . . their obligation of acknowledging and valuing the woman's rights within the Church."

The recognition of the equality and value of the woman among the People of God remains the basic issue. And to this must be added

the discernment that has played such a big part in the Council hall of St. Peter during both sessions, but especially the second, namely the need for the service of each and every member of the Church for the building up of the Body of Christ, according to the manner and extent willed and intended by the Spirit of God. This is a matter, not of a self-sanctification in the sense of an individual egoistical piety, nor of an excessive emphasis on class distinctions, but rather of a simple service, a readiness to listen to the Lord, and to follow Him, as and wheresoever He should lead. The Church calls for the development of the natural and supernatural gifts which the Giver of all good things presents in abundance to His sons and daughters. The progressing Church needs the rich fulfillment of all these talents, and the total commitment of all Her members, for otherwise She cannot fulfill Her world-wide mission in the future.

A unique contribution to the building up of the Body of Christ is demanded of the woman within the Church. If she fails to answer this command, irreparable sources of strength and value will be lost to the Church, and she herself will never attain to the life's fulfillment that is possible to her. This twofold consideration should motivate us to recognize the important service of the woman in the Church (especially for the future), and to strive, more than ever before, to produce the predispositions for this service.

This begins with the development of the young woman. We hear much talk today about political and economical development, as well as investments in character development.

These are new and unfamiliar categories of thought. In addition to the traditional factors of production, that is, labor and capital, factors measured in terms of physical units, we now come upon a third factor which has appeared in modern planning, namely man's knowledge and his ability to use available resources to their full potentiality. This is commonly referred to as the 'human factor', or even more recently, as the 'third' factor. This third factor is determined by the natural abilities of the people of a country, by the efforts and results of particular political developments, and by the discoveries of research in past decades or even centuries.<sup>2</sup>

If modern economy is gauged by such considerations, and takes great care to include the young woman, it is doing this under the

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<sup>2</sup> Prof. G. Bombach, "Bildungspolitik und Wirtschaftliche Entwicklung." Series of Lectures; German Institute of Industry, Jg. 14, Nr. 12.

pressure of purely economic laws of development. The question of human dignity does not enter into the picture at all. How such political developments affect other spheres of human life is of no interest to the economist. In an economic system, the "human factor" is only a means, and, as such, must be subordinated to the system.<sup>3</sup> A more intensive recruiting among women and girls along with an even more resolute political development for the woman, will sharpen the already existing problem, and do incalculable harm to the whole structure of human society.

Any detriment to the family will soon hurt the living organism of the Church. From this point of view, we certainly hope that a wise political development will permeate the economy, and that a settlement can be found which will serve not only the economy, but also the total organism of the people. But since the Church has the task of caring for men, (and She is especially equipped for this mission), the weighty and pressing questions of political development cannot, without Her assistance, be satisfactorily solved. And because our chief concern here is with the woman in the Church, she too must help to bring about a solution to this very important question. She must be ready to exhibit all the qualifications necessary for such a service to her fellow women, and to all of mankind. This is surely an instance of a new and very timely basis for a far-reaching development of the woman, a task which the Church, for Her own sake, may not neglect. Never before in the history of man, has the woman been faced with so many new tasks, common to all areas of social life. The Church can only take the keenest interest in seeing that as many women as possible be prepared for these tasks, and that they acquire the ability to engage prominently in the total process of modern life. Thus the Church must also turn Her attention to the secular training of the woman, and this from the elementary school level right on up to the University.<sup>4</sup> *Pacem in terris* says:

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<sup>3</sup>In 1961, in West Germany, out of nine-million, eight-thousand women between the age of twenty and forty-five, six-million, nine-thousand were married, and of these, two-million, sixty-six-thousand (almost forty per cent) were employed. In Cologne, compared with two-hundred-sixty-thousand male workers, there are one-hundred-forty-seven-thousand women employees.

<sup>4</sup>The fact that the German Bishops recently solicited an institute (similar to the Cusanus) for the support and advancement of female students, should be viewed as a good sign.

The natural law also gives man the right to share in the benefits of culture, and therefore the right to a basic education and to technical and professional training in keeping with the stage of educational development in the country to which he belongs. Every effort should be made to insure that persons be enabled, on the basis of merit, to go on to higher studies, so that, as far as possible, they may occupy posts and take on responsibilities in human society in accordance with their natural gifts and the skills which they have acquired.

Pope John expects the Christian today to be armed with rich knowledge, technical ability, and professional experience, so that he may be able to take his place in all public institutions, and there to permeate technology and culture with healthy principles, and to live these principles in the spirit of the Gospel. We are certain that the Pope here is also thinking of the modern woman, and that he expects from her a unique and invaluable assistance. For since the woman is more closely connected to life than is the man, and since immediate human values are her basic concern, she can (provided that she be included in the total picture) more forcefully and effectively obtain recognition of these qualities that are so uniquely hers. Her thoughts and actions must at the same time, however, be stamped with the unity of the light of Faith and the power of love, as is demanded by Pope John.

This demand also touches upon the important question of the religious formation of the woman. It must indeed be equally as thorough as her secular development.

It is too often the case, that equal attention is not given to one's religious and secular development, so that, while one may be very well educated in the field of Science, his knowledge of his religion never gets beyond the elementary stage. It is necessary, therefore, that the youth be given a religious training that is comprehensive, constantly pursued, and imparted in such a way that his religious and moral development will keep pace with his acquisition of scientific knowledge and technology.<sup>5</sup>

There are two things in this statement that especially demand our attention. First of all, we should see that the Pope's words are also intended for the woman. Secondly, we must note that "religious training" needs to be "constantly pursued". This certainly implies that religious training is meant for the woman's adult years as well as for her early life. How, otherwise, can she be in a position to set an example in her service to society, and to comply with the Pope's words in the encyclical: "It is especially fitting that all who confess

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<sup>5</sup> Encyclical "Pacem in terris", V.



Christ should bring light and love to human society. This will be the more effectively accomplished, the more intimate is the union of each one with God."

This statement of Pope John has special significance for the religious development of the woman. This is not to imply that the man should any less strive to unite his heart with God, but only that, since such a union is of so great a value for the woman, it should be brought about in a manner truly suited to her. Obviously the woman's changed manner of living will demand a new form of religious training, one which recognizes that her final goal consists in a deep personal union with God. The direction is clearly indicated to us when we say: Let us take care not to identify our heart with our senses or emotions. Although both belong to human nature (and are especially at home in the woman, and should be carefully nurtured in her), nevertheless they should never dominate one's religious development. The modern woman has to face the hard facts of day to day existence. She is also called upon to assume tasks of leadership in society. For this, she needs a clear insight into the truths of Faith, and a well grounded personal commitment to these truths. She needs, too, to be able to make judgments in matters of conscience which the Commandments make obligatory, and to follow resolutely the voice of her own conscience. And whenever it is demanded of her that she explain to others the truths of her religion, she must be able to do so in such a way as to show that she herself is clearly and soberly convinced of them. When the occasion arises, she must be able to present the demands of morality so as to indicate that these are rules of life that cannot be violated without punishment. Such sobriety and firmness of ideology, religion, Church, and morality, united to the charm of a mature and lovable woman, cannot fail to have its effect on society. The changed situation of the woman therefore demands a corresponding instruction in the Faith, together with a fitting application of the truths of Faith within the Church. Such a thing is not, thank God, as difficult as many priests imagine. It is necessary for them to acquire a respect for the woman's dignity, and to take seriously her present and future service to the Kingdom of God. Just as soon as the priest sees in the woman an authorized partner in the Kingdom of God, there will arise a clear and genuine ministerial obligation having in mind the proper channeling of the woman for the best possible fulfillment of her service. The priest must endeavor to

make his theological statements examples of intellectual clarity. In coming to grips with a question, he must get into its depths and draw out its meaning for life. He should fear neither to reveal his own personal commitment to the Faith, nor to allow his own manly living of it to shine through. This is not to be done merely for its pedagogical value—which would very quickly be noticed and radically rejected—but rather as a manifestation of a man of God and the Church who possesses a sober, but at the same time enthusiastic,



concern for the things of God. But how will this affect the woman in the Church? She must, in her turn, recognize that the priest does have a genuine esteem for her, and that he is making a positive attempt to understand her in her present situation. She must understand that he really wants to assist her, and that to do his he is willing to give of himself as a theologian, a priest, and a man. The clearer she sees this, the better will be her position.

Weaknesses in the woman, as is the case with all human limitations, are to be recognized but not overemphasized. A just judgment looks beyond these minor faults to her far greater excellences. Just as we should always try to see the good in men, so too here, the priest must perceive what is good in the woman, and set about, with pastoral enthusiasm, to develop this good to its fulfillment in Christ. The Church needs a proper relationship between priest and woman, a relationship of an intellectual-spiritual partnership in a common, though in many ways quite diverse, responsibility to the People of God. Such a relationship is possible only when the priest is stamped by a simple reverence for the woman's dignity, and convinced of

her rights and duties in God's service. Certainly "Pacem in terris" develops logically along these lines. The encyclical seeks to further define the position of leading men and woman within the Church. It also provides for the proper assignment of available resources, for the distribution of labor, and for the opening up of new areas of action within the Church's sphere. Anyone who was present at the Council, and heard the South American Bishops' desperate appeal for priests and deacons to help out in their vast mission territories, must recognize that women, too, should be allowed to do their part in answering this challenge. And there is an answer to this appeal which is, in fact, the voice of God's Spirit. The Church has always been able to answer such appeals, precisely because She is a living Church. The answer to be given, however, demands of the Church impartiality and discretion, generosity and trust. A change in the common experiences of life brings with it new [rotations of work and recreation, new types of social relations among adults and children, new allotments of school time, and the like], and it the Church's task to [indicate how life in these circumstances can be ordered to man's supernatural end and to sanctify those living in these circumstances by drawing] on the treasury of Her blessings and salvific powers.<sup>6</sup> At present, the South American Bishops are trying to build up catechist stations in areas lacking priests; in time, they would like to begin ordaining catechists, both married and single, to the diaconate.<sup>7</sup> We should be careful not to be too hasty in judging such experiments. We are too unfamiliar with the circumstances in these regions. We know neither the people nor their needs. Indeed, we should rather rejoice to see that means of deliverance are being sought, even if these means, at first glance, are difficult for us to understand, and give rise to many doubts. Perhaps in South America the road is being paved for healthy solutions which, without such daring experiments, would never materialize. In any case, the

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<sup>6</sup> The German term "Form" is so dialectical that it is impossible to indicate its meaning in English without enumerating examples of this meaning. Hence the bracketed explication of what is implicit in "Form".

<sup>7</sup> It was reported that the members of a small community of Sisters have been made vicars of a parish in Brasil. The Bishop is said to have entrusted to their superioress certain ecclesiastical cares, such as, responsibility for catechetical instruction, liturgical education and works of charity within the parish. The priest comes only on Sundays, to celebrate Mass with the Congregation.

Church should not look upon the daring and optimism of a Pope John as something that is demanded only of him, and given exclusively for his lifetime.

An immense treasury of natural and supernatural gifts is at the disposal of the Church, and is waiting to be dispensed. There are, too, as always, charisms in the Church today, which are a precious commodity to men, women, priests and laymen, and these must be made fruitful.

### ***Special Vocations in the Service of God's People***

With the changed position of the woman in public life, nearly all areas of secular activity have been opened to her. It is only logical then, that the number and variety of womens' vocations within the Church be increased. It is of utmost importance for the future of the Church that She sift out the needed womens' functions, and awaken and nurture genuine vocations to these. We should proceed from that great design for the ministry of the Church which the Council so forcefully proposed, namely, the service of each and everyone of Her members to the People of God and human society. The highest goal of our labor and teaching within the Church should be to lead every man, young and old, to the timely recognition of his unique vocation in the Kingdom of God, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" will be the basic prayer of all our efforts, which, mark my words, must penetrate into every level of Christian society, and this includes the woman.

If the woman is to serve the People of God in the role of wife and mother, then she has a clear vocation stemming from the mission of Christian marriage and the family in the Kingdom of God, and as such, must be taken seriously. Such a mission would ordinarily take a woman long years to accomplish, especially since she is not only the rearer of her children, but also their teacher, and as such, must be able to pass on to them the good word of the Gospel, and to lead them to the rich life of the Sacraments. Parents must strive to be able to bring about such a totality of Christian education and formation. There will come a time, however, when the mother will be freed from many of her household tasks. Her children will no longer need her to the extent that they did in their early years, and she will then be able to turn her attention to sharing her experience and assistance with the other women and mothers in her community. And so she



take on a new vocation, that of the elderly woman and mother within the parish, home and organization, where her modest cöoperation is indispensable.

If the woman is to serve the People of God in the role of a cloistered nun, then this vocation will be recognized as a living manifestation of a determined (eschatological) aspect of the Church in this world. Her threefold voluntary renunciation produces in turn a threefold royal road to freedom, to complete abandonment to the Lord, and to a generous, exclusive love for the Church. We hope that the Council will offer clear and inspiring directives concerning the vocation to the religious life, which will again set noble hearts on fire. We hope too that the religious vocations of our young women will be able to counteract the devastating power of egotistical life-principles, to which so many of today's women and girls have committed themselves, to their own great shame and to the corruption of society.

If the woman is to serve the People of God as a religious Sister, engaged in secular activities, but with the strength and in witness to a life consecrated to God, according to her promises of Poverty, Obedience, and Chastity, then the fulfillment of this vocation will be especially blessed. The spiritual strength found in her common observances and duties will contribute to her work, and will give to her, inwardly bound by her Profession, that freedom of the children of God which can be of so great importance as a witness of a truly Christian life.

If the woman is to serve the People of God as a social worker, this may be completely within the confines of the Church. She may have made a conscious renunciation of marriage and a family, as well as the renunciation of any affiliation to an Order or secular institute. Yet all her efforts may be dictated by a concern about her own personal union with God and the Church. Furthermore, she may be completely aware that in doing this, she becomes an emotionally free or liberal woman. As a result, such a service will demand of her a high degree of fortitude embraced in a free subordination to the total structure of the Church.

These are only a few of the most basic vocations that are open to the woman within the sphere of the Church. We have enumerated them here, in order to shatter the all too common notion that marriage and religious life are the only two recognized women's vocations with-

in the Church, and that all others are somehow to be regarded as abnormalities. No, this is not the case at all! As we have indicated, many are the varieties of genuine vocations in the Church that are accessible to the woman, each having within it the power to lead her to a rich fulfillment of her life's desires. All are positive responses to the cries of distress coming from the People of God and human society. How important it is, then, to hear in these cries the voice of God, the voice of the Holy Spirit in our times! Womens' organizations already existing in the Church must be constantly attentive to the needs of the times. They should not cling stubbornly to their usual tasks, but must remain ever alert to new possibilities and genuine solutions. Neither a uniformity of such womens' organizations nor a coördination of all their efforts can solve the many problems confronting the woman today. These solutions can be attained only by a variety of women's groups capable of meeting the diversity of contemporary social needs. All of these groups, however, must be one in ready service to all Gods' people, one in the love of Christ!

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