The Church and the Second Sex

With the Feminist Postchristian Introduction and

New Archaic Afterwords by the Author

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CHAPTER TWO

History: A Record of Contradictions

> 'To pretend that Christianity was intended to stereotype existing forms of government and society, and protect them against change, is to reduce it to the level of Islamism or Brahminism.'
>
> *John Stuart Mill*

A study of Christianity's documents concerning women reveals a puzzling ambiguity if not an outright contradiction. Most observable is the conflict between the Christian teachings on the worth of every human person and the oppressive, misogynistic ideas arising from cultural conditioning. If the latter do not contradict they at least obscure the basic doctrine. Intimately bound up with this dialectic there is another tension, between a pseudo-glorification of 'woman' and degrading teachings and practices concerning real women. The second tension of opposites is an effect of the first. Its existence betrays an uneasy awareness that 'something is out of joint', and it reflects an inauthentic response to this awareness. The symbolic glorification of 'woman' arose as a substitute for recognition of full personhood and equal rights. So we may say that the record of Christianity in regard to women is a record of contradictions.

1. Scripture

The Bible manifests the unfortunate—often miserable—condition of women in ancient times. The authors of both the Old and the New Testaments were men of their times, and it would be naïve to think that they were free of the prejudices of

their epochs. It is therefore a most dubious process to construct an idea of 'feminine nature' or of 'God's plan for women' from biblical texts. As one theologian expressed it: 'Let us be careful not to transcribe into terms of nature that which is written in terms of history.'[1]

An example will illustrate this point. The New Testament gave advice to women (and to slaves) which would help them to bear the subhuman (by today's standards) conditions imposed upon them. It would be foolish to erect, on this basis, a picture of 'immutable' feminine qualities and virtues. Thus, although obedience was required of women and slaves, there is nothing about obedience which makes it intrinsically more appropriate for women than for men. The idea of taking feminine 'types' from the Bible as models for modern women may be an exercise for the imagination, but it is difficult to justify as a method. Any rigid abstraction of types from history implies a basic fallacy.

Old Testament

The Bible contains much to jolt the modern woman, who is accustomed to think of herself as an autonomous person. In the writings of the Old Testament women emerge as subjugated and inferior beings. Although the wife of an Israelite was not on the level of a slave, and however much better off she was than wives in other near-eastern nations, it is indicative of her inferior condition that the wife addressed her husband as a slave addressed his master, or a subject his king.

According to Fr Roland de Vaux:

> 'The Decalogue includes a man's wife among his possessions, along with his house and land, his male and female slaves, his ox and his ass (Ex 20:17; Dt 5:21). Her husband can repudiate her, but she cannot claim a divorce; all her life she remains a minor. The wife does not inherit from her husband, nor daughters from

[1] Louis-Marie Orrieux, O.P., 'Vocation de la femme: recherche biblique', *La femme; nature et vocation. Recherches et débats* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard), cahier n. 45, décembre, 1963, p. 147.

> their father, except when there is no male heir. (Nb 27:8). A vow made by a girl or married woman needs, to be valid, the consent of father or husband and if this consent is withheld, the vow is null and void (Nb 30:4-17)."[1]

Whereas misconduct on the part of the wife was severely punished, infidelity on the part of the man was punished only if he violated the rights of another man by taking a married woman as his accomplice. In the rabbinical age, the school of Shammai permitted a husband to get a divorce only on the grounds of adultery and misconduct. However, some teachers of the more liberal school of Hillel would accept even the most trivial excuse. If the husband charged that his wife had cooked a dish badly, or if he simply preferred another woman, he could repudiate his wife. Even earlier than this it was written in Sirach 25:26: 'If thy wife does not obey thee at a signal and a glance, separate from her.'

Respect for the woman increased once she became a mother, especially if she produced males, since these were, of course, more highly valued. A man could, indeed, sell his daughter as well as his slaves. If a couple did not have children, it was assumed to be the fault of the wife. Briefly, although Hebrew women were honored as parents and often treated with kindness, their social and legal status was that of subordinate beings. It is understandable that Hebrew males prayed: 'I thank thee, Lord, that thou hast not created me a woman.' From the point of view of the modern woman, the situation of women in the ancient Semitic world—and, indeed, in the ancient world in general—has the dimensions of a nightmare.

Christian authors through the centuries have made much of the Genesis accounts of the creation of Eve and the geographical location of the rib. This, together with her role as temptress in the story of the Fall, supposedly established beyond doubt woman's immutable inferiority, which was not merely physical but also intellectual and moral. So pervasive was this interpretation that through the ages the antifeminist tradition has justified

[1] Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel, its Life and Institutions*, translated by John McHugh (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1961), p. 39.

itself on the basis of the origin and activities of the 'first mother' of all mankind. In a somewhat more sophisticated and disguised vein this is continued, even today, particularly by preachers and theologians who are unaware of developments in modern biblical scholarship. Such misunderstanding of the Old Testament has caused immeasurable harm.

Most of the usage of Old Testament texts to support sex prejudice reveals a total failure not only to grasp the fact of the evolution of human consciousness in general but also to understand the fact and meaning of the evolution of thought in the Old Testament itself. The foundation upon which the case for the subordination of woman is built lies in the older of the two accounts of creation. The earlier creation story (J document), found in Genesis 2, has been stressed as a basis for Christian thinking about women, while the P document account, found in Genesis 1—written several centuries later—has not been stressed, nor have its implications been understood.

Contemporary scriptural exegetes of all faiths, having the tools of scholarship at their disposal, as well as insights of psychology and anthropology, are enabled to look critically at the first chapters of Genesis. The two creation accounts, which differ greatly from each other, have been carefully scrutinized. The later creation story gives no hint that woman was brought into being as an afterthought. On the contrary, it stresses an original sexual duality and describes God's act of giving dominion to both. The plural is used, indicating their common authority to rule: 'And God said, Let us make mankind in our image and likeness, and let them have dominion . . .' (Gen 1:26). The following verse says: 'God created man in his image. In the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them' (Gen 1:27). This is understood by exegetes to mean that the image of God is in the human person, whether man or woman. Moreover, the plural is used in the following:

> 'Then God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle and all the animals that crawl on the earth" ' (Gen 1:28).

Thus, the burdens of reproduction are not specially associated with the woman, nor is there any indication that 'technical' or 'professional' work should be proper to the man.

It is the earlier (J) creation account, found in the second chapter, which has been the source—or excuse—for many of the disparaging theories about women. The intention of the author of this account seems to have been to express the creation of mankind as involving two stages. As Gerhard von Rad explains the J view:

> 'The creation of woman is very far removed from that of man, for it is the last and most mysterious of all kindnesses that Yahweh wished to bestow upon the man. God designed a help for him, to be "corresponding to him"—she was to be like him, and at the same time not identical with him, but rather his counterpart, his complement.'[1]

Contemporary scholars, such as McKenzie,[2] reject the idea that the story of the later creation of Eve intends to teach the subordination of woman. Rather, it is maintained that what is being conveyed is her original equality. Moreover, the old arguments for feminine inferiority which were based on the use of the word translated 'helper' to describe Eve do not stand up against linguistic studies, which demonstrate that the original word employed does not carry any implication of subordination.[3] Today, both the Genesis accounts, whatever their relative merits, are understood to teach that man and woman are of the same nature and dignity and that they have a common mission to rule the earth.

All of this does not change the fact that for thousands of years theologians and preachers have dourly been grinding out assurances of divine approval of woman's secondary place in the universe, 'as known from scripture'. Thus, Pope Paul's recent

[1] Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, I, trans. by D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), p. 149.

[2] John L. McKenzie, S J., *The Two-Edged Sword* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1956), p. 95.

[3] Pastor André Dumas, 'Biblical Anthropology and the Participation of Women in the Ministry of the Church', in *Concerning the Ordination of Women* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1964), p. 30.

statement to Italian women that 'perfect equality in their nature and dignity, and therefore in rights, is assured to them from the first page of sacred scripture' comes too late for the millions of women who lived and died with the 'religious' conviction of their divinely ordained inferiority and subordination. A psychoanalyst has written: 'The biblical story of Eve's birth is the hoax of the millenia.'[1] Unfortunately, the theologians who grimly pontificated about Mother Eve down through the centuries displayed little sense of irony and humor.

Humorless also have been the misogynistic tirades occasioned by the mythical account of the Fall. It should be observed that in the biblical story, as continued in Genesis 3, the woman's subordination to man—a sociological fact recognized by the author—is not the result of nature but rather of sin. Noteworthy also is the fact that the 'division of labor' theme is placed in the context of the effects of the Fall. The man is now associated with the task of conquering nature. The woman is seen only in the context of the burdens involved in reproduction. Isolated in fixed sex 'roles', they are no longer partners in all things. There is no indication that things must always be this way, since in fact this division is not inscribed in 'nature' but rather is the result of sin. What this suggests is that men and women, in striving to overcome the effects of sin, should evolve toward that real partnership on all levels which is required if the image of God is to be realized in them.

New Testament

In the New Testament it is significant that the statements which reflect the antifeminism of the times are never those of Christ. There is no recorded speech of Jesus concerning women 'as such'. What is very striking is his behavior toward them. In the passages describing the relationship of Jesus with various women, one characteristic stands out starkly: they emerge as persons, for they are treated as persons, often in such contrast with prevailing custom as to astonish onlookers. The behavior

[1] Theodor Reik, *The Creation of Woman* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1960), p. 124.

of Jesus toward the Samaritan woman puzzled even his disciples, who were surprised that he would speak to her in public (John 4:27). Then there was his defense of the adulterous woman, who according to the law of Moses should have been stoned (John 8:1-11). There was the case of the prostitute whose many sins he forgave because she had loved much (Luke 7:36-50). In the Gospel narratives the close friendship of Jesus with certain women is manifested in the context of the crucifixion and resurrection. What stands out is the fact that these, his friends, he saw as persons, to whom he gave the supreme yet simple gift of his brotherhood.

The contemporary social inferiority of women was, indeed, reflected in the New Testament. Although the seeds of emancipation were present in the Christian message, their full implications were not evident to the first century authors. The most strikingly antifeminist passages are, of course, in the Pauline texts, which are all too familiar to Catholic women, who have heard them cited approvingly *ad nauseam*. We now know it is important to understand that Paul was greatly preoccupied with *order* in society and in Christian assemblies in particular. In modern parlance, it seemed necessary to sustain a good 'image' of the Church. Thus it appeared to him an important consideration that women should not have too predominant a place in Christian assemblies, that they should not 'speak' too much or unveil their heads. This would have caused scandal and ridicule of the new sect, which already had to face accusations of immorality and effeminacy. In ancient Corinth, as one scholar has pointed out, for a woman to go out unveiled would be to behave like a prostitute.[1] Paul was concerned with protecting the new Church against scandal. Thus he repeatedly insisted upon 'correct' sexual behavior, including the subjection of wives at meetings. Once this is understood, it becomes evident that it is a perversion to use Pauline texts, which should be interpreted within their own social context, to support the claim that even today, in a totally different society, women should be subject.

[1] Pastor André Dumas, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

Paul looked for theological justification for the prevailing customs, such as the custom that women should wear veils. This partially accounts for his reference to Genesis 2 in I Corinthians 11:7ff, which he interprets to mean that woman is for man and not the contrary. We have here the idea that man is the 'image and glory of God', whereas woman is 'the glory of man'. Then there is his biased statement which has been quoted with relish by preachers ever since: 'For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.' Modern scripture scholars do not, of course, agree with this interpretation of Genesis. Moreover, Paul himself evidently noticed that there was something wrong and corrected himself immediately afterward: 'Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.' However, the damage was done. For two thousand years women have endured sermons on the 'glory of man' theme, and we still receive a yearly harvest of theological essays and books dealing with the 'theology of femininity', which rely heavily upon the 'symbolism of the veil' and 'God's plan for women' as made known through Paul.

A similar procedure of using the then current interpretation of Genesis to buttress convention is seen in another text, which is no longer generally thought to have been written by Paul, although it surely was written under the influence of the Pauline tradition:

> '[I desire] also that women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion. Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty' (I Timothy 2:9-15).

The author tries to support the androcentric attitudes and practices of his times by reference to Genesis. The fact is, of course, that there is no evidence that God made woman subordinate or that the social facts of the past should be prolonged and erected into an immutable destiny.

It is interesting to observe that those who have been fond of quoting such texts down through the ages to keep women 'in their place' have been obliged to adapt their interpretations. For example, that famous 'I permit no woman to teach' was used in the past against women who attempted to teach the catechism. It was later used by some to support prohibitions against their taking theological degrees. Today, women do take such degrees and do in fact teach theology. The same text, however, is still used by some writers to support their exclusion from the hierarchy, although it has been refuted. Moreover, it is evident that a certain selectivity is operative in the use of such texts on the subject of women. Few of those who cite this passage in justification of women's traditional silence would, for example, go so far as to argue that women should not braid their hair, nor wear gold or pearls or expensive clothing. To go to this extent would be considered absurd. On the other hand, many still cite Paul's words to support the custom of women covering their heads in Church. Such inconsistencies demonstrate the unreliability of the process of applying culturally conditioned texts within changed and changing social contexts.

One of the most frequently quoted texts is, of course, the following:

> 'Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. As the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands' (Eph 5:22-24).

An Anglican scholar has pointed out that great caution must be used in understanding this analogy:

> 'Woman certainly did not derive her being from man, nor does she derive her significance from him.'[1]

The same author explains that

> 'rejection of the wife's subordination does not invalidate the analogy, but simply requires a revision of the terms in which its ethical and personal implications are expressed. Thus, because marriage is a relation of mutual and not unilateral love, the exemplary love of Christ for the Church stands as a pattern to be imitated by the wife no less than the husband; indeed, the full moral and theological significance of their *henosis* only emerges when the notion of male headship is discarded in favor of a higher conception of sexual order.'[2]

It is to be hoped that this development of the Pauline conception, which reveals a humanist, personalist attitude toward the man-woman relationship, will eventually prevail in Christian thinking.

We are now in a position to see that the widespread habit of the clergy of perpetuating the oppressive Pauline ideas is hardly justifiable. There is perversity involved in the prolongation of doctrines and practices in an age in which they can be seen as faulty and harmful—which is quite a different matter from their expression in a milieu in which they appeared justifiable. These texts have been used over the centuries as a guarantee of divine approval for the transformation of woman's subordinate status from a contingent fact into an immutable norm of the feminine condition. They have been cited to enhance the position of those who have tried to keep women from the right to education, to legal and economic equality, and to access to the professions. The irresponsible use of these texts continues today.

The equal dignity and rights of all human beings as persons is of the essence of the Christian message. In the writings of Paul himself there are anticipations of a development toward realization of the full implications of this equality. We have seen

[1] D. S. Bailey, *The Man-Woman Relation in Christian Thought* (London: Longmans Green, and Co., 1959), p. 302.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 303.

that after the harshly androcentric text in I Corinthians, he attempts to compensate somewhat:

> 'Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God' (I Cor 11:11-12).

Moreover, the dichotomy of fixed classes as dominant-subservient is transcended:

> 'For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:27-28).

As one theologian has pointed out:

> 'This does not mean that the kingdom of heaven has to do with non-sexed beings. Paul is enumerating the relationships of domination: these are radically denounced by the Gospel, in the sense that man no more has the right to impose his will to power upon woman than does a class or a race upon another class or another race.'[1]

It is not surprising that Paul did not see the full implications of this transcendence. There is an unresolved tension between the personalist Christian message and the restrictions and compromises imposed by the historical situation. It would be naïve to think that Paul foresaw social evolution. For him, transcendence would come soon enough—in the next life. The inconsistency and ambivalence of his words concerning women could only be recognized at a later time, as a result of historical processes. Those who have benefitted from the insights of a later age have the task of distinguishing elements which are sociological in origin from the life-fostering, personalist elements which pertain essentially to the Christian message.

[1] Louis-Marie Orrieux, O.P., *op. cit.*, p. 142.

2. The Patristic Period

An examination of the writings of the Church Fathers brings vividly into sight the fact that there is, indeed, a problem of women and the Church. The following statement of Jerome strikes the modern reader as weird:

> 'As long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man (*vir*).'[1]

A similar idea is expressed by Ambrose, who remarks that

> 'she who does not believe is a woman and should be designated by the name of her sex, whereas she who believes progresses to perfect manhood, to the measure of the adulthood of Christ. She then dispenses with the name of her sex, the seductiveness of youth, the garrulousness of old age.'[2]

These strange utterances can be understood only if one realizes the lowness of women in the commonly held view. The characteristics which the Fathers considered to be typically feminine include fickleness and shallowness,[3] as well as garrulousness and weakness,[4] slowness of understanding,[5] and instability of mind.[6] For the most part, the attitude was one of puzzlement over the seemingly incongruous fact of woman's existence. Augustine summed up the general idea in saying that he did not see in what way it could be said that woman was made for a help for man, if the work of child-bearing be excluded.[7]

[1] PL 26, 567. *Comm. in epist. ad Ephes.*, III, 5.
[2] PL 15, 1844. *Expos. evang. sec. Lucam*, lib. X, n. 161.
[3] John Chrysostom, PG, 61, 316. *In epist. I ad Cor.*, cap. 14, v. 35., *Homilia* XXXVII.
[4] John Chrysostom, PG, 62, 544–5. *In epist. I ad Tim.*, cap. 2, v. 11. *Homilia* IX.
[5] Cyril of Alexandria, PL 74, 691. *In Joannis evang.*, lib. XII, xx, 15.
[6] Gregory the Great, PL 76, 453. *Moral.*, lib. XXVIII, cap. 3.
[7] PL 34, 395–6. *De Genesi ad litteram* IX, cap. 5.

Clement of Alexandria was also evidently baffled. Although he was somewhat more liberal than Augustine and concluded that men and women have the same nature, he inconsistently upheld masculine superiority.[1]

In Genesis the Fathers found an 'explanation' of woman's inferiority which served as a guarantee of divine approval for perpetuating the situation which made her inferior. John Chrysostom thought it followed from the later creation of Eve that God gave the more necessary and more honorable role to man, the more petty and the less honorable to woman.[2] Ambrosiaster remarks that woman is inferior to man, since she is only a portion of him.[3] Thus there was an uncritical acceptance of the androcentric myth of Eve's creation. Linked to this was their refusal, in varying degrees of inflexibility, to grant that woman is the image of God, an attitude in large measure inspired by Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. Ambrosiaster states baldly that man is made to the image of God, but not woman.[4] Augustine wrote that only man is the image and glory of God. Since the believing woman, who is co-heiress of grace, cannot lay aside her sex, she is restored to the image of God only where there is no sex, that is, in the spirit.[5]

Together with the biblical account, the Fathers were confronted with an image of woman produced by oppressive conditions which were universal. In contrast to their modern counterparts, women in the early centuries of the Christian era—and, in fact, throughout nearly all of the Christian era—had a girlhood of strict seclusion and of minimal education which prepared them for the life of mindless subordinates. This was followed by an early marriage which effectively cut them off for the rest of their lives from the possibility of autonomous action. Valued chiefly for their reproductive organs, which also inspired horror, and despised for their ignorance, they were denied full personhood. Their inferiority was a fact; it appeared to be

[1] PG 8, 1271–5. *Stromatum*, lib. IV, cap. 8.
[2] PG 51, 231. *Quales ducendae sint uxores*, 4.
[3] PL 17, 240. *Commentaria in epist. ad Corinth. primam.*
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] PL 42, 1003–5. *De Trinitate* XII, 7.

'natural'. Thus, experience apparently supported the rib story, just as the myth itself helped 'explain' the common experience of women as incomplete and lesser humans. The vicious circle persisted, for the very emancipation which would prove that women were not 'naturally' defective was denied them in the name of that defectiveness which was claimed to be natural and divinely ordained. Thus, Augustine taught that the order of things subjugates woman to man.[1] Jerome wrote that it is contrary to the order of nature, or of law, that women should speak in the assembly of men.[2] He maintained that the man should be commanded to love his wife, whereas the woman should fear her husband:

> 'For love befits the man; fear befits the woman. As for the slave, not only fear is befitting him, but also trembling.'[3]

Thus the 'ideal' marital situation proposed by Jerome—an 'ideal' suited to encourage such perversities as the sado-masochistic couple—appears highly abnormal to the modern person. It is significant that he was unable to find an adequate difference between the roles of wife and slave other than the fact that the fear of the latter should be so strong as to be accompanied by trembling.

The presumed defectiveness of woman extended also, and perhaps especially, into the moral sphere. The primary grievance against her was her supposed guilt in the Fall. The violence of some of the tirades on this subject has psychoanalytic implications. Tertullian, for example, wrote for the edification of his contemporaries:

> 'Do you not know that you are Eve? . . . You are the devil's gateway. . . . How easily you destroyed man, the image of God. Because of the death which you brought upon us, even the Son of God had to die.'[4]

Clement of Alexandria taught that it is shameful for woman

[1] PL 34, 204. *De Genesi contra Manich.* II, 11.
[2] PL 30, 794. *Expos. in epist. I ad Cor.*, cap. 14.
[3] PL 26, 570. *Comm. in epist. ad Ephes.* III, 5.
[4] PL 1, 1418b-19a. *De cultu feminarum, libri duo* I, 1.

to think of what nature she has.[1] Augustine cynically complained that man, who was of superior intelligence, couldn't have been seduced, and so the woman, who was small of intellect, was given to him.[2] The logical inconsistencies implied in this seem to have escaped him: this dull-witted creature could hardly have been too responsible. Moreover, she was clever enough to seduce man, which the ingenious devil could not do. Why did that paragon of intelligence and virtue succumb so easily? It is all too evident that logic is not operative in such invective, which neurotically projects all guilt upon the woman. For the Fathers, woman is a temptress of whom men should beware. That the problem might be reciprocal is not even considered.

There were attempts to balance the alleged guilt-laden condition of the female sex, but these, unfortunately, did not take the form of an admission of guilt shared by the sexes. Instead, Eve was balanced off by Mary. Thus, for example, Origen remarks that as sin came from the woman so does the beginning of salvation.[3] Augustine wrote that woman is honored in Mary.[4] He claimed that since man (*homo*) fell through the female sex, he was restored through the female sex. 'Through the woman, death; through the woman, life.'[5] This type of compensation produced an ambivalent image of woman. Mary was glorified, but she was unique. Women in the concrete did not shake off their bad reputation and continued to bear most of the burden of blame. The sort of polemic, therefore, which attempts to cover the antifeminism of the Fathers by pointing to their glorification of Mary ignores the important point that this did not improve their doctrine about concrete, living women. In fact there is every reason to suspect that this compensation unconsciously served as a means to relieve any possible guilt feelings about injustice to the other sex.

In the mentality of the Fathers, woman and sexuality were identified. Their horror of sex was also a horror of woman.

[1] PG 8, 430. *Paedagogi* II, 2 (end).
[2] PL 34, 452. *De Genesi ad litteram* XI, 42.
[3] PG 13, 1819 C. *In Lucam homilia* VIII.
[4] PL 40, 186. *De fide et symbolo*, 4.
[5] PL 38, 1108. *Sermo* 232, 2.

There is no evidence that they realized the projection mechanisms involved in this misogynistic attitude. In fact, male guilt feelings over sex and hyper-susceptibility to sexual stimulation and suggestion were transferred to 'the other', the 'guilty' sex. The idea of a special guilt attached to the female sex gave support to the double moral standard which prevailed. For example, in cases of adultery, the wife had to take back her unfaithful husband, but if the wife was unfaithful, she could be rejected.

Even in the face of such oppressive conditions a few women managed to attain stature. Jerome admitted that many women were better than their husbands.[1] But more significant is the fact that the existence of exceptions, no matter how numerous, did not change the generalizations about feminine 'nature'. Hence the strange ambivalence which we have noted.

On the whole, then, the Fathers display a strongly disparaging attitude toward women, at times even a fierce misogynism. There is the recurrent theme that by faith a woman transcends the limitations imposed by her sex. It would never occur to the Fathers to say the same of a man. When woman achieves this transcendence which is, of course, not due to her own efforts but is a 'supernatural' gift, she is given the compliment of being called 'man' (*vir*). Thus there is an assumption that all that is of dignity and value in human nature is proper to the male sex. There is an identification of 'male' and 'human'. Even the woman who was elevated by grace retained her abominable nature. No matter what praise the Fathers may have accorded to individuals, it is not possible to conclude that in their doctrine women are recognized as fully human.

Some individual women were, of course, honored and respected in the patristic age. Moreover, women exercised a role in the Church's ministry. The widows had the duty of instructing female converts for baptism, but they never constituted an order of the ministry. The office of deaconess is referred to in scripture (e.g. Romans 16:1), and Pliny the Younger refers to them in one of his letters. Other documents give more de-

[1] PL 26, 536. *Comm. in epist. ad Ephes.*, III, 5.

tailed information.[1] It appears that at first the widows ranked higher and that later they ceded first place to the deaconesses, who took over their functions. Whereas the widows did not receive ordination and 'imposition of hands',[2] deaconesses did, and the latter were part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.[3] In the West especially, their functions were severely restricted because of their sex, and they existed only until the end of the sixth century, when baptism of adults became rare, leaving the widows with virtually no function. In the East, their powers were often more extended, and there is evidence that they lasted several centuries longer in some of the Churches. There is no small irony in the fact that during an age in which opinion of women was so low, some of them were, in fact, members of the hierarchy, whereas in a later and more enlightened age, when the Church itself is urging them to take a more active part in public life, they are completely excluded from the hierarchy.

3. The Middle Ages

Theological opinion of women was hardly better in the Middle Ages, although some of the fierceness of tone was mitigated. The twelfth century theologian, Peter the Lombard, whose *Sentences* became a standard textbook to be commented upon by teachers of theology, went so far as to write that woman is sensuality itself, which is well signified by woman, since in woman this naturally prevails.[4] Bonaventure repeated many of the standard ideas. He thought that the image of God is realized more in man than in woman, not in its primary meaning, but in an accidental way.[5] He repeats the old idea that

[1] Cf. the article 'Diaconesses', in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* (hereafter referred to as DTC), t. IV, col. 685–703.
[2] *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 25.
[3] *Ibid.*, VIII, 19, 20.
[4] PL 191, 1633. *Collectanea in epist. D. Pauli in epist. ad Cor.*, cap. XI, 8–10.
[5] *Comm. in Sec. Librum Sententiarum Petri Lombardi* (Quaracchi edition), dist. XVI, art. 2, q. 2.

woman signifies the 'inferior part' of the soul; man, the 'superior part'.[1]

What was new in the picture in the Middle Ages was the assimilation into theology of Aristotelianism, which provided the conceptual tools for fixing woman's place in the universe and which, ironically, could have been used to free her. In the writings of Thomas Aquinas, which later came to have a place of unique pre-eminence in the Church, Aristotelian thought was wedded to the standard biblical interpretations, so that the seeming weight of 'science' was added to that of authority. Thus, following Aristotle, Aquinas held that the female is defective as regards her individual nature. He wrote that she is, in fact, a misbegotten male, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex. Her existence is due to some defect in the active force (that of the father), or to some material indisposition, or even to some external influence, such as that of the south wind, which is moist. He adds that, as regards human nature in general, woman is not misbegotten, but is included in nature's intention as directed to the work of generation.[2] She has, then, a reason for being—that is, she is needed in the work of generation. It seems that this really is all she is good for, 'since a man can be more efficiently helped by another man in other works'.[3]

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that Thomas thought woman has a major or even an equal role, even in her one specialty, i.e. reproduction. He wrote:

> 'Father and mother are loved as principles of our natural origin. Now the father is principle in a more excellent way than the mother, because he is the active principle, while the mother is a passive and material principle. Consequently, strictly speaking, the father is to be loved more.'[4]

[1] *Ibid.*, dist. XVIII, art. 1, q. 1.
[2] *Summa Theologiae*, I, 92, 1, ad 1. Albert the Great also wrote that woman is misbegotten: in II P. *Sum. Theol.* (Borgnet), tract. 13, q. 80, membrum 1.
[3] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 92, 1 c.
[4] *Ibid.*, II–II, 26, 10 c.

He continues:

> 'In the begetting of man, the mother supplies the formless matter of the body; and the latter receives its form through the formative power that is in the semen of the father. And though this power cannot create the rational soul, yet it disposes the matter of the body to receive that form.'[1]

Thus, the role of the woman in generation is purely passive; she merely provides the matter, whereas the father disposes this for the form. This view of woman as a purely passive principle which merely provides the 'matter' of the offspring is, of course, linked to an entirely outdated and false biology: that the mother is, in fact, equally 'active' in the production of the child was unknown in the thirteenth century.

This idea of women as 'naturally' defective, together with the commonly accepted exegesis of the texts concerning woman in Genesis and the Pauline epistles, and the given social situation of women in a condition of subjection are three factors whose influence can be detected in Thomas's arguments supporting the traditional androcentric views. Thus, in regard to marriage, he judged that, although there is proportional equality between man and wife, there is not strict equality; neither in regard to the conjugal act, in which that which is nobler is due to the man, nor in regard to the order of the home, in which the woman is ruled and the man rules.[2] Moreover, the exclusion of women from Holy Orders is upheld on the basis that a sacrament is a sign, and that in the female sex no eminence of degree can be signified, since the woman has the state of subjection.[3] There is no probability at all that Thomas was able to see this 'state of subjection' as merely the result of social conditioning, of a situation which could change. He believed that social inferiority was required by woman's 'natural' intellectual inferiority: 'So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates.'[4] This, he thought, would have been the case even

[1] *Ibid.*, II–II, 26, 10, ad 1.
[2] *Ibid.*, Suppl., 64, 3 c.
[3] *Ibid.*, Suppl., 39, 1 c.
[4] *Ibid.*, I, 92, 1, ad 2.

if sin had not occurred, i.e. even before the Fall. Thus, in Thomas's view, the question of woman's autonomy is hopelessly closed. The best she could hope for, even in the best of worlds, would be a kind of eternal childhood, in which she would be subject to man 'for her own benefit'.

The puzzlement which characterized patristic thought on women is again starkly evident in Thomas's writings. This is all the more striking because his thought is worked out in an ordered synthesis; it is not a collection of disconnected snatches of rhetoric, as is sometimes the case with the Fathers. The very existence of women seems to have been an awkward snag in the orderly universe which he envisaged. For the modern reader, it is startling to read the question posed in the *Summa Theologiae*: 'Whether woman should have been made in the first production of things?'[1] The very existence of the question is significant. Although Thomas argues that human bi-sexuality should have been 'from the beginning', his whole mode of argument reveals a naïvely androcentric mentality which assigns what is properly human to the male and views sexual union as merely 'carnal'. Woman is seen as a sort of anomaly.

The anomaly of woman had nevertheless to be assimilated into the system. A striking ambiguity, which looks very much like a contradiction, resulted. It was necessary to admit, for example, that the image of God is found both in man and in woman, for this Thomas recognized to be the teaching of Genesis. Yet Paul had said that 'woman is the glory of man', and indicated that she was not the image of God. Thomas concludes that

> 'in a secondary sense the image of God is found in man, and not in woman: for man is the beginning and end of woman; as God is the beginning and end of every creature.'[2]

The degrading idea that 'man is the beginning and end of woman' is reinforced by the parallel: man: woman; God: creature. Besides the intrinsic unacceptableness of this idea,

[1] *Ibid.*, I, 92, 1 c.
[2] *Ibid.*, I, 93, 4, ad 1.

there is an extreme difficulty in reconciling it with the assertion in the same paragraph that the image of God in its principal meaning (i.e. the intellectual nature) is found in both man and woman. If woman has an intellectual nature, then her end cannot be man, for intellectuality is the radical source of autonomous personhood.

The tension between irreconcilable ideas is also apparent from Thomas's teaching on the rational soul which, he holds, is not transmitted by the reproductive process but rather is directly infused by God.[1] Therefore, the form which constitutes the individual, whether male or female, as a human person is not derived from the father, but is directly from God. Thomas has made it clear, moreover, that in his opinion

> 'there is no other substantial form in man besides the intellectual soul; and that the soul, as it virtually contains the sensitive and nutritive souls, so does it virtually contain all inferior forms, and itself alone does whatever the imperfect forms do in other things.'[2]

What is more, he strongly maintains that intellectual understanding is not by means of any bodily organ; rather it is an operation which is *per se* apart from the body.[3] Similarly, the operation of the will is also performed without a corporeal organ.[4]

It is abundantly clear, therefore, that even according to Thomas's own principles, the alleged defectiveness of women, both as to their role in generation and considered as products of the generative process, becomes extremely difficult to uphold. Indeed, in the light of these principles it becomes impossible to uphold. According to Thomas, it is the intellectual soul which makes the human person to be the image of God.[5] This is neither caused by the male, nor is it essentially different in man and woman.

We said earlier that there is a striking difference between Thomas and the Fathers. The latter often manifest an un-

[1] *Ibid.*, I, 118, 2 c.
[2] *Ibid.*, I, 76, 4 c.
[3] *Ibid.*, I, 75, 2 c.
[4] *Ibid.*, I, 77, 5 c.
[5] *Ibid.*, I, 93, 6 c.

resolved tension between their idea of woman in her 'nature' and woman with grace, to such an extent that when she has grace, she no longer is called 'woman', but 'man'. Thus, there is an identification of 'male' and 'human', which is overcome to some extent by grace. Thomas, of course, shares the feeling that women as such are not quite human. However, leaving all questions of grace aside, there is indecision in his thought on the level of nature itself. For Thomas, possession of an intellectual soul is natural and essential to men and women. In the light of this radical natural equality, it makes little sense to say that man is the principle and end of woman. Why, then, does he say it?

The discord between the philosophical anthropology of Thomas and his androcentric statements is due to the then commonly accepted biblical exegesis, Aristotelian biology, and the prevailing image and social status of women. The deep roots of Thomas's thought—his philosophical conceptions of the body-soul relationship, of intellect, of will, of the person, and his theological ideas of the image of God in the human being and of man's last end—clearly support the genuine equality of men and women with all of its theoretical and practical consequences. In opposition to the outdated exegesis and biology which he accepted, these Thomistic principles are radically on the side of feminism. Thomas himself could not see—or would not permit himself to see—the implications of these principles in regard to women. And we have seen why: the logical conclusions he might have drawn would at that time have appeared contrary to faith and contemporary experience.

Today, fidelity to truth and justice requires that thinkers who are aware of these implications make them explicit, rather than parroting as 'Thomistic doctrine' harmful and untenable ideas which Thomas surely would not propose, were he alive today.

Despite medieval theories, there were some cases of powerful women in the Middle Ages. Nuns, especially, had a certain autonomy, which even St Thomas recognized. It is one of the ironies of history that there were abbesses who legitimately

exercised great power, far beyond what is accorded to religious women today. They were 'persons constituted in ecclesiastical dignity' who had 'the administration of ecclesiastical affairs and pre-eminence of grade'.[1] In fact, abbesses had power of jurisdiction. Like bishops and abbots, they wore the mitre and cross and carried the staff.

The abbesses of St Cecilia in Cologne had the power of jurisdiction and of suspension over clerics.[2] The abbesses of Conversano, in Italy, ruled a Cistercian abbey and its neighbouring parishes and wielded enormous power. This was symbolized in a ceremony of homage in which the newly consecrated abbess, with mitre and cross, was seated before the external door, under a baldachin. Each member of the clergy under her jurisdiction passed before her, prostrating himself and kissing her hand.[3] The homage ceremony was modified in 1709, and the last abbess of Conversano died in 1809.

Another interesting instance was that of the abbesses of Las Huelgas, near the city of Burgos in Spain. The abbess of Las Huelgas was

> 'dame, superior, prelate, legitimate administrator, spiritual and temporal, of the said royal monastery and of its hospital, as well as of the convents, churches, and hermitages of its filiation, of the villages and places of its jurisdiction, of the manors and vassalages, by virtue of Apostolic bulls and concessions, with plenary, exclusive jurisdiction, quasi-episcopal, *nullius diocesis,* and with royal privileges: a double jurisdiction exercised in peaceful possession, as is publicly known.'[4]

The powers of this jurisdiction included giving legal judgment, just as bishops did, in criminal and civil cases and in cases concerning benefices; the power of giving dimissories for ordinations; the power of giving licenses for preaching, for confessing, for exercising care of souls, for entering religious life; the power

[1] Article 'Abbesses', in DTC, t. I, col. 18.
[2] Elizabeth Schüssler, *Der vergessener Partner* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1964), p. 89.
[3] Article, 'Abbesses', DTC, col. 21.
[4] *Ibid.*, col. 20.

of acknowledging abbesses, of imposing censures, and of convoking synods.[1]

Although attempts have been made to explain away most of this as not really constituting spiritual jurisdiction, such attempts have not been completely successful. Thus it is suggested that the abbesses could have convoked synods through a vicar as intermediary, since according to canonists women are not able to convoke synods.[2] However, there is no convincing evidence offered that there were such intermediaries.

In addition to cases such as those we have mentioned, there were also double orders, in which both monks and nuns were ruled by an abbess.[3]

Besides the abbesses, there were other great individual women in the secular world. There were such outstanding rulers as Clotilde and Blanche of Castille, and learned women like Eleanor of Aquitaine and Blanche of Navarre. There were great saints: Catherine of Siena wielded enormous influence in her milieu, and the story of Joan of Arc has no parallel. However, it would be absurd to judge the general condition of women by such examples. The naïve idea of those who say that 'true ability will always prove itself', and point to such extraordinary cases, simply ignores the fact that countless women were completely stifled by an environment which worked against the development and expression of their talents.

The prevailing low status of women was fixed by law and custom. By canon law a husband was entitled to beat his wife. Canon law allowed only the dowry system for matrimony, and under this system women were defenseless. Moreover, since they were legally incompetent, they were not considered fit to give testimony in court. In general, they were considered as man's property. Since for feudal lords marriages were a way of gaining property, women were pawns in the game of acquiring wealth. The Church's complicated marriage laws offered ample opportunity for trickery and abuse. Thus, while the history of

[1] *Ibid.*, col. 21.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] Cf. Schüssler, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

the Middle Ages reveals a few glorious feminine personalities, that side of the scales is extremely outbalanced by the masses of mute and anonymous victims of hypocrisy and oppression.

4. Beginnings of the Modern Period

'The very thought that I am a woman is enough to make my wings droop.'[1] This remark, which was made by Teresa of Avila, suggests that the situation of women was not yet greatly improved in the sixteenth century. Why would a person of such intelligence and greatness have such a low conception of her own sex? Perhaps it is not too surprising when one realizes that some preachers of the time, as well as fathers of families, considered it wrong for women even to learn to read and write.[2] In such an atmosphere, it must have been difficult for a woman to have much esteem for herself and other members of her sex. In fact, Teresa's words often reflect, perhaps unconsciously, the attitudes of her milieu. She speaks frequently of the 'weaknesses' of women. The following remark is revealing:

> 'During the very sorest trials that I have suffered in this life, I do not recall having uttered such expressions, for I am not in the least like a woman in these matters but have a stout heart.'[3]

The implicit assumption is that real courage is normal only for men. Moreover, more than one admirer of Teresa made remarks similar to that of John of Salinas: 'She is a man.'[4] It is thought-provoking that this great woman and her friends, when they tried to express the nature of her uniqueness, spontaneously had recourse to expressions which disassociated her from her own sex.

Teresa's writings abound with passages in which she ex-

[1] Life, Ch. X. *The Complete Works of St Teresa of Jesus.* Translated and edited by E. Allison Peers (London: Sheed and Ward, 1949), vol. I, p. 61.
[2] Dominique Deneuville, *Sainte Thérèse d'Avila et la femme* (Paris: Editions du Chalet, 1964), p. 40. This enlightening work gives many useful references to St Theresa's works in French translations.
[3] *Spiritual Relations*, III. Peers edition, vol. I, p. 317.
[4] Cited in Deneuville, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

presses a terrible uneasiness over the handicaps imposed upon her sex. She writes of the obstacle of sex, which prevents her from preaching.[1] Irony as well as anguish are reflected in the following passage, most of which, significantly, was deleted from her manuscript but later restored:

> 'When thou wert in the world, Lord, thou didst not despise women, but didst always help them and show them great compassion. Thou didst find more faith and no less love in them than in men. . . . We can do nothing in public that is of any use to thee, nor dare we speak of some of the truths over which we weep in secret, lest thou shouldst not hear this, our just petition. Yet, Lord, I cannot believe this of thy goodness and righteousness, for thou art a righteous Judge, not like judges in the world, who, being after all, men and sons of Adam, refuse to consider any woman's virtue as above suspicion. Yes, my King, but the day will come when all will be known. I am not speaking on my account, for the whole world is already aware of my wickedness, and I am glad that it should become known; but, when I see what the times are like, I feel it is not right to repel spirits which are virtuous and brave, even though they be the spirits of women.'[2]

Teresa suffered greatly from her awareness of the ignorance imposed upon her sex. She refers to this ignorance many times, and indicates that she is fully aware of its harmful consequences. Her suffering on this account was all the more acute and lasting, because she clearly saw the value of learning. The following passage gives an indication of the intensity of her anguish:

> 'O Lord, do thou remember how much we have to suffer on this road through lack of knowledge! The worst of it is that, as we do not realize we need to know more than we think about thee, we cannot ask those who know; indeed we have not even any idea what there is for us to ask them. So we suffer terrible trials because we do not understand ourselves; and we worry over what is not bad at all, but good, and think it very wrong.'[3]

Years of experience and observation caused Teresa to modify

[1] *Interior Castle*, VI, vi. Peers ed., vol. II, p. 298.
[2] *Way of Perfection*, Ch. III. Peers ed., vol. II, p. 13.
[3] *Interior Castle*, IV, i. Peers ed., vol. II, pp. 233–44.

any tendency to delusions about masculine perfection. After describing certain exalted spiritual experiences, she says:

> 'The Lord gives these favors far more to women than to men: I have heard the saintly Fray Peter of Alcantara say that, and I have also observed it myself. He would say that women made much more progress on this road than men, and gave excellent reasons for this, which there is no point in my repeating here, all in favor of women.'[1]

She noted the blind underestimation of women which caused parents to regret the birth of daughters:

> 'It is certainly a matter for deep regret that mortals, not knowing what is best for them, and being wholly ignorant of the judgments of God, do not realize what great blessings can come from having daughters or what great harm can come from having sons, and, unwilling, apparently, to leave the matter to him who understands everything and is the creator of us all, worry themselves to death about what ought to make them glad.'[2]

Apparently, as a consequence of mystical experience, Teresa's understanding rose above the common interpretation of Pauline texts concerning women, which she had at first accepted:

> 'It had seemed to me that, considering what Saint Paul says about women keeping at home (I have recently been reminded of this and I had already heard of it), this might be God's will. He (the Lord) said to me: "Tell them they are not to be guided by one part of scripture alone, but to look at others; ask them if they suppose they will be able to tie my hands." '[3]

Thus Teresa's understanding—like that of Catherine of Siena, who recorded in her Diary a similar experience—transcended the theology of her times and anticipated what biblical scholars would begin to suggest centuries later.

During the centuries following the Middle Ages theological opinion concerning women did not change radically. Cardinal Cajetan (1469-1534), a famous commentator on the writings

[1] *Life*, Ch. XL. Peers ed., vol. I, p. 293.
[2] *Book of the Foundations*, Ch. 20. Peers ed., vol. III, p. 98.
[3] *Spiritual Relations: Favors of God*, XIX. Peers ed., vol. I, p. 344.

of Thomas Aquinas and one of the leading theologians of his time, expressed almost total agreement with Thomas' views about women. His usual comment on these passages was: 'All of this is evident' (*Omnia patent*). He did, however, deviate slightly from the Master's doctrine by expressing the opinion that there are many works which can be expected to be done better by a woman than by a man.[1]

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Jesuits, thought he saw a similarity between women and Satan: 'The enemy conducts himself as a woman. He is a weakling before a show of strength, and a tyrant if he has his will.'[2]

Especially revealing were (and still are) reasons given for the exclusion of women from holy orders. The Spanish Dominican, Dominic Soto (1494-1560) reflected sixteenth century opinion in his treatment of this subject: he held that the female sex is a natural impediment to the reception of Holy Orders. The ladies were not alone in this category, however, for he also listed hermaphrodites inclining to this sex, monsters, and the perpetually demented. Having given the usual arguments based upon texts of Paul, he added that even the light of nature shows that it would be absurd for women to be promoted to consecrate and to hear confessions, for even if there are some who are prudent, that sex manifests a certain poverty of reason and softness of mind.[3]

Consistent with such an opinion of woman was a doctrine of marriage which perpetuated her situation of helpless subordination and legal impotence. Thus Soto posed the questions of whether it is licit for a man to 'put away' his wife because of fornication and because of adultery, and answered affirmatively to both. Significantly, the question of whether a wife could 'put away' her husband for such offenses was not even raised.[4]

Francis de Sales (1567-1622), a liberal for his age, wrote some

[1] *Commentarium in I partem summae theologiae S. Thomae Aquinatis*, q. 92, a. 1.
[2] *Spiritual Exercises*, 'Rules for the Discernment of Spirits', First week, Rule 12.
[3] *In Quartum Sententiarum Commentarii*, d. 25, q. 1, a. 2.
[4] *Ibid.*, d. 36, q. 1, a. 1 and 3.

'advice for married people' which reflected the mentality of the times.[1] Addressing himself to husbands, he told them that the weaknesses and infirmities of body and mind of their wives should not provoke disdain, but rather a sweet and loving compassion, since God made them that way

> 'so that, since they depend upon you, you will receive from them more honor and respect, and so that you will have them for companions in such a way that you will nevertheless be their chiefs and superiors.'

While both husbands and wives are told to love tenderly and cordially, the wife's love for her husband should be 'respectful and full of reverence'. In creation woman was taken from man's side, under his arm, 'to show that she should be under the hand and guidance of her husband'. The intellectual superiority of the male is taken for granted in these passages. De Sales' remarks on marital fidelity suggest by their choice of wording a moral superiority of the male as well. He wrote: 'Husbands, if you want your wives to be faithful to you, make them see the lesson by your example.' These passages reveal that the androcentric assumptions of the Fathers and medieval theologians had been preserved intact. In fact, the tone of unctuous condescension does not disguise, but rather reinforces these assumptions (the *compassion* of the husband is balanced by a corresponding *reverence* on the part of the wife). An essentially alienating and de-personalizing form of man-woman relationship is exalted as the Christian ideal.

Although there was no basic change in theory concerning women during the early modern period, an important movement began which, although it most directly affected religious women, had a wider significance. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the beginnings of the dramatic struggle of religious women to free themselves of the cloister. In the Middle Ages it had become an accepted fact that once

[1] *Introduction à la vie dévote* (Paris: Editions Fernand Roches, 1930), t. II, troisième partie, ch. 38.

a woman became a nun, she was to be enclosed in the convent for life. In 1289, Boniface VIII had imposed strict enclosure upon all religious women. The Council of Trent renewed the constitution of Boniface with a few alterations, and soon afterward, Pius V issued decrees that all religious women must accept solemn vows and the cloister. This Church legislation reflected a strong distrust of feminine competence and morals. The attitudes which it reflected were strongly entrenched, and revolutionaries who saw the need for change were strongly opposed.

Now a number of courageous women struggled to break the old patterns. Among these was Angela Merici (1474-1540), founder of the Ursulines, whose ideas were daring and novel for the times. According to her idea, the Ursulines were not to be bound by cloister, nor to have a habit nor a common life. Their only vow was to be a vow of chastity. They were to live a life of consecrated virginity while laboring as apostles in the world. Unfortunately, ecclesiastical authorities were not ready to understand these changes. After Angela's death, the authorities—especially Charles Borromeo, Cardinal of Milan—gradually managed to force her company back into the old monastic forms, insisting upon cloister, religious habit, and the like. The founder's plans were defeated. A similar fate was imposed upon the plans of Francis de Sales and Jeanne de Chantal for their Sisters of the Visitation. Vincent de Paul's Daughters of Charity were more successful in accomplishing innovations.[1]

Undoubtedly, the most daring of the innovators was Mary Ward (1585-1645), who founded the 'English Ladies'. She intended that her group would work 'in the world', conducting schools for girls. They would be like the Jesuits, but would not be subjected to them, as to a 'First Order'. Rather, they were to be governed directly by women responsible solely to the pope, independently of bishops and of men's orders. Also

[1] A historical study of these attempts is to be found in James R. Cain, *The Influence of the Cloister on the Apostolate of Congregations of Religious Women.* Excerpt from a doctoral dissertation in canon law, Lateran University (Rome: 1965), pp. 1–58.

daring for the time were Mary Ward's ideas on the education of girls. A strong advocate of the emancipation of women, she planned to teach girls Latin and other secular subjects which heretofore had been reserved largely to men. She insisted that

> 'there is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great things, as we have seen by the example of many saints. . . . For what think you of this word, "but women"? As if we were in all things inferior to some other creature which I suppose to be man! . . . And if they would not make us believe we can do nothing, and that we are but women, we might do great matters.'[1]

At the same time, Mary Ward accepted part of the traditional teaching concerning woman's 'place', which her modern counterparts are challenging in the second half of the twentieth century. She was willing to accept the submission of wives to their husbands, that men are head of the Church, that women could not administer the sacraments or preach in public Churches. It would have been extremely difficult to question these points in the seventeenth century, when women were still considered unfit to study Latin or to teach very small boys. She was, however, a great revolutionary within the context of her times, struggling to free women to develop and use their talents in the service of the Church.

For her pains, Mary Ward was rewarded with persecution by clerical enemies. One of the chief among these was William Harrison, Archpriest of England, who together with some colleagues wrote to Pope Gregory XV in 1621, trying to get the congregation dissolved, since they were doing work 'unfitting for women'. What were the exact reasons given for opposition to this dedicated group? The first objection of Mary Ward's enemies was that women had never before taken upon themselves an apostolic office—an objection which revealed a strange ignorance of the early years of Christianity—and this was no time to begin. Describing the characteristics of women, the

[1] Mother M. Margarita O'Connor I.B.V.M., *That Incomparable Woman* (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1962).

archpriest reflected the opinions prevalent in the Church: since that sex is 'soft, fickle, deceitful, inconstant, erroneous, always desiring novelty, liable to a thousand dangers', the Church Fathers had cried out against them. Harrison's second objection was that while the group professed to be religious, they did not submit to cloister, as required. Third, they presumed too much authority, and spoke too freely on spiritual matters. This, of course, was claimed to be against the teaching of Paul, who in I Corinthians 14:34-5, had said that women should be silent in the churches. Another objection was that they would teach erroneously and lead others into heresy. Moreover, it was maintained that the women would cause scandal by frequenting the homes of people and travelling freely. Finally, these ladies because of their apostolic work were the subject of ridicule.[1] So much for the clerical refutations of Mary Ward's efforts. These did not, of course, represent the opinions of all of the clergy. The Jesuits, for example, were divided on the subject.

Mary Ward appealed to Pope Urban VIII in an audience in 1624, and he had her case reviewed by a board of cardinals. They did not come to a definite decision, but apparently agreed with each other against the possibility of 'the power of women to do aught of good to any but themselves in a life consecrated to God."[2] Finally in 1629 a decree of suppression was issued. Mary regarded this as a spurious document, and instructed her members to disregard it. In retaliation, three ecclesiastics from the Holy Office arrested her in Munich in 1630 as a heretic and a schismatic; she was imprisoned in a Poor Clare convent, under extremely unhealthful conditions, until released by a decree of Pope Urban.

The official Bull of suppression was signed by Urban in 1631. The wording of the Bull eloquently reveals the ecclesiastical mentality. It said, among other things,

> 'certain women, taking the name of Jesuitesses, assembled and living together, built colleges, and appointed superiors and a Gen-

[1] Cited in Cain, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
[2] O'Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

eral, assumed a peculiar habit without the approbation of the Holy See . . . carried out works by no means suiting the weakness of their sex, womanly modesty, virginal purity . . . works which men most experienced in the knowledge of the sacred scriptures undertake with difficulty, and not without great caution."[1]

The crawl of progress continued, however. The institute survived as a 'new institute', with modified regulations, but in the mid-eighteenth century it was again under fire. Benedict XIV issued a Bull (*Quamvis justo*), which stated that the new Institute of English Virgins was 'kindly tolerated', but that they must not recognize Mary Ward as their founder. Finally, papal approbation was given in 1877 under Pius IX, the vigorous original plan having been modified. Not until the present century was Mary Ward reinstated as founder.

What is the significance of this case? It illustrates tension and opposition between those who hold ecclesiastical authority —the guardians of the traditional androcentric structures—and those who try to bring women out of their condition of imposed inferiority and immaturity. The arguments used by William Harrison and the cardinals against Mary Ward are not unfamiliar to twentieth century Catholics. The basic contest has not changed: she and her followers struggled for the right to teach catechism and Latin, and were rebuked as trying to do what is unfitting for women and against the teaching of Paul. While since then, assuredly, much territory has been gained, today the same arguments are given to justify the enormous obstacles to autonomy and equality which still remain. Vestiges of the cloister still impede religious women today, hampering their personal and intellectual development in subtle ways, and thus indirectly selling short those whom they teach and with whom they have contact. Obstructive masculine legislation has contributed greatly toward perpetuating the basis which exists in fact for the caricature of 'the good Sisters'.

[1] *Ibid.*, pp. 115–16.

5. Emancipation and Papal Documents

It was not Catholic ideology but the industrial revolution which led to feminine emancipation. The eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century theologians continued to justify the traditional subordinate and legally helpless situation of married women. Cardinal Gousset (1792-1866) held that the administration of property belonged to the husband alone. He could sell or dispose of it as he wished, without the agreement of his wife.[1] The latter was expected to follow him wherever he should decide to go, even to a foreign country, and to submit to him in all things.[2] Indeed, the education permitted to young girls hardly equipped them for anything better than the life of mindless subjects. The clergy who concerned themselves with their spiritual direction generally encouraged only the passive virtues, and discouraged anything more than a modest intellectual ambition. A typical example was the work of the Abbé Juilles, who in the middle of the nineteenth century wrote a book of advice for girls, in which he counseled them to develop the virtues of humility, charity, and purity, but overlooked such virtues as courage and ambition. He encouraged them to apply themselves to Christian teaching on a modest level, but not to aspire to the level of scientific knowledge.[3]

The official Catholic reaction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the modern movement toward feminine emancipation manifested the persistence of the conflict between the Christian concept of women as persons, made to the image of God, and the notion of them as inferior, derivative beings. The first pope to confront the movement was Leo XIII. Against the socialists, whom he saw as threatening the stability of marriage, he defended 'paternal authority'. As for the husband-wife relationship, he re-affirmed the subjection of the female:

[1] *Théologie morale* (Paris: Jacques Lecoffre et cie, 1858), I, p. 315.
[2] *Ibid.*, II, p. 605.
[3] *La jeune fille chrétienne dans le monde* (Paris: Ambrose Bray, 1861).

'Wherefore as the Apostle admonishes: "As Christ is the head of the Church, so is the husband the head of the wife"; and just as the Church is subject to Christ, who cherishes it with most chaste and lasting love, so it is becoming that women also should be subject to their husbands, and by them in turn be loved with faithful and constant affection.'[1]

This, of course, implies a limited view of woman's 'nature,' which he briefly expresses in another document:

'Women, again, are not suited for certain occupations; a woman is by nature fitted for home work, and it is that which is best adapted at once to preserve her modesty and to promote the good bringing up of children and the well-being of the family.'[2]

In his encyclical on Christian marriage, Leo asserted:

'The husband is the chief of the family and the head of the wife. The woman, because she is flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, must be subject to her husband and obey him; not, indeed, as a servant, but as a companion, so that her obedience shall be wanting in neither honor nor dignity.'[3]

The implied interpretation of Genesis is unacceptable by the standards of modern biblical scholarship. Moreover, there is an intrinsic inconsistency within the statement itself. The riddle of how someone who is subject can truly be considered as a companion did not, it seems, appear as a problem to Leo. A comparable one-sidedness can also be seen in his treatment of divorce, which was viewed as an unqualified evil. He even claimed that by divorce,

'the dignity of womanhood is lessened and brought low, and women run the risk of being deserted after having ministered to the pleasures of men.'[4]

The other side of the picture was simply ignored; the fact that many women desired nothing more than to be freed definitively

[1] Encyclical Letter, *Quod Apostolici Muneris*, 28 December, 1878.
[2] Encyclical Letter, *Rerum Novarum*, 15 May, 1891.
[3] Encyclical Letter, *Arcanum Divinae*, 10 February, 1880.
[4] *Ibid.*

from partners who exploited their wives' inability to obtain a divorce under existing laws was tacitly passed over.

Although Benedict XV, in 1919, pronounced in favor of votes for women, this did not represent any sweeping change in the official outlook concerning women themselves. It was thought by many Catholics that women's votes would support conservative and religious parties. It would be naïve to suppose that this consideration did not affect official attitudes.

One of the great struggles in the effort to achieve adulthood for women has been the striving for an equal education. Resistance to this striving can be seen in the words of Pius XI, who wrote in 1929, in his encyclical on the Christian education of youth:

'False also and harmful to Christian education is the so-called method of "coeducation". This too, by many of its supporters, is founded upon naturalism and the denial of original sin; but by all, upon a deplorable confusion of ideas that mistakes a leveling promiscuity and equality for the legitimate association of the sexes. The creator has ordained and disposed perfect union of the sexes only in matrimony and, with varying degrees of contact, in the family and in society. Besides there is not in nature itself, which fashions the two quite different in organism, in temperament, in abilities, anything to suggest that there can be or ought to be promiscuity, and much less equality, in the training of the two sexes.'[1]

From the last words it appears that Pius XI was even more horrified at the idea of equality than of promiscuity. It is noteworthy that he linked coeducation with equality and therefore opposed it. Separate and 'different' education is, in fact, one of the surest ways of supporting the illusion that women are inferior in ability. In proclaiming that the 'differences' should be 'maintained and encouraged',[2] Pius XI unconsciously conceded that these differences are not as natural in origin as he would want to believe.

In his encyclical on Christian marriage Pius XI, citing Paul, repeated the familiar ideas on the 'order' of domestic society:

[1] Encyclical Letter, *Divini Illius Magistri*, 31 December, 1929.
[2] *Ibid.*

'This order includes both the primacy of the husband with regard to the wife and children, the ready subjection of the wife and her willing obedience.'[1]

His hostility to feminine emancipation is hardly disguised. He attacks those 'false teachers' who say that 'the rights of husband and wife are equal', and who say that there should be emancipation 'in the ruling of the domestic society, in the administration of family affairs, and in the rearing of children', and that this liberty should be 'social, economic, and physiological'.[2] Through loaded wording, psychological pressure is brought to bear against women who would want to improve their situation. He wrote, for example, that according to the doctrine of the 'false teachers', the married woman should, 'to the neglect of these [her family] be able to follow her own bent and devote herself to business and even public affairs'.[3] The whole tone and context suggests that anyone who does devote herself to business or public affairs is suspected of doing this to the detriment of her family. This is suggested also by omission, since there is no hint of the possibility that by such activity the woman could become a more well-rounded person and therefore a better wife and mother. It is noteworthy, furthermore, that Pius's choice of language unconsciously refuted the 'feminine nature' hypothesis upon which he elsewhere relied so heavily. It is the admission of such an ambitious 'bent' in women which reveals the shakiness of his views about 'the natural disposition and temperament of the female sex'.

'True emancipation', according to Pius XI, will not involve 'false liberty and unnatural equality with the husband'.[4] He referred to equality in dignity, and then effectively negated this by affirming the necessity of 'a certain inequality'.[5] It is abundantly obvious that he favored the traditional androcentric situation; yet the pressure of social evolution forced him to use

[1] Encyclical Letter, *Casti Connubii*, 31 December, 1930.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] *Ibid.*

expressions which have just enough ambiguity to leave the door open a crack for regrettable but unavoidable social change. Thus, he wrote:

'Again, this subjection of wife to husband in its degree and manner may vary according to the different conditions of persons, place, and time.'[1]

This prepared the way for an evolution of doctrine, but at the price of an ambiguity which could be interpreted in a manner that would militate against progress as long as the social situation and mores would allow. In the numerous passages of this type, the pendulum swings between the strong affirmation of a supposedly essential order, and a cautious admission of possible deviations from this. The following passage also illustrates this point:

'It is part of the office of the public authority to adapt the civil rights of the wife to modern needs and requirements, keeping in view what the natural disposition and temperament of the female sex, good morality, and the welfare of the family demands, and provided always that the essential order of the domestic society remain intact.'[2]

It is significant that in this process of adaptation it was the 'public authority' which was said to adapt the rights of the wife. All this was to be decided for her. There was no suggestion of a democratic process in which she might claim her rights or actively further social change in her own favor.

The copious utterances of Pius XII manifest the same resistance to change, often descending into detail with great explicitness. He insisted upon male headship in marriage.[3] As for married women entering the fields of work and public life:

'It is doubtful that such a condition is the social ideal for the married woman.'

However, he went on in the same text to claim that providence

[1] *Ibid.*
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] *Address to Married Couples*, 10 September, 1941.

gives to the Christian family the power 'to avoid the perils which are doubtless hidden in [such a state]'. He praised

> 'the sacrifice of a mother who, for special motives, must, beyond her domestic duties, also work to provide with hard daily toil for the upkeep of her family'.

His advice to such working women:

> 'During the hours and days which you can dedicate entirely to your dear ones, add zealous attention to redoubled love.'[1]

The text reveals the same indecision we have seen in the writings of Pius XI between a supposed 'ideal' situation (that of a bygone agricultural society) and the facts of modern life. It is notable that work is seen by Pius XII solely as an obligation taken on for the family, and not at all as a means of self-expression or as a contribution to society. Moreover, stress is laid on the double duty of the working wife, without a balancing reference to the duties or attitudes of husbands.

In one of his widely published addresses, the ambivalence of Pius XII's attitude is revealed in modes of expression that appear comical some twenty-odd years later. Having bemoaned the fact that women have been breaking out of bondage to the home, he could conclude:

> 'Your entry into public life has come about suddenly, as an effect of the social events of which we are being spectators; that does not matter! You are called to take part in it.'[2]

A key concept in the whole adjustment to modern society was 'spiritual motherhood', an easily manipulated concept which permitted some expansion of the traditional role but with limitations.

> 'Every woman is destined to be a mother, mother in the physical sense of the word, or in a more spiritual and higher but no less real meaning.'[3]

[1] *Address to Newlyweds*, 25 February, 1944.
[2] *Address to Women of Catholic Action*, 21 October, 1945.
[3] *Ibid.*

Just how restrictive and unrealistic this conception is becomes clear in the next passage:

> 'The creator has disposed to this end the entire being of woman, her organism, and even more her spirit, and above all her exquisite sensibility. So that a true woman cannot see and fully understand all the problems of human life otherwise than under the family aspect.'[1]

Many women find a discrepancy between this exclusive identification with the maternal role and their own experience of themselves, and find this identification with one role alienating. Pius takes care of such cases by using the expression 'true woman', implying that anyone who does not fit the stereotype is not what she should be.

While Pius XII seemed capable of viewing the work of a married woman as legitimate only insofar as it was a necessity imposed upon her to help support the family, his view of the man's work is, significantly, very different:

> 'For if by elevating himself creditably and honestly in society by means of his profession and labor, the man confers esteem and security on his wife and children—since the pride of children is their father—the man must not forget how much he contributes to a happy domestic life if, in every circumstance, he shows, in his own heart as well as in his exterior behaviour and speech, regard and respect for his wife, the mother of his children.'[2]

Missing entirely is any thought that esteem in society as a reward for her own professional excellence is a good to be prized by the woman as well. For Pius XII she remained the purely relational being, who receives esteem from society because of her maternal role. Absent too is any recognition of the fact that this condition of dependence upon another for one's self-image can be alienating.

Since the mental framework evidenced in Pius XII's writings is one in which women are envisioned as totally 'other', it is not

[1] *Ibid.*
[2] *Address to Newlyweds*, 8 April, 1942.

surprising that he showed little sensitivity for their problems and personal aspirations. The following statement is revealing:

> 'A cradle consecrates the mother of the family; and more cradles sanctify and glorify her before her husband and children, before Church and homeland. The mother who complains because a new child presses against her bosom seeking nourishment at her breast is foolish, ignorant of herself, and unhappy.'[1]

There is in the context no suggestion of sympathetic understanding or of compassion for another's situation. The possibility that the woman is overburdened and exhausted by repeated pregnancies is not considered. To quote again:

> 'Even the pains that, since original sin, a mother has to suffer to give birth to her child only draw tighter the bond that binds them: she loves it the more, the more pain it has cost her.'[2]

Such statements could well lead one to agree with Simone de Beauvoir's idea that there is an unconscious sadism at the root of certain moral attitudes concerning women. At the very least, there is in evidence an insensitivity and one-sidedness which is astonishing.

Pius XII perpetuated the custom of giving a double meaning to 'equality'. Having granted the equality of women with men 'in their personal dignity as children of God', he repeats the familiar jargon which serves to nullify the practical implications of real equality. Thus he wrote of 'the indestructible spiritual and physical qualities, whose order cannot be deranged without nature herself moving to re-establish it', affirming that 'these peculiar characteristics which distinguish the two sexes reveal themselves so clearly to the eyes of all', that only obstinate blindness or doctrinairism could disregard them.[3] The difficulty with this is, of course, that not only physical qualities but also 'spiritual' ones are presumed to be linked universally and exclusively to members of one sex. It is precisely this bridge from the biological differentiation to the level of personality

[1] *Address to Women of Catholic Action*, 26 October, 1941.
[2] *Address to Obstetricians*, 29 October, 1951.
[3] *Address to Women of Catholic Action*, 21 October, 1945.

differences which responsible thinkers today who are aware of the role of cultural conditioning would regard as highly problematic, and as anything but clear 'to the eyes of all'.

Pius XII's specific allusions to the alleged 'spiritual' differences reveal the unreliability and traditional bias of his assumptions. Thus:

> 'This effective collaboration in social and political life in no way alters the special character of the normal action of woman. Associating herself with man in his work in the area of civil institutions, she will apply herself principally to tasks which call for tact, delicate feelings, and maternal instinct, rather than administrative rigidity.'[1]

The expression, 'associating with man in *his* work', sustains the image of her as relational and subordinate. The text suggests, moreover, that she should be kept out of responsible administrative posts. This is confirmed by a statement in the same context about

> 'the sensibility and delicacy of feeling peculiar to woman, which might tempt her to be swayed by emotions and thus blur the clearness and breadth of her view and be detrimental to the calm consideration of future consequences,'

although it is conceded that these qualities are

> 'of valuable help in bringing to light needs, aspirations, and dangers in the domestic, welfare, and religious fields.'[2]

Having discouraged women from posts requiring 'administrative rigidity', Pius XII attempted in the same text, in a most unrealistic way, to point out compensatory factors:

> 'Only woman will know, for example, how, without detriment to efficacy, to temper with kindness the repression of loose morals; only she will know how to preserve from humiliation and educate in decency and in the religious and civil virtues delinquent youth;

[1] *Ibid.*
[2] *Ibid.*

> only she will be able to render fruitful service in the rehabilitation of discharged prisoners and of delinquent girls."[1]

Why would 'only she' be able to do these things? The works described could be done by competent professional psychologists, men or women. Pius XII seems to have been anxious, indeed too anxious, to find a 'role' for women in line with 'spiritual motherhood'. The unreliability of this conception is as evident from exaggerated praise of supposed specifically female talents as from the more negative statements.

The idea that the fixed sexual stereotypes might be the effect of social conditioning was not given serious consideration by Pius XII or his predecessors. All of the alleged specifically feminine characteristics are seen as rooted unalterably in feminine 'nature'. Yet it was impossible consistently to uphold such a view, and like his predecessor, Pius XII unwittingly refutes it. This is seen, for example, in his emotional description of the daughter of the working mother:

> 'Used to seeing her mother always absent and the home dismal in its abandonment, she will find no attraction in it, she will not feel the slightest inclination for domestic occupations, and she will be unable to understand their nobleness and beauty or desire to devote herself to them some day as a wife and mother.'

Moreover, she

> 'will want to emancipate herself as early as possible and, according to a truly sad expression, "live her own life".'[2]

So the alleged natural bent to domesticity is after all suspiciously subject to rapid change.

Even aside from specific instances of unwitting self-refutation, the whole tactic of these recent popes has been self-refuting. To paraphrase one of Shakespeare's famous lines, it seems the gentlemen did protest too much. If women's subordination were really so 'natural', it would not be necessary to insist so

[1] *Ibid.*
[2] *Ibid.*

strongly upon it. It would seem that people would not have to be told authoritatively to behave 'naturally'. The opposition of these popes to birth control, which becomes ever more acutely embarrassing to a Church endeavouring to face up to the necessity of change, was also rooted in a rigid and inadequate conception of 'nature'.

Hopefully, Church leaders will profit from the mistakes of the past, and not continue to repeat them.