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# Mary and Womanhood in the Renewal of Christian Anthropology

Mary and Womanhood. The question seemed clear a few decades ago. At that time the Virgin Mary was presented as a mirror in which Christian women recognized their ideal image. Yet most women today no longer see themselves in this mirror. The mirror had become opaque, its surface blurred, so to speak, so that the contemporary Christian woman finds nothing but clouded, deformed, or broken images.

What are the problems that have arisen? What inspirations can the Virgin Mary bring to the modern woman, beyond the conventional images used until only a short while ago? These will be the two points of the present article.

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## I. THE PROBLEMS

Why has the classical theme, "Mary, Model of Womanhood," become so out of date that even preachers do not dare to speak of it today? There are four principle reasons:

1. *Evolution and Relativity of the Feminine Situation*

First and most basic, the woman's role had remained constant between the first centuries of the Judaeo-Christian era and the beginning of our own century. Woman were still doing the same kind of work: sewing, cooking, cleaning, etc. A woman's civil and economic rights were inferior to the man's. She did not vote; she was not involved in the political life of her country. She had little or no access to intellectual culture, to advanced education, to the liberal professions. She was reduced to what the Germans called the 3K's: *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*; children, kitchen, church (the third *K* corresponds to a more recent phenomenon, however). Moralists and preachers defined her as "wife and mother," with special emphasis on the second term. It was a favorite theme in the instruction of young Christian women. In flagrant contrast, however, no one preached to young men that they ought to be "husbands and fathers." Still less would young men have been defined by these titles. Mary was a model of the housewife, of domestic work, of a submissive life bound to the home.

She was a psychological model of a perpetual minor living under man's shadow in an underdeveloped environment, in a civilization that was itself underdeveloped: the model of the woman who sews, who draws water from wells, and who keeps the fire going, as so many women were still doing at the beginning of the twentieth century, when a rural economy held the major part of the population.

Times have changed. They have even changed rapidly in Europe where these new developments began later than in America. In France we rarely find young women who want to emulate their mothers. The same can be said of those who would recognize the Virgin Mary as a model upon whom to pattern their lives.

Thus, one of the most recurrent themes of pontifical teaching, "the housewife," is found to be out of date. In Italy during the 1960's, John

XXIII received in audience an association of Italian working women and sympathized with them about the sad fact that they had to make their own living. This surprised the women, because for them work represented something entirely different: an irreplaceable element of their insertion into the world and into their culture. Shortly afterwards, John XXIII, recognizing this aspect of the "feminist movement" in *Pacem in Terris*, hailed the "work of women" as a "sign of the times." On this point, by way of example, the change in attitude has come about for two reasons:

The first can be made clear by using France as an example. The number of working women has not appreciably increased since 1900, but occupations have changed. In 1900, women were exploited in inferior, poor-paying jobs. Today they are found in considerable proportions in top-priority professions: law, medicine, management, higher education, etc. Professional work is not a blind alley for them, but an irreplaceable factor of culture and development.

Secondly, the duration and efficiency of human life have been extended. The marital age tends to be lower. Thus, many young women are preparing a second life for themselves, one they will begin to live at the age of forty after their children have been reared. In the meantime, they will sacrifice partially or totally their professional life. These new cultural situations were not experienced by the Virgin Mary.

We are wondering just how far this ever-accelerating trend will go. The Church has gladly welcomed the developments in medicine which have brought about greater freedom for women in making possible painless childbirth, although this was initiated in a Marxist country. She has a more hesitant attitude, but one favorable in principle, to the regulation of births. She will not follow—and rightly so—the prophets of the future who already are hypothesizing artificial gestation of children, for example.

Some technical solutions are destructive of fundamental human values. This has already been experienced. The ultra-modern, ultra-septic maternities in which children were reared without human contact have encountered high mortality rates. When real, physical, and effective contact was established between the children and a woman who was given the job of caring for them without gloves or mask, this unprecedented epidemic

ceased. Every child needs a mother; it is no less necessary for his life than food, instruction, etc.

Regardless of the manner in which present day change evolves, the surprises that are in store for us, it is important that it does not destroy, but builds men.

Considering all this, what has changed with regard to Mary? Basically, she is no longer a cultural model. One can no longer subject women to an image of Mary presenting her as a witness to a state of civilization that has been surpassed. Yet on another level she remains a universal model. She remains the woman who took upon herself, in God, the universality of the world and salvation in her own particular historical context, by receiving Christ and giving birth to him. The situation is no longer the same, but Mary remains a model in the way she accepted her own situation in order to receive and radiate Christ in faith.

## 2. *Mary, Model of Womanhood and Christ, the Universal Model*

Other problems involving the theme, "Mary, Model of Womanhood," are secondary. The following principle used to be taken for granted: Mary is the model of women as Jesus is the model of men. Today this appears to be nonsensical.

First of all, people have become more cautious when distinguishing between masculine and feminine characteristics, for accepted distinctions have been shown to be deceptive: the active man, the passive woman, etc.

Secondly, masculinity and femininity do not exist in a pure state; they are two elements which are combined in diverse proportions. If there does exist a certain emotional predominance in women, emotivity likewise exists in men; some men are more emotional than certain women. This ambiguous situation is realized on a physiological level in the initial embryological indifferenciation of the sexes, and by physical elements which are signs of virility among women and of femininity among men.

These considerations require us to place in proper light the fact that Christ is the supreme and universal model for men as well as for women—and first of all for Mary. But we must say this: it is by his humanity,

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not by his masculinity, that Christ has saved us. It is essentially on this level that he reveals himself to us and attracts us. Likewise, Mary is more profoundly a human ideal than a feminine ideal. She is a supreme realization of the human in the feminine, but in relationship with Christ, for masculine and feminine are indissolubly correlatives in salvation, as elsewhere. The humanity of Christ has been constituted by the work of the woman, ". . . blessed among women. . . ." He would not have been fully man if he had not been referred, from his very beginning among us, in his physical and psychic genesis, to a woman: his mother. As every man, he had been awakened and moulded by this presence and this first image, whereas Mary herself was modeled on him according to grace.

### 3. *Mary the Virgin par excellence, and the Present Misunderstandings of Virginité*

Our contemporaries have emphasized the third problem with special force. They place value on the woman's sexual fulfillment, both physiologically and psychologically. That Mary is a virgin, a virgin *par excellence*, is an obstacle for them. She appears as a model of incomplete or underdeveloped femininity, if not of a frustrated or artificially compensated sexuality, in brief, a dangerous model. A French author, Philippe Heriat has written a "futuristic" drama in which a young woman hostile to the opposite sex obtains an infant through parthenogenesis. The title of the play is *The Immaculate*. This reference is significant in that it is an indication of the contemporary mentality.

The first element of a response can be found in the Gospel's presentation of Mary. At the time of the Annunciation she is a "virgin engaged" (or "married," as certain authors translate it) to a man named Joseph (*Mt. I.27*). Excluding sexual union—ruled out by her exclusive consecration to the Son of God—she lived a common life with a man. This presupposes a profound union of responsibilities, work and mutual help, with a certain affective element on the level of friendship experienced by a man and woman involved in the joint effort of building a household.

More profoundly, Mary's resolution not to know man does not mean that she lacked the capacity to give herself; neither does this imply a with-

drawal, nor a refusal of sexuality, but a surpassing of it. Mary was led to the vocation of virginity not by reason of any pre-established concept of a hierarchy of states giving priority to virginity over marriage. The thought of her times was deliberately the opposite of this. She discovered virginity as a means of realizing a divine purpose, as an exclusive gift of God, and as a total consecration to salvation. As certain individuals have remained virgin for natural reasons, Mary did this for the realization of a commanding and universal objective: the salvation of man. She did it, as many women after her were going to do, in order to testify in this world that the other life to which we are called, which no longer makes use of ordinary means—material goods, sexual love—can even now be lived in God, by God, and for God. Consecrated life is an eschatological witness.

#### 4. *Mother of a Unique Son*

The last problem involving the theme "Mary, Model of Womanhood": Mary is the mother of a unique son. She is not the model of mothers with many children; she had neither their worries nor their responsibilities. This very secondary objection can likewise be resolved in the same way: universality. Mary gave birth to a son who is universal by his divinity as well as his soteriological mission. She accepted him as such. In him, her maternity has a universal extension, and this universality is realized in the spiritual maternity promulgated by Christ on Calvary when he said, "Mother, behold your son." (*Jn.* 19.25).

Let us conclude this first section.

We have begun with problems. Rather than give complete solutions still in the process of maturation, we have simply given the principles of a solution which always lead us to the same thing: to understand Mary not in that which is particular and passing, but according to the universal values of the Gospel. These solutions ought to be made more precise with a double realism, i.e., taking into account human realities which evolve and the Gospel which we must constantly penetrate ever more deeply.

2. BIBLICAL DATA

Our second part will be a return to the sources. It is a response to the following question: What light will the Gospels shed on womanhood according to the plan of God and the role of Mary as the ideal of womanhood in this plan?

In this respect, the riches of Scripture have been unappreciated. We shall concentrate on four themes:

1. *The Equality of Man and Woman*

a. *The First Fact: Equality*

The first theme concerns the equality of man and woman. It is an equality of nature that the Bible affirms in the two creation accounts—in opposition to the mentality of that period.

“God created man in his image . . . man and woman he created them,” we read in the better known first account (*Gn.* 1.27).

This striking phrase is repeated even more vigorously in *Gn.* 5.1:

On the day God created Adam, he made him in the likeness of God. Man and woman he created them and gave them the name of Adam. (P document, sixth century)

The force of the Hebrew text is lost in its translation, for Adam is at once the common term for mankind and the typical name of the first man, according to a certain law of exchange between a collectivity and the individual, between the group and its typical personalization—one of the keys to Semitic thought processes in the Bible. According to Genesis, man is inseparably masculine-feminine, in an equality.

The second account of creation (*Gn.* 2.18-23) is a more colorful presentation according to the literary genre of the J document (tenth century, not the sixth century as for the P document), but the import is positively indisputable. What this account intends to convey to a polygamous people who often categorized women with brute animals (*Ex.* 20.17; *Dt.* 5.21)



is this: that woman is of the same "stuff," of the same origin as man. Even more, the conclusion to the account is a contradiction of Hebraic custom whereby the woman leaves the paternal house in order to dwell with her spouse. The Genesis account centers marriage on the woman:

This is why man leaves his father and his mother and attaches himself to his wife. (*Gn. 2.24*)

Perhaps this text stems from a very archaic matriarchal civilization. Whatever the case may be, it accords to woman a place in the foreground. The Bible assumes, in transcending them, the diverse types of civilization: the matriarchal and the patriarchal, so predominant elsewhere.

The New Testament draws new consequences from the fundamental equality between man and woman. According to St. Paul, the woman has the same right over the body of her husband as the husband over the body of his wife (*I Co. 7.4*). This is something very new in a cultural milieu where the husband had all the rights; the wife, none at all. The Pauline condemnation of those who have relations with a prostitute—or extra-marital relations of any form—follows the same line of thinking. Indeed, according to Greek and Latin custom, a man of means had a wife in order to insure his posterity and other women for love and fantasy. He respected and took care of the first, and saved his love-life for the second. The dissociation was so well established, so ingrained, that even St. Jerome and St. Thomas Aquinas admitted and repeated an adage of the pagan philosophers: "He who loves his wife too ardently is an adulterer," for ardent, passionate love was associated with extra-conjugal relations. In spite of St. Paul, many moralists had been impressed by this pagan adage which had since become "traditional." It was formally disposed of only at Vatican II (*Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, Ch. 2*).

The New Testament constitutes a new stage in the affirmation of the equality in salvation, equality *according to grace*, an equality in which all differences are surpassed:

In Jesus Christ there are neither Greeks nor Jews; neither men nor women, neither free men nor slaves (*Gal. 3.28*).

Again, revelation goes against the current of contemporary civilization.

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Likewise, *I Pt.* 3.7 insists on the honor that a man ought to accord his wife inasmuch as she is co-heir of grace and life. In other words, man and woman are equal before the heritage, the divine gift of salvation.

The practice of baptism constituted a veritable revolution if we compare it with Old Testament practices. In Israel, only men were circumcised. Consequently, they alone participated in the assembly of the "royal and priestly" people of which *Ex.* 19.6 had spoken. In the Church, from its very onset, women were baptized along with the men. By this very practice, women belonged with full rights to the royal priesthood of the new people.

The New Testament also introduced the equality of man and woman with regard to sin. In the Old Testament, the woman adulterer alone was subject to stoning; the man was exempt from this penalty. It is in opposition to this that Jesus shields the adulteress from the legal sanction urged by the Pharisees (*Jn.* 8). Similarly, he put an end to the inequality in operation regarding the application of the law of indissolubility of marriage. This would seem to be the intention of the prescription reported by *Mk.* 10.1-2; *Lk.* 16, 18; *Mt.* 5,31-32, and *Mt.* 19-1-19—the famous exception Bishop Zoghby invoked at the Council for the dissolution of certain marriages for the benefit of a partner unjustly and definitively abandoned.

In brief, the Bible teaches the equality of man and woman in all respects: mission, responsibility, membership in the People of God, right of inheritance, etc.

### b. *Second Fact: Subordination*

In the face of this impressive series of texts affirming equality between man and woman, we must situate another apparently contradictory series. According to the New Testament, woman is a frail being (*I Pt.* 3.7; cf. *I Tm.* 2.14). She is subordinate to man in marriage (*I Co.* 14.34; *Eph.* 5.22-24; *Col.* 2.18; *Tt.* 2.5; *I Pt.* 3.1). She is excluded from hierarchical functions: governing, officiating at worship, speaking in the Church (*I Co.* 14.34; *I Tim.* 2.11-14). What are we to think of these texts? How can they be reconciled with the preceding ones?

In general we can say that the texts affirming equality represent an expression of Divine Revelation which goes against the established social order; the second series is more ambiguous. In what way does this latter series of texts announce a law with normative intentions? In what way are these texts simply an expression of the established social order? To respond to this question:

The subordinate condition that the Bible attributes to woman is explained, in part at least, by artificial conditions which have been surpassed today. We must recognize that the Pauline passage on the necessity for women to wear veils "because of the angels" (*I Co.* 11.10) is a cause of embarrassment for present-day exegetes.

More precisely, texts urging women to be submissive to their husbands are strictly parallel to those urging slaves to be submissive to their masters (*I Tim.* 6.7; *Ti.* 2.9; *I Pt.* 2.18). Identical terms are used and the analogy of the two cases is attested by the passage we have already cited from *Gal.* 3.28:

In Jesus Christ there are neither Greeks nor Jews, neither men nor women, neither free men nor slaves.

Today slavery is abolished, and the Church is pleased to see in this the fruit of the Gospel's request. The inferior status of woman and the discriminations to which she has been subjected are being overcome today. Is this not also the fruit of the Gospel's request?

This observation urges us to phrase a more general question: Is not a certain subordination of woman to man explained by the fact of sin—of the egotism of man, of his will for power, of his instinct for domination? This factor is evidently present in those civilizations where women perform all the domestic and productive work, where she carried, and still carries, the burdens. These civilizations seemed to have assumed that nature itself had given women the responsibility of bearing both burdens and children. This reasoning which appears so ridiculous today explains many customs of an apparently-evolved civilization, in particular, Old Europe. The idea that certain tasks are women's work, and that men are rightfully exempt from all domestic services—washing the dishes, cooking, etc.—is an entirely relative sociological convention largely surpassed in countries more

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advanced in this respect. Such is the case in the United States, for example.

In a still more general manner, we must separate the Christian faith from a thousand conventions, more or less deceptive, with which it has unfortunately co-existed for many centuries. Think of the pagan marital concepts we spoke of a while ago. Think also of the myths by which medieval civilization falsely substantiated feminine inferiority. She was considered by biologists to be a "defective man," a man who, because of a failure to arrive at the term of his development, remained in the infantile state of femininity. This was certainly a strange idea, for the reproduction of the human species, thanks to the differentiation of the sexes, then appeared as the result of an accident, of an error of nature, a biological mistake which would have taken place fifty percent of the time. Moreover, it was also assumed that the masculine embryo received the soul ten days before the female embryo because the matter in the masculine embryo was disposed in a superior way. This "admirable" invention of masculine conceit was current among the great doctors of the Middle Ages, including even St. Albert the Great.

Are there in fact differences between man and woman which imply the superiority of the one and the subordination of the other? There are great reservations concerning this question today. Indeed, many of the so-called masculine superiorities have been revealed to be the result of preconceived ideas, or of conditions imposed on woman by civilization. Even the domain in which the position of woman appears most manifestly "inferior," that of physical strength, is now being challenged. Certain feminine athletic records of today surpass masculine records of the nineteenth hundreds. In other areas woman reveals superiorities, e.g., in the length of life. Regarding all this, Simone de Beauvoir reduces to nothing all masculine-feminine differences. According to her these are only conditionings to which liberty should not submit, but surpass. She goes too far, for true liberty does not deny the realities of nature; it assumes them and surpasses them in making use of them. In the species there certainly exists a differentiation between man and woman. On the physical level there is a generative role proper to woman; her constitution is adapted to this end and to the psychological continuance of this maternal function.

This function places woman in a position of receptivity, of vital continuity. She is in more intimate, closer connection with life and with the cosmos. She plays a mediating role between man who fights with the cosmic forces in order to dominate them and the life she assumes and perceives from the interior. She is thus an irreplaceable intermediary between psychologically discontinuous man and the continuity called for by the perpetuation of the human race; in broader terms, the survival of groups and societies.

The Dutch psychologist, Buytendijk, while eliminating many deceptive differences between man and woman, asks us to retain this distinctive characteristic; namely, that woman is "filled with solicitude for the world." What dominates in her is the sense of values, while in man the fundamental experience is the resistance of the cosmos on which he works. For man, everything is matter to be transformed and the means to realize an end, whereas woman respects and protects the rights and integrity of the realities of nature. Man would thus be characterized by finalization and the woman by gratuity; man by duty; and woman, by spontaneity. Man would be polarized by thing; woman, by person. (cf. L. Buytendijk, *La femme, ses modes d'être, de paraître, d'exister*, Bruges, 1954).

These differences are not altered, but fulfilled in the supernatural order.

### c. *The Connection*

Now we are ready to understand the harmony and the connection between these two apparently contradictory New Testament themes: equality and hierarchy. The key to the paradox is to be found in this fact: the differences between the sexes are *relative elements in the order of human nature, the foundation of a relationship in the equality of nature, a correlative relationship.*

In this respect the mystery of the three Divine Persons offers a clarifying and significant analogy. In the Trinity also, the identity of nature implies a relative plurality, for in God persons are pure relations: they are *esse ad* in the identity of *esse in*, as the theologians say. As in marriage, the Trinity is usually presented as a hierarchy; more precisely, a monarchy, in which the Father alone is often designated as monarch by the Greek

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Fathers. The expression of this hierarchy sometimes goes very far. "The Father is greater than I," says Christ in *Jn.* 14.28. However, these expressions do not diminish in any way the equality of nature between the Father and the Son. The analogy is profound. It has its roots in the text of *Gn.* 1.27 and 5.1-2: Man has been "created in the image of God . . . man and woman." As a distinction of persons is relative in the divine nature, the distinction "masculine-feminine" of sexes is relative in human nature. This relative difference implies a functional hierarchy between man and woman. It no more implies inequality than does the trinitarian monarchy between the Father and the Son. We will even see that this relative hierarchy gives rise to a reversal in the order of service and humility.

### *2. The Marriage of God and Humanity*

The second theme which interests us in the theology of the Covenant (Alliance) is presented by numerous biblical texts as a conjugal alliance between God and the people of Israel.

This symbolism is initiated by *Hosea* 2, and continued in the following texts: *Je.* 31.17-22; *Is.* 51.17,21-22; 52.1-2,7-8,12; 54.4-8; 61.10-11; 62.4-5; *Song of Songs*; *Ez.* 16; *Ps.* 45 (44). It eventually leads to the Pauline theology of marriage between Christ and the Church, the efficacious model of the marriage-sacrament (*I Co.* 11.2-14; *Eph.* 5.21-23).

In this transcendent and symbolic marriage, it is God who plays the role of the husband; humanity (people of Israel, the Church, each Christian soul), the role of the wife.

This symbolism sometimes shocks and embarrasses our contemporaries. Indeed, at first sight, it would seem to imply an ontological superiority of the man symbolized by God and an inferiority of the woman symbolized by humanity. This is meant to be taken symbolically, however. In reality, man is not the god of the woman. Moreover, he is not the mediator of the woman before God, as he was in the Old Testament where woman was excluded from membership in the priestly assembly. In the New Testament, man's mediation is relativized "in the Lord" (*Gal.* 3.18) who is the unique mediator (*I Tm.* 2.5). If man remains in a sense the head of the

woman, as Christ is directly the head of the entire Church (*Eph.* 5.23; *Gal.* 1.18), man and woman exercise on their own levels reciprocal mediations (*Eph.* 5.21: "be submissive to one another"). Particularly evident is the mediation of the Christian woman with respect to the pagan husband she sanctifies (*I Co.* 7.14).

Finally, the biblical symbolism signifies essentially the love of God for man; thus, the kind of equality that love establishes gratuitously. The principle of all Christian hierarchy is regulated by this paradoxical but essential rule:

That he who commands be as the one who serves. (*Mk.* 10.42-45 parallel to *Mt.* 20.25-28; *Lk.* 22.24-27; *Jn.* 13.4-15. cf. Y. Congar, "La hierarchie comme service selon le Nouveau Testament." in *L'Episcopat et l'Église universelle.* Paris 1962.)

According to this law which Christ taught with insistence, the bishop is the servant of his people—of the Church in which he represents Christ—and the Pope is the "servant of the servants" of God. They ought to follow the example of Christ who presents himself in a parable as the one who takes a towel in order to wait on his own servants (*Lk.* 12.37) and who puts this parable into action at the Last Supper when he washes the feet of his disciples. The marital hierarchy is based on the same model, the same law of love, equality, and humble service. This is explicitly taught by Paul in *Eph.* 5.25:

Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church . . .

When the hierarchy appears in its true light as a humble function of service, the frustration a woman feels in finding herself excluded from the priesthood loses its foundation.

We are touching upon a delicate question. Why has the priesthood been reserved for men to the exclusion of women? This certainly does not spring from any inferior status attached to women, but rather from the significance of this service which has as its objective the official representation of Christ and the transmission in the Church of the kind of action according to which Christ is the bridegroom of the Church.

Does Divine Law exclude women from the priesthood? Can this law be retracted? This is being discussed, and it *can* be discussed. The

question, however, goes beyond the limits of this paper. In brief, here as elsewhere, there should be no question of a woman playing a masculine role, of wishing at any price to do what man does or to have what man has. Nor should there be any thought of conquering this ministry as if it were some kind of prey to be caught. What is important is to establish feminine ministries along the lines of initiative, creativity, and liberty. Tradition furnishes, in this respect, some significant points of departure. In certain churches deaconesses belonged to the presbyterium; they received the imposition of hands, as did priests and deacons; they belonged to the hierarchy. We should not, however, think in terms of an archaeological restoration of the past, but of a rediscovery.

To this end, we must take as our point of departure the universal ecclesial priesthood, common to men and to women, and develop on this foundation a great diversity of original ministries. We shall eventually see the restoration of a feminine diaconate which will baptize and preach, witness marriages and distribute communion. This will present no problem, for in Latin America women are already exercising such functions. Will women ever be able to hear confessions? Tradition leaves the door quite open, for auricular confessions were often heard by non-ordained monks. Moreover, the Church's discipline regarding the sacrament of Penance has undergone extensive development. Will we some day go so far as to impart to women the celebration of the Eucharist and the functions of governing? This would appear improbable, but it would be imprudent to absolutely deny the possibility.

### 3. *A Compensating Theme: Wisdom, God in the Feminine*

If the theme of marriage identifies the masculine with God and the feminine with man, woman finds compensation in another biblical theme: Divine Wisdom is described with feminine characteristics. It is the glory of Solomon to have espoused Wisdom, i.e., God

She it was I loved and searched for from my youth;  
I resolved to have her as my bride,  
I fell in love with her beauty (*Wis.* 8.2; cf. vss. 6,16).



We find the same imagery in *Sir.* 51.13 which calls those who fear the Lord to contract this marriage or alliance:

He who is taken up with the law receives wisdom . . . as a virgin spouse she receives him (the text must be read according to the Hebrew of the Qumran scrolls. J. Sanders. ed., *Discoveries in the Judean Desert of Jordan IV* . . ., p. 80. Compare *Wis.* 7.28 and 3.13. See *Pr.* 7.4 in which the name given to Wisdom, "my sister," has a bridal sense, according to Egyptian usage: the pharaohs would espouse their sisters, etc.)

In this same area, the Wisdom literature surmounts the revulsion provoked by the feminine priesthood which was practiced on mountain heights. We refer to what was in reality sacred prostitution presented as a means of union with divinity. We are touching here on one of the adventitious reasons which has led to the rigorous exclusion of women from the priesthood. In *Pr.* 9, Folly, presented as a sacred prostitute extending an invitation to her banquet, is contrasted with priestly Wisdom which invites man to the true banquet: the meal of the covenant. This symbolic meal is a sacred meal at which Wisdom exercises a priestly role. In *Sir.* 24, the priestly role of Wisdom, the divine hypostasis (24. 3-6), is more explicit. In effect, she declares:

In the holy tabernacle, in his presence, I exercised the priesthood (cf. R. Laurentin, *Marie, l'Église et le Sacerdoce*, vol. 2, p. 70, note 43.

This symbolic priesthood is a feminine priesthood, a fact that calls for a delicate reassessment of the thesis of the absolute incompatibility between femininity and the priesthood.

#### 4. *The Anthropology of Womanhood According to St. John*

The last series of texts is very important, for these texts help to correct one of the most unhealthy and alienating ideas which theologians have forced upon women: man is made to lead, and the woman to follow; man is active by nature, the woman, passive.

These ideas were grounded in deficient physiological concepts. During the Middle Ages it was thought that man alone furnished the active principle of generation. Woman simply furnished the blood, thought of as a passive and nourishing material.

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All of the activity (*tota virtus activa*) is from the male; the passivity (*passio*) from the female. The Virgin did not have an active role, but only furnished the matter of the generation. (St. Thomas Aquinas, *III Sent.* d. 3, q. 2, a. 1 objection 1).

We know today that the ovule furnished by the woman is no less active, no less alive than the masculine seed, and that it is even more essential and irreplaceable. Parthenogenesis is technologically possible; androgenesis is not. This unhealthy concept contradicted by modern biology is also contradicted by an impressive series of biblical texts, texts in which women play active and prior roles.

As Eve introduced sin into the world (*Gn.* 3), Mary brought salvation and life (*Lk.* 1). She likewise played an introductory role at the "first miracle of Jesus," the miracle that became the foundation of the disciples' faith (*Jn.* 2.11; cf. *The Constitution on the Church*, 58). The Samaritan woman brought faith in Christ to her village (*Jn.* 4.39-40); the sisters of Lazarus were the recipients of one of Christ's major miracles: the resurrection of their dead brother, the type and foreshadowing of the coming Resurrection of the Savior (*Jn.* 11—note the analogies between Mary's suggestion in *Jn.* 2.4, the miracle at Cana, and Martha's in *Jn.* 11.22). Mary, one of the sisters of Lazarus, effects the sign that foreshadows the burial of Jesus: the prophetic function of the redeeming death which Jesus himself prepares (*Jn.* 12.27; *Mt.* 26.12-13; *Mk.* 14.8-9). Finally Mary Magdalen is the first to tell the apostles of the mystery of the Resurrection (*Lk.* 24 and *Jn.* 20). In all these cases, the woman is first; she discerns values; she awakens, suggests, takes the initiative; she not only has a priority, but a superiority in faith. The contrast with the apostles is striking in the scenes of the Samaritan woman and the resurrection of Lazarus. It is also striking in the account of Mary Magdalen's testimony concerning the Resurrection (*Lk.* 24.11). Those who afterwards become the official witnesses of the risen Christ do not accept this first testimony:

But their story seemed pure nonsense, and they did not believe them (24.11).

Similarly, the salvific role of certain Old Testament women is clear: Deborah and Judith, for example, inspire and boldly initiate the victory of the People of God. Likewise, but in a more paradoxical manner, Rachel

seems to designate as the choice of God, Jacob, who is called Israel, the ancestor and type of the people chosen by God.

In the Gospel of St. John, this is a conscious perspective. Women have a structural place there; they are situated at the key moments. This implies a theological anthropology of womanhood.

There is nothing more contradictory to the Bible than the long accepted theme of feminine passivity.

One day we must liberate the explosive energy contained in the hearts of women. (Cardinal Salège)

#### CONCLUSION

Now that the Council has ended, theology finds necessary the elaboration of an anthropology, for theology is not simply the study of God in himself, but of the relationship of the God-Savior to man, as man exists according to the plan of God. A necessary element of this anthropology is a keen understanding of the woman's role.

In this respect, Mary holds a place in the first rank. The dissipation of a thousand false and old-fashioned ideas does not diminish her position, but gives her more importance and situates her in a far more convincing and brilliant place. Mary has been given a place in the Divine Plan in order to play a feminine and maternal role: a mediating role between the Creator and the cosmos, a cosmos in which God becomes incarnate in order to save man. She plays a role in the birth of the Savior and in the fruition of salvation. Despite the evolution of customs and the appearance of critical objections, she is the woman *par excellence*, the supreme accomplishment of femininity. We must situate this model at a less culturally determined level, however, one that is less particularistic and more universal.

Finally, the key to the problems we have raised, in particular, that of Mary as the model of womanhood, is universality. From the viewpoint of the Gospel, the emancipation and the liberation of woman, as formally of the slaves, is only a means to an end. What counts is fulfillment on the level of human and divine universality. Mary is the evangelical model

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of womanhood, not so much because of the particular characteristics of her situation, but because of the manner in which she accepted this situation. In the ordinary and limited situation which was hers—that of a poor woman in a lowly village (*Jn.* 1.46)—she is an example of the possibilities human nature, feminine as well as masculine, is capable of in the authenticity of nature and grace.

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