

## **A WOMAN'S FIAT: HER GIFT TO THE CHURCH**

### **A REFLECTION GIVEN AT A RETREAT FOR THE WIVES OF DEACONS IN FORMATION**

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Foundress

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#### **The Marian Dimension of the Second Vatican Council**

The Second Vatican Council told us at its conclusion in the Message to Women on December 8, 1965, "The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved."

Why is this a particular hour for the vocation of women to be acknowledged and to be allowed to influence the Church and the world with a particular power? The answer we may find in the clear Marian dimension of the Second Vatican Council, which was inaugurated by John XXIII on October 11, 1962. At that time, this date was the feast of Mary's Motherhood. The Council concluded on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, 1965.

According to His Holiness Benedict XVI, "the council took place in a Marian setting. It was actually far more than a setting. It refers us, as it referred the Council Fathers at that time, to the image of the Virgin who listens and lives in the Word of God, who cherishes in Her heart the words that God addresses to Her and, piecing them together like a mosaic, learns to understand them" (Homily, December 8, 2005). Our Lady responsibly responded, with a woman's heart, to the mission entrusted to Her.



It was the sense of many of the Council Fathers that the Blessed Mother had to be placed very clearly in the Heart of the Church, just as in the Cenacle, asking for a particular outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Church, in order to adequately respond to the present needs of the world.

It is very significant that at the promulgation of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, on November 21, 1964, there was a solemn proclamation: Mary, Most Holy Mother of the Church. Mary is so interwoven in the great mystery of the Church that She and the Church are inseparable, just as She and Christ are inseparable. Mary mirrors the Church, anticipates the Church in her person . . . and "in Mary, the Immaculate, we find the essence of the Church without distortion" (Benedict XVI, Homily, December 8, 2005).

She is the Immaculate Church. She is the Heart perfectly united to the Heart of Christ. She is the feminine Heart in the plan of salvation; the Woman whose fiat brought about the Savior of the world. She is the Woman who has uniquely cooperated in the plan of salvation. She has exercised fully Her mission as Mother of the Word Incarnate, the Redeemer of Man, and Her maternal mission in the life and formation of the Mystical Body of Her Son, the Church.

#### **Women Change History**

She is the Woman who has changed history by Her receptive, docile, obedient and unconditional fiat. With Her total and personal "I," with Her feminine genius, She has participated in a unique way in the work of redemption. She is the Woman who has influenced and continues to actively influence history, the world, and the Church; and in Her all women find identity and mission in the life of the Church and of the world. Mary is "blessed among women" (Lk 1:42). In Her and through Her, every woman shares in some way in Mary's sublime dignity in the Divine plan.

The remarkable gift of grace given by the Lord to the Blessed Mother not only testifies to what we could call God's respect for women, but also emphasizes the profound regard in God's plans for her irreplaceable role in human history. May the contemplation of Mary's heart and life make us more attentive, more receptive and more readily disposed to cooperate in the loving plans of God. May we women find our mission in the Church by contemplating the Blessed Mother! May we understand the heart of the woman . . . may we understand our own hearts and the feminine vocation in the heart of the Church. May we offer with great generosity our feminine heart and genius for the good of the Church.

#### **The Vocation of Women: the Marian Principle of the Church**

One can say that there are two ministerial profiles in the Church. First, there is the apostolic and Petrine one, which stands at the origin of the sacramental priesthood of the presbyterate and the episcopate. Second, there is the Marian one of spiritual maternity, contemplation, receptiveness to the Spirit, service and maternal formation. The Marian dimension of the Church embraces the Petrine . . . and cares for, nourishes, accompanies, covers, and supports the Petrine, helping it to live the fullness of its identity and mission (cf. Address of John Paul II to the Roman Curia, Dec. 22, 1987).

The Marian mission in the Church is the feminine mission in the Church: it is the Heart of the Spouse and Mother saying a constant fiat in the Church throughout history. When Mary uttered Her fiat, the Church was already present. It was the heart of the Woman, the Church, who gave Herself as an unconditional gift to God. She was totally ready to receive God's will and be opened to His powerful action. This limitless readiness to open Her heart and womb to the power of the Spirit, the 'let it be done' professed by the Virgin Mary, teaches us women that there is a particular power granted to us by God: our cooperation in the plan of salvation begins not in what we forcefully do, but in what we humbly and trustingly allow God to do in and through us. Let it be done! In the womb of the feminine heart - which represents the heart of the Church, since the Church is a She - the Holy Spirit desires to place His fecundity...and to spiritually give birth to Christ through history. It is in the womb of the Spouse and Mother - the womb of the Church - that Christ is conceived and given birth to.

It is to this Marian principle of the Church that we should look to discover in depth the role and mission of woman in the Church. "This link between the two profiles of the Church, the Marian and the Petrine, is therefore profound and complementary. This is so even though the Marian profile is anterior not only in the design of God but also in time, as well as being supreme and pre-eminent, richer in personal and communitarian implications for individual ecclesial vocations" (John Paul II, Address to the Roman Curia, Dec. 22, 1987 n. 2).

In John Paul II's letter on reserving priestly ordination to men, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, he wrote, "The presence and the role of women in the life and mission of the Church, although not linked to the ministerial priesthood, remain absolutely necessary and irreplaceable. As the Declaration *Inter Insigniores* points out, 'The Church desires that Christian women should become fully aware of the greatness of their mission: today their role is of capital importance both for the renewal and humanization of society and for the rediscovery by believers of the true face of the Church'" (no.3). Women have the mission to humanize society by being witnesses to the primacy of love, to the primacy of the heart, and by showing the splendor of the feminine and maternal face of the Church.

### **The Feminine Genius**

The unity of the Marian and Petrine principles in the Church are profound and complementary, and they remain necessary and irreplaceable. So what is the mission of women in the family of the Church? In Genesis we read, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen 2:18). We also read that we are, as male and female, created in the image and likeness of God. As John Paul II said in his Letter to Women, "the creation of woman is thus marked from the outset by the principle of help: a help which is not one-sided but mutual" (no.7). We, as women, help to complete and fulfill the expression of humanity that reflects God Himself. We bring unique gifts, which John Paul II calls the "feminine genius" - physically through our ability to be mothers; affectively in our call to 'make love a priority;' and spiritually in our capacity to focus on each person as a child of God, and to attract with a feminine fiat the works of the Spirit.

"It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." God entrusted the human being to a woman. Certainly, every human being is entrusted to each and every other human being, but in a special way the human being is entrusted to women. This is precisely because the woman, in virtue of her special experience of motherhood, is seen to have a specific sensitivity towards the human person and all that constitutes the individual's true welfare, beginning with the fundamental value of life. Particularly women are called to teach men the priority of love...the primacy of love, the primacy of the human person, the attentiveness to the needs of others...to help them grow in the generous acceptance and expansion of the heart to embrace others. Women have the particular mission to remind all in the heart of the Church and the heart of the world the primacy of love. Love is the heart of the Church (*Story of a Soul*, Manuscript B, Chapter IX).

### **A Deacon's Wife, the Wife of a Servant**

Although Jesus chose men as his Apostles - a choice which is normative for their successors - He nevertheless has chosen to directly involve women in the cause of His Kingdom. A "Woman" opened up the path for Christ in the world. A Woman changed history by Her simple, yet powerful, fiat. John Paul II states, "After all, was it not in and through her that the greatest event in human history - the incarnation of God himself - was accomplished?" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 31). A Woman's fiat brought the Savior of the world, the Servant who came to serve and not to be served.

A Woman's fiat gave us the Servant! Your fiat as deacons' wives is so connected that it actually flows from the fiat of the Blessed Mother. You, like Her, accompany with your prayers, love, service, active cooperation and spousal wisdom, the journey of your husbands' hearts to be formed into the heart of a servant. You are the feminine genius who helps to form the heart of the ministry of servanthood in the Church!

Do you realize your Marian mission in the Church, how you participate with the Marian principle of the Church in unity with the Petrine principle? Do you realize the power of your fiat which is manifested, by offering with love and generosity, your spouses to the Church, thereby giving Her more servants?

You are called to be Marian hearts. This is done by forming (calling forth virtue in your husbands) - with your spousal and maternal love, with your witness and generosity - the heart of servants. It is supporting their mission, and being a good and fit helper to your husband's vocation in your own families (as husbands and fathers) and in the family of the Church - by helping them have the virtuous heart of servants, whereby they generously share their hearts, time, talents, life and service with the Church. Help your husbands by prayer, by example, and by your love to be virtuous men, to have the heart of servants, and to fulfill their mission with integrity and responsibility.

A great and visible sign of the workings of the Holy Spirit in the Second Vatican Council was the restoration of the permanent diaconate in the Church. In his address to permanent deacons on September 19th, 1987 in Detroit, Michigan, John Paul II said, "Given the dignity and importance of the permanent diaconate, what is expected of you? As Christians we must not be ashamed to speak of the qualities of a servant to which all believers must aspire, and especially deacons, whose ordination rite describes them as 'servants of all.' A deacon must be known for fidelity, integrity and obedience, and so it is that fidelity to Christ, moral integrity and obedience to the Bishop must mark your lives, as the ordination rite makes clear."

But it is not only they who are called to lives of exemplary virtue; you also are called to help them with your virtuous lives. "Their wives not only consent, but also have the Christian moral character and attributes which will neither hinder their husbands' ministry nor be out of keeping with it" (Congregation for Catholic Education, Congregation for the Clergy; Basic Norms for the Formation of Deacons, 37).

In the rite of ordination to the permanent diaconate, in the prayer of consecration, the Church expresses her hopes and expectations: "Lord, may they excel in every virtue: in love that is sincere, in concern...in unassuming authority, in self discipline and in holiness of life. May their conduct exemplify your commandments and lead your people to imitate their purity of life. May they remain strong and steadfast in Christ, giving to the world the witness of a pure conscience. May they in this life imitate your Son, who came, not to be served but to serve..."

This is at the very heart of the diaconate to which your husbands have been called: to be a servant of the mysteries of Christ and, at one and the same time, to be servant of your brothers and sisters. That these two dimensions are inseparably joined together in one reality shows the important nature of the ministry of your husbands by their ordination. They are configured to Christ in his servanthood role. They are to be images of the Heart of the Servant.

They are called to be living signs of the servanthood of Christ and of His Church, to be icons of the diakonia of the life of the Church. There are three areas of ministry in particular that are associated with the diaconate: the ministry of the word, the ministry of the altar, and the ministry of charity. These three ministries are inseparably joined together as one in the service of God's redemptive plan.

### **Your Marian Mission in your Husband's Ministry**

And you, dear wives, are called by the Church to accompany and support - with a Marian heart, just like the Blessed Mother - your husband's ministry.

Your husbands are called to be Ministers of the Word, which entails a constant reading and diligent study of the Sacred Scriptures. They are to proclaim it, to preach it, to announce it to all hearts. They are to become recipients of the Word in their own heart to be able to proclaim it with power to others. The deacons are called to hear and guard the Word of God in order to be able to proclaim it worthily. What a beautiful Marian mission you can fulfill by accompanying your husbands. You, women - Marian hearts - have a particular grace to hear, ponder, reflect and treasure in your hearts the Word of God. In a woman's heart the Word became flesh. Help your husbands to develop a listening heart, a reflective heart, and a servant's heart - one who disposes himself to receive the potency of the Word, who allows himself to be transformed by it, and who proclaims it, communicating it in its integrity to the whole world.

Your husbands are called to be Ministers of the Altar. Among those who minister at the altar, after the priest, the first in rank is the deacon. In a particular way the care and the preparation of the sacred vessels are entrusted to him. In so many forms, during the Eucharistic celebration, the deacon serves the altar. What a Marian mission you can fulfill accompanying your husbands! You, women - Marian hearts - have a particular disposition to prepare with care and attention the "mangers" where the child will rest. John Paul II invited deacons to "treat the holy vessels in the Liturgy with the same love that the Virgin Mary wrapped the new born Child in swaddling clothes and placed him in the manger." Teach your husbands, by your maternal love, to be custodians and guardians of the Eucharist.

Your husbands are called to be Ministers of Charity, particularly identifying and responding to the needs of others - of the suffering, the poor, the abandoned. The deacons become the voice of the needy...they identify and reach out to those suffering in the community. What a Marian mission you can fulfill by accompanying your husbands! You, women - Marian hearts - have a particular 'eye' to identify the needs of others. Just look at the Blessed Mother at Cana - She found out that the couple had no wine even when they themselves did not notice it. She went to Jesus to ask for the miracle. What a beautiful mission for you, wives of future deacons, who can become the 'loving eyes' that identify the needs of others and present them to your husbands so they can provide for the needy in the name of the Church.

You are to become, with your husbands, witnesses to love in family life. You and your husbands are to give a witness of unconditional marital love and to be intimately united, living fully your sacrament of marriage. This is why the Church fittingly requires the wife's consent before her husband can be ordained a permanent deacon (Can. 1031 §2). As the current guidelines for the permanent diaconate in the United States point out, you are to give witness together to a nurturing and deepening of mutual, joyful and sacrificial love between husband and wife, which constitutes perhaps the most significant involvement of a deacon's wife in her husband's public ministry in the Church (Guidelines, NCCB, p. 110). Today especially, this is no small service. The family of today suffers greatly and needs to see witnesses to marital love and fidelity.

### Be a Model of the Marian Spirit of the Church

The future deacon, your husband, is one who will strive to be “the servant of the servants of the Lord.” This transformation into a servant’s heart can be accomplished by a profound contemplation of the servanthood of the heart of a woman. Be a model of the Marian spirit of the Church! The Marian principle of the Church, the Marian heart is the best formator in the spirit of a servant. “Behold the servant of the Lord . . . Let it be done!!!” (Lk 1:38).

You, dear women, occupy an important place in the mission of your husbands... you have an important Marian mission in the heart of the Church. You are ordinary hearts, ordinary women, with extraordinary lives; for the greatness is in the generous and orderly donation of your husbands for the service of the Church.

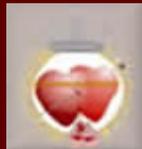
St. Therese discovered almost at the end of her earthly life the greatest vocation of all: “In the heart of the Church, My Mother, I will be love” (Story of a Soul, Manuscript B, Chapter IX). In the Heart of the Church, you are love; you are the spousal love that nurtures, protects, guides, forms and supports the heart of the servants, your husbands, who have been called to the permanent diaconate in the Church.

In the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II told us that the Church “desires to give thanks to the Most Holy Trinity for the ‘mystery of woman’ and for every woman - for all that constitutes the eternal measure of her feminine dignity, for the ‘great works of God,’ which throughout human history have been accomplished in and through her” (no.31).

Today I want to thank you for living your mission in the Church, for your fiat, for the generosity of your hearts in offering your husbands for the Church. This fiat is your greatest mission in the Church. “Man is born of a woman” (1 Cor 11:12), says St. Paul; consequently every work of man bears the imprint of a woman.

May the Blessed Mother guide all women to understand their mission in the Church!

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