

EQUALITY OF THE SEXES

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Imagine you are having dinner with two Catholic friends. One is a fully Catholic person, but is not well acquainted with Catholic teaching on equality between the sexes. The other is a good person, but a nominal Catholic with secular leanings. He interprets Church teaching on the equality of the sexes as meaning "sameness"



First, let me start by thanking you both for bringing such an important subject matter into our dinner conversation, I believe it is valuable to speak honestly and clearly about this topic.

Michael: Well, I have to be truthful, I go to Mass on Sundays but I don't really know much about my Catholic faith.

John: I don't really go to Church at all, I consider myself to be a CEO (Christmas and Easter only), those are about the only two days out of the year that I go to Mass.

Both man and woman are human beings to an identical intensity, because both were created in God's image and likeness. They both have the same dignity as human beings. Man and woman (each one was created as a person and also as a rational being). However, men and women are not equal, at least not in their bodies, would you both agree with me on this one?

Both: Yes, of course, but we are not speaking about their bodies.

John: What I believe is that equality of the sexes means "sameness".

Would you mind if I expand a little on this, would that be alright with both of you ?

Both: Please go ahead

The woman is created by God "from the rib" of the man and is placed at his side as another "I", as the companion of the man, who is alone in the surrounding world of living creatures.¹

This is why she is called a "woman". God created man and woman to complement each other. And, what an amazing way God used to create us "women". He was unequivocally original. He took the woman (precisely) out of the rib of the man, as if to remind us that we are united to man (yet different). And this will follow us for the rest of our lives.

John: Wow, I was clueless about the woman been taken out of the rib of the man, wow !

Don't worry, you are not the first one, most people don't know this either. They think of the creation of the world, Adam and Eve, original sin, and that's about it. They don't research any further, or study anymore, they stay with the basic information and are content with that.

John: You have really picked my interest with this new revelation, please go on.....

Blessed John Paul II wrote in *Mulieris Dignitatem* (this is a document He wrote on the Dignity and Vocation of women) that it was the Creator's decision that the human being should always and only exist as a woman or a man. In other words, this is what God intended since the beginning, for a man to be a man and for a woman to be a woman.

"Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of the person, who is not just something, but someone."²

This is why He created them differently. They both have a soul which was infused by God at their creation, but their bodies were designed differently.

They have equal human dignity, however, the distinction between a man and a woman can also be seen as how God intended them to complement each other.

Michael: You seem very knowledgeable about this topic.

Well, I must say this topic fascinates me because it gives me the opportunity to explain in a politely, intelligent way everything I learned in a course that I took while studying for my Master's in Theology, called "Sexual Ethics". It was a phenomenal course, and indeed it has helped me tremendously throughout my life.

John: I am sure anything a woman can do, a man can probably do it (either the same way or) better.

John, you are right, to a certain extent, there are things in life that both sexes (can do conjointly) and do it well. For example, when it comes to professional careers, they both can be impressive lawyers, excellent doctors, phenomenal professors, or amazing accountants, etc.

And, when it comes to sports, they both can be great volleyball players, competitive tennis players, etc. However, since God created us different, we have distinctive functions to play.

Let me explain to you what I mean.

Sexual attraction makes obvious the fact that the attributes of the two sexes are complementary, so that a man and a woman can complete each other. The properties which the woman possesses are not possessed by the man, and vice versa.³

Man and woman are physically and psychologically different. And, as human beings, one acquires some specific value for the other. This is what is meant by complementarity. A man, (even if he wanted to), could never be a woman, and a woman (even if she wanted to) could never be a man. That is just the way God made them. They are both valuable as persons, and they both possess different gifts. They were both meant to unite in the conjugal act and become cooperators with God in creating a new life.

"Looked at more closely and concretely these two persons, the man and the woman, facilitate the existence of another concrete person, their own child, blood of their blood, and flesh of their flesh. This person is at once an affirmation and a continuation of their own love."⁴

The two sexes complement each other. In other words, they help to transmit existence. Without the union of a man and a woman in the conjugal act, there would be no children, would you agree with me on this one?

Both (John and Michael): Yes, we agree.

Therefore, procreation is the proper end of marriage. Both (the man and the woman) take full responsibility in bringing a new human being into this world by fully participating in the conjugal act, which ultimately leads to the creation of a new life (a new human being). This human being is a what we call a person. And, it is precisely God who places an immortal soul on this new creature.

This is the reason why human life is so valuable, because it doesn't belong to us (creatures), it belongs to God and God alone. He is the author of all human life. A man and a woman are only His co-creators in this endeavor.

"The essence of the human person is therefore - in the Church's teaching - the work of God himself. It is He who creates the spiritual and immortal soul of that being, the organism of which begins to exist as a consequence of physical relations between man and woman."⁵

The transmission of life is, therefore, the main responsibility of a man and a woman within the context of marriage.

"A man therefore needs a woman, so to say, to complete his own being, and a woman needs a man in the same way".⁶

In other words, a man without a woman is incomplete, he is not fully a man (in all the sense of the word). And a woman without a man is unaccomplished (she is not fulfilled as a woman). Something is missing when one or the other is absent and that absence is felt. This is very crucial to understand when we are discussing equality of the sexes. It is not a matter of one sex being more important than the other, or a matter of similarity. It is about the fact that one sex cannot be without the other (in life in general). We need each other.

In the "unity of the two", man and woman are called from the beginning not only to exist "side by side" or "together", but they are also called to exist mutually "one for the other".⁷

Just for a moment, visualize a world just populated with only women. And, then conceptualize a world occupied with just men (no women around). How would you feel?

Michael: That would be horrible!

John: Yeah, that would be awkward.

Exactly, and that was just an unrealistic example. However, this example gives you a glimpse of what your life would be like without your daughter/son/mother or father. Again, unrealistic, but it proves a point, and that is the fact that we need each other. And we need each other precisely because we are different.

John, your father could never be your mother, and vice versa. He could never give birth to a new human being, and neither can you. Your body (as a man) was not designed that way (to give birth). By the same token, your mother could not have possibly have given you life (on her own). She required your father to take his role in the conjugal act, so you could be created. To put it in simple words, a man could never be a mother, in the same way that a woman could never be a father.

“Mother and father are not replaceable or interchangeable; they are complementary. This means that the mother’s work with children is of a very special importance, especially when they are small. The father’s complementary position regarding children is also deeply important, but the mother is the key person for the very small child.”⁸

And, this is so true, a newborn baby, a 1 year old, or even a 2 or 3 year old feels the necessity of his or her mother during this particular stage of their small lives. It is the mother who nurtures them, who wakes up in the middle of the night to give them food or change their diapers, etc. This is what motherhood is all about. It is about total self-giving. A true mother forgets about herself completely. Her priority is now focused on her children.

It is not that a man cannot do any of this (feeding them or changing their diapers), of course he can. It is just that it comes more natural for the woman, because of the gift of her maternity (along with her femininity) bestowed to her by God Himself.

The woman was created to be a Mother, in all the sense of the word, and she has received all the necessary graces to fulfill that God-given role.

“Motherhood is linked to the personal structure of the woman”.⁹

Motherhood is so unique, that only a woman can become a Mother, and there is an intimate, unique bond with her child (which lasts a lifetime and only She can understand).

“Scientific analysis fully confirms that the very physical constitution of women is naturally disposed to motherhood - conception, pregnancy and giving birth”.¹⁰

Therefore, it is important to understand that both men and women have different gifts, inventiveness, and skillfulness. Even in the way they relate towards each other and to other people is distinctive. One may be more intuitive than the other (usually the woman), although that is not necessarily the case in many situations.

Do you remember there was a time when women were not allowed to work, because their husbands will not give them the green light, they were forced to stay at home and take care of the children?

Michael: There was a time that I didn’t want my wife to work because I wanted her to be a full-time ‘stay at home’ mom, but then I changed my mind, we discussed it, and now she works, and we are both very happy.

John: I believe there still some cultures where they (until today) don’t allow women to work outside of the home, but I am not sure.

I am not quite sure about that one either John, but I will google it. Let me research it and get back to you on it. And, Michael, good for you, taking care of the family is not just up to your wife, you both need to be there for your children. You both have different parenting roles, but the same outcome, to love them as best you can, and to give them the best education and discipline possible. Another way of saying this is: “Discipline with love”.

Moreover, since both of you are parents (as man and woman alike), your mutual goal is to love your children unconditionally and to be for them the best role-models they could possibly follow.

Fortunately, thank God things have changed, and now women are just as competitive as men in the professional field.

“It is a question of understanding the reason for and the consequences of the Creator’s decision that the human being should always and only exist as a woman or a man. It is only by beginning from these bases, which make it possible to understand the greatness of the dignity and vocation of women, that one is able to speak of their active presence in the Church and in society.”¹¹

Both sexes have tremendous potentialities, they just need to be discovered. And, both should always work together, in order to make this a better world. Collectively they can achieve more.

"The Letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the World Episcopate on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World underlines the equality in human dignity and yet the fundamental difference between the sexes."¹²

This is a great document to read on the Church's teaching about the difference between the sexes. Are you following me?

John: Everything you are telling me is very interesting, I am listening, please go on....

"The Letter is very clear on the fact that women and men are different, and women must therefore not be treated as if they were men. This is a radical point."¹³

This is absolutely essential to understand when it comes to equality of the sexes, because we could never treat a man like a woman because of his masculinity, or treat a woman like a man because of her femininity. Sadly, but very true, is that we live in a society where if a man wants to become a woman and a woman wants to become a man, it has been socially accepted.

This is morally wrong. And, no matter how much society desires to make it seem adequately, it is not right. It goes against human nature, and it is contrary to God's design of the male and female bodies.

He designed our bodies in a specific way, and we cannot change them (even if our friends are doing it). Our bodies belong to God, and we cannot do whatever we decide with them.

We must promote and defend masculinity among men, and femininity among women. We should exhort (both men and women) to be what they were meant to be. We must never allow the "masculinization" of women, this would be going against their essence.

"For whenever man is responsible for offending a woman's personal dignity and vocation, he acts contrary to his own personal dignity and his own vocation."¹⁴

In other words, men have to be true men, and women have to be true women. And, they should respect and honor the womanhood and manhood of each other.

"Masculinity" and "Femininity" are distinct, yet at the same time they complete and explain each other."¹⁵

Using today's advancements to become (physically) the opposite sex is not only going against our human nature, but our human dignity (as sons and daughters of God) as well. And, this clearly means opposing God's perfect creation, since He created us in His image and likeness.

"In this history, on the basis of the principle of mutually being "for" the other, in interpersonal "communion", there develops in humanity itself, in accordance with God's will, the integration of what is "masculine" and what is "feminine".¹⁶

Have any of you ever heard of Theology of the Body?

Michael: I have but I really don't know much about it.

John: I have never heard of it before, what is it?

Well, our beloved Blessed Pope John Paul II (soon to be canonized by Pope Francis) wrote (during the first part of his pontificate) 129 short talks between the years 1979-1984 - about the profound meaning of the human body (both masculinity and femininity). He gave a beautiful vision of what our bodies (as male and female) were meant to be. And, he named this major work "theology of the body." It is absolutely wonderful!

"By helping us understand this profound interconnection between sex and the Christian mystery, John Paul's theology of the body not only paves the way for lasting renewal of marriage and the family; it enables everyone to rediscover "the meaning of the whole of existence, the meaning of life".¹⁷

And, now there is even a "Theology of the Body" for teens, which is so necessary for today's youth. It is so important for them to understand they are valued as human beings created by God.

"The dignity of every human being and the vocation corresponding to that dignity find their definitive measure in union with God."¹⁸

The Church teaches us that it was Jesus Christ Himself who promoted the dignity of women. His words and his actions always showed the enormous respect He had for women.

"A woman's dignity is closely connected with the love which she receives by the very reason of her femininity; it is likewise connected with the love which she gives in return."¹⁹

We can see it even in the woman who was caught in adultery, how Jesus treated her with love and compassion. He saw her (for who she was) a woman who had a dignity and who was valuable in God's eyes. Jesus saw beyond mere appearances.

Women have always been precious for God, and have played and continue to play a very important role in the life of the Church. Women were the ones who were standing at the foot of the Cross with Jesus (of course, His beloved disciple Saint John was also there).

"From the beginning of Christ's mission, women show to him and to his mystery a special sensitivity which is characteristic of their femininity".²⁰

It was a woman (Mary Magdalen) the first one to see the Risen Christ. It was a woman who was at the center of the salvific mission of Christ. It was a woman who gave birth to the Son of God. It is precisely a woman who represents all of humanity. And, this is no ordinary woman, this woman is above all other women in the entire universe. This woman is our loving, our sweet Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God and the Mother of all humanity.

Therefore she is truly the Mother of God, because motherhood concerns the whole person, not just the body, nor even just human "nature".²¹

Clearly, man cannot exist alone. God is so wise that He created man in connection to another human person. This other person being the woman.

"Mary is "the new beginning" of the dignity and vocation of women, of each and every woman."²²

For the most part, women are more attentive to details. Usually men are more practical and simple. The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is incomparable. Women need to realize the personal value of their own femininity (John Paul the II used to call this the feminine genius).

In other words, women need to discover (or re-discover) their entire meaning of their femininity. And, not only discover it, but treasure it.

All that being said, men are also extremely important in God's eyes. And the best example of masculinity that we have can be found in Jesus Christ Himself. He is the true definition of "manhood". You want to be a true man, look at Jesus, imitate Him, love like Jesus. Interestingly enough, Jesus called 'only men' to be his closest disciples. And, it is 'only men' who are with him during His Last Supper, at the Institution of the Eucharist.

He chose a man to be his 'precursor' here on earth (Saint John the Baptist). He chose three wise-men to go pay him homage and take Him gifts when He was born. He chose a sinful man, Peter, (who denied Him three times) to be His Vicar (representative) here on earth. He chose a man to be the leader of His Church!

He chose a man (the one next to him on the cross) to be with him in paradise that same day. And, finally, He chose only men to be His priests here on earth.

It is crystal clear how God has loved both men and women equally. And how Jesus values them both for who they are, and for who they are meant to be.

John: Wow! I am practically speechless! The way you have explained all of this to me is magnificent. When we started our dinner conversation, I had no idea that I was going to be acquiring so much knowledge. I had always interpreted Church teaching on equality of the sexes as sameness.

But you have managed to captivate my total and undivided attention. As you kept speaking and sharing with us, all I kept saying to myself was, "Please don't stop, please go on, continue". The more you spoke, the more I wanted to listen to you. You have explained it in such a clear, loving, and respectful way, that all I can honestly say is "thank-you".

"Thank-you" for helping me see the truth.

I feel as if scales fell off my eyes. I can see clearly now how God created us to be man and woman. And, how each one of us has a distinctive role to play in God's eyes. I have a whole new vision about our dignities as male and female.

Michael: Ditto!

You have nothing to thank me for, all I did (and I thank-you for allowing me to do so) was share from my heart what God has placed in it. And, if we are able (as human beings) to understand God's plan for each one of us, value our dignities, and recognize our roles in life, we have half the battle won.

Therefore, to speak about the equality of the sexes as sameness means, we have not yet fully grasped the totality and greatness of God's plan for any of us (as individuals, or as a whole).

For example, in marriage, we were created to love each other through a sincere gift of self. This way both sexes complement each other, as God conceived us to be. Marriage is a unique and special bond between a man and a woman. This is clear and it is definitive.

And, since the human being - man and woman - have been formed in God's image and likeness, there is an equality in our dignity (which should be treasured). Furthermore, our Church educates us that shared relations between men and women have to be consistent to the personal truth of their being. In other words, both men and women (as individual persons) are valuable.

What is 'feminine' and what is 'masculine', God has already defined it in the mystery of creation. This is crystal clear.

However, the Church (although is perfect and holy because God is the founder) is made up of human beings (who are imperfect) and who have come up with all sorts of distortions(perhaps it was not their intention) when it comes to the true teachings of the Church.

Therefore, it is of fundamental importance to understand that each one of us (man and woman) are cherished. And, even though we are different, we are to edify each other, and to give the best version of ourselves to others.

We were made to love and be loved. It is in our very essence as human beings.

By the fact of her femininity, a woman is the one who receives from the man. And, vice versa, by the fact of his masculinity, it is the man who gives to the woman. And, this is clearly seen in the ways our bodies were designed by God.

It is the woman who receives love from the man (in order to be able to give love to him). The woman is the receiver, the man is the giver. A man needs a woman to complete his own being and conversely.

The Church has always defended the dignity and vocation of both men and women. We have had (and currently have) so many holy men and women in the Church.

As I mentioned earlier, the feminine response has always been one of self-giving, it is in the human nature of the woman. She gives herself totally, and in a special and intimate way in the conjugal act (which is meant only for marriage). Simply put, men and women complete each other to fulfill their divine role in God's purpose.

These are realities which have not changed and cannot change over the course of history. Every human being is loved by Christ.

Therefore, needless to say, it is essential for men to also discover (or rediscover) their own masculinity (their masculine genius).

And, now that we have finished having dinner, would it be alright with both of you if I share what Blessed John Paul the II wrote on *Mulieris Dignitatem* # 25, (which I happen to have a copy of that particular number right here with me, since it is one of my favorite quotes) and I think summarizes our entire dialogue ...

Both: Of course, absolutely, please read on

Meditating on what the Gospels say about Christ's attitude towards women, we can conclude that as a man, a son of Israel, he revealed the dignity of the "daughters of Abraham", **the dignity belonging to women from the very "beginning" on an equal footing with men.** At the same time Christ emphasized **the originality which distinguishes women from men**, all the richness lavished upon women in the mystery of creation. Christ's attitude towards women serves as a model of what the Letter to the Ephesians expresses with the concept of "bridegroom". Precisely because Christ's divine love is the love of a Bridegroom, it is the model and pattern of all human love, men's love in particular.

¹Mulieris Dignitatem - Apostolic Letter of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year - # 6 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988

²Catechism of the Catholic Church, Doubleday, 1992 # 357

³Love and Responsibility, Karol Wojtyla, Ignatius Press, 1981, Pg. 48

⁴Love and Responsibility, Karol Wojtyla, Ignatius Press, 1981, Pg. 53

⁵Love and Responsibility, Karol Wojtyla, Ignatius Press, 1981, Pg. 55

⁶Love and Responsibility, Karol Wojtyla, Ignatius Press, 1981, Pg. 81

⁷Mulieris Dignitatem - Apostolic Letter of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year - # 7 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988

⁸Men and Women in Family, Society and Politics - Article by Janne Haaland-Matlary -

<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=6309>

⁹Mulieris Dignitatem – Apostolic Letter of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year - # 18 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988

¹⁰Ibid # 18

¹¹Ibid # 1

¹²Men and Women in Family, Society and Politics – Article by Janne Haaland-Matlary -

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¹³Men and Women in Family, Society and Politics – Article by Janne Haaland-Matlary -

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¹⁴Mulieris Dignitatem – Apostolic Letter of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year - #10 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988

¹⁵Ibid # 25

¹⁶Ibid # 7

¹⁷What is the Theology of the Body? <http://www.tobinstitute.org/page.asp?ContentID=5>

¹⁸Mulieris Dignitatem – Apostolic Letter of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year - #5 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988

¹⁹Ibid # 30

²⁰Mulieris Dignitatem – Apostolic Letter of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year - # 16 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988

²¹Ibid # 4

²²Ibid # 11

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[Back to Main Page of Teachings of SCTJM...](#)



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