

Outline document
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WOMEN'S CULTURES: EQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE

Premise

“I am convinced that the human species develops as a twofold species, ‘male’ and ‘female’; that the essence of the human being, of which no trait should be missing, is present in both, manifesting itself in two ways: and that the entire structure of being highlights this specific mould.” (Edith Stein)

In our Plenary, the invaluable contribution of our Members and Consultors will allow us to gather some aspects of women’s cultures in four thematic stages, in order to identify possible pastoral paths, which will allow Christian communities to listen and dialogue with the world today in this sphere. The expression “women’s cultures” does not imply any division from men’s cultures, but shows our awareness that there is a women’s “perspective” on the world and all that surrounds us, on life and on experience. This perspective is a normal part of the fabric of all cultures and societies; we can see it in the family and in work, in politics and the economy, in study and decision making, in communications and literature, in art and sport, in fashion and cuisine, etc. This text has been composed by a group of women in the light of pastoral considerations sent in by our Members and Consultors and will guide us in our reflections.

At the dawn of human history, societies divided roles and functions between men and women rigorously. To the men belonged responsibility, authority, and presence in the public sphere: the law, politics, war, power. To women belonged reproduction, education, and care of the family in the domestic sphere. In ancient Europe, in the communities of Africa, in the most ancient civilisations of Asia,

women exercised their talents in the family environment and personal relationships, while avoiding the public sphere or being positively excluded. The queens and empresses recalled in history books were notable exceptions to the norm.

From the latter part of the 19th century onwards, especially in the West, the division of male and female “spaces” was put into question. Women demanded equality; they no longer accepted the role of the *deuxième sexe*, but wanted the same rights, such as that of voting, access to higher education, and to the professions. And so the road was opened for the parity of the sexes.

This step was not, and is not, without problems. For, in the past (but only in the past?) women had to fight to exercise their professions or take on decisional roles that appeared to be exclusively meant for the male world. So the areas of reflection are extended throughout the different cultures, they transform and present themselves with different accents, sometimes becoming entwined with political and strongly ideological movements. In this globalised and strongly dialectical horizon, there is an urgent need to find answers. Our Plenary is engaged in discovering and understanding the feminine specificity in considering themes such as function, role, dignity, equality, identity, liberty, violence, economy, politics, power, autonomy etc.

THEME I. Between equality and difference: the quest for an equilibrium

There are differences

Today, generally speaking, women seek to reconcile professional life and family commitments. They can renounce maternity, but those who do have children cannot avoid raising, educating and protecting them. In any case, women who are not married or have no children, welcome, include, and mediate; they are much more capable of tenderness and forgiveness than men. Beyond the different ways of being parents, there is a difference between the feminine and the masculine in techniques of problem-solving, in the perception of the environment, in models of representation

and cycles of rest, to mention just a few categories. Cancelling such differences impoverishes personal experience. In this sense it is right not to accept an imposed neutrality but to value difference.

The egalitarian wave, though, is continuous and touches all areas of social life and almost all human institutions and cultures. It is so strong that, in the last years, in the West, some have even affirmed that there is no difference: the subject is neuter and chooses and builds his/her identity; owns him/herself and answers primarily to him/herself. Yet, in seeking parity, rarely have women renounced their differences. An example could illustrate this: the coordinator of an international conference presents the first speaker, Michelle, a 65 year old European. In her country she was the first woman to obtain a degree in physics and the first woman Rector of a university. She has been president of one of the most prestigious European academic associations for some years. The coordinator asks her by which of her many titles she wishes to be presented: ‘my favourite title is “grandma”, and I wish to spend more time in that capacity than I currently do’. Even if Michelle is unable to be a grandma as much as she wishes, this “title” is an integral part of her personal identity and allows her to define herself. The incisive question underlying the example is: in the same situation, would a man give the same response?

Equal and diverse, together?

In modernity, where work is the main way to avoid poverty and exclusion, women want to work, have a career and recognition of this commitment in terms of status and money equal to men. They want space in the public sphere equal to that which has been given to men. They ask to be considered as people complete in themselves, not as secondary citizens. Many countries in the world have even modified their juridical systems to recognise the equilibrium and sharing of responsibilities between women and their husbands, between mothers and fathers.

At the beginning of the third millennium feminine subjectivity tended to express itself in harmony between these two points. In the world, many women's cultures have been engaged in different ways and forms and at differing speeds in identifying a proportion, even to avoid the two extremes of this process: uniformity on the one hand and marginalisation on the other. The difference and the equality of women is not *against*, but *with*, for the historical experience of the feminine condition has taught women that neutrality is in reality a form of despotism, and makes us less human.

- Difference (between men and women) has generated a radical inequality. Where are the roots? In cultural anthropology? In keeping power firmly in the hands of those (men) who are traditionally recognised as more fit to command?
- Can the question of gender be tied in some way to this unequal vision between men and women, whence the pretence of creating a cultural identity? Is there some link especially at the level of social tensions?
- Can the categories of “reciprocity” and “complementarity” be an interpretative key and possible way of life, or must we find other categories?
- Equality as human persons requires differences to give fullness to the Word of God who creates. “And God said: let us make man in our image, in our likeness ... And God created man in his image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:26-27). What language can we use today to make this Word understandable to people? Can biblical narration still have an intrinsic power of persuasion today?

Theme II. “Generativity” as a symbolic code

The very many ethical and juridical enquiries have convinced us that the theme of generativity is one of the most debated and controversial in the current cultural, social and political horizon in the West, but it is not the only one (just think of questions such as surrogacy, wombs for hire, homologous and heterologous

medically assisted fertilisation, etc.) Aware of this, we have chosen to read this category in a symbolic key, avoiding the complexities of a sociological, juridical and bioethical reading which would have required a different type of analysis, research and engagement.

Putting it in an excessively simplified way, we can affirm that the generative path is divided into four moments: desiring, bringing into the world, looking after, and finally, letting go. So it is a generativity that, as an original anthropological act and symbolic code, is also seen in pedagogical spaces (education in faith, pastoral activity, schooling) giving life to social, cultural and economic structures that are inspired by values, ideas, principles and practices oriented to the common good, to the whole development of man and engagement in solidarity.

The starting point for each human person

Generativity turns, without doubt, on the bodies of women. It is the female universe that – due to a natural, spontaneous predisposition which could be called bio-physiological – has always looked after, conserved, nurtured, sustained, created attention, consent and care around the conceived child who must develop, be born, and grow. The physicality of women – which makes the world alive, long-living, able to extend itself – finds in the womb its greatest expression. The body of the woman is the starting point for each human person, the primary source of the response to the anguish of death. In the body of the woman, prenatal life is lived: this has a value and fundamental importance for it leaves the first impression on the body and brain in the formation of a child.

Bringing a human being into the world, then is much more than generating it or giving birth to it; it means helping the child to develop its own potential and realise itself and live a full life, in which the crises and difficulties can be encountered with resources that are intra- and inter-personal. In this generative horizon, the *mens* (so neuroscience teaches) emerges from the activity of the brain whose structures and

functions are directly influenced by interpersonal experiences, beginning with life in the womb. This is a biological process, of integration that is stimulated by relations founded on security, empathy, emotive tuning, cooperation and understanding.

Other contexts of “generative liberty”

So, as every relation has an impact on the brain and on the mind, generativity can be expressed in every relation, in every moment of life, unfolding itself in many forms. So, promoting the good life, it in fact becomes generative, leaving its mark on the existence of those who have been entrusted to it. This can happen in many contexts, from the family to places of education, care, information and business. Women executives and managers, for example, who develop managerial processes based on respect, welcoming, making the most of differences and skills, generate and protect life expressing fecundity. Such processes are at the basis of a future that is fully human, safeguarding against an involution of the human species, a risk that is possible where the logic of competition and power are cultivated in a disharmonic fashion.

- The first contact with the world and the first look at life for each human being are received in a feminine context. Is there sufficient recognition of the value of women in this indispensable segment of human life?
- Do society and the Church around the world always recognise the central role of the women who accompany towards the fullness of humanity?
- Is care work still considered a women’s question (angels of the hearth)? Is it given economic recognition? How do we express this in society? And in the Church?
- The birth of new ways and generative spaces (relationships, friendships, support, solidarity, sharing, etc.) can also be facilitated by virtual networks. How do women find space to express themselves in the world of social networks?

Theme III. The female body: between culture and biology

The feminine body

The body for women – as also happens for men – is, in a cultural and biological, symbolic and natural sense, the place of one's own identity. It is the subject, means, space of development and expression of the self, the place rationality, psychology, imagination, natural functionality and ideal tensions converge. The feminine body, then, is a filter of communication with others, in a continuous and inevitable exchange between individuals and contexts. So the feminine identity is the point of convergence of daily fragility, of vulnerability, mutability, and multiplicity between emotive interior life and exterior physicality.

Plastic surgery can be counted as one of the many manipulations of the body that explore its limits with respect to the concept of identity. A specificity that is placed under so much stress in the contemporary world as to provoke pathologies (dysmorphophobia, eating disorders, depression...) or “amputate” the expressive possibilities of the human face which are so connected to the empathic abilities. Plastic surgery that is not medico-therapeutic can be aggressive toward the feminine identity, showing a refusal of the body in as much as it is a refusal of the “season” that is being lived out.

If the body is the place of truth of the feminine self, in the indispensable mixture of culture and biology, it is also the place of the “betrayal” of this truth. The indiscriminate and undifferentiated use that the media and communications industry has applied in all its forms, in advertising (sexual allusion and debasement of its role), is undeniable proof. No political or social battle has been able to do without a mechanism so profoundly rooted as that of the exploitation of the female body for commercial benefit.

Aggression towards women's bodies

According to UN statistics, 70 per cent of those who live in poverty worldwide are women: poor women, uneducated, in conditions of exploitation, subjection, and difficulty, that is in situations that profoundly limit their ability to know, to be informed, emancipated and liberated; women cowed by depression that makes them weak, devoid of courage, servants of men; women who accept a level of presumed inferiority and who are conditioned by the cultural customs of the society in which they live. So poverty is both cause and consequence of violence on women.

In a similar way, a woman's body can become a symbolic place of "nothingness", of being an "object" through hiding, mutilation and constriction of the body, even to the point of eliminating all subjectivity, any expression of life and thought. In this sense, prostitution can be considered the most widespread form of "slavery", even in civil and democratic societies. When we speak of violence perpetrated on women – beginning with girls – we speak especially of the violation of principles and values embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and successive national and international documents in defence of human rights (which hark back to the biblical command not to oppress orphans or widows (cf. Ex 22:21)). If it is true in fact that all individuals have equal rights in as much as they are human beings, no excuse – be it cultural or social – should ever be used to legitimate, minimise or even tolerate gender violence. But this still happens today as, in the very discrimination and stereotypes tied to roles, violence on women sinks its roots even deeper.

Femicide is the killing of women as women, taking possession of something that is seen as an exclusive right, looking to humiliation and to violence, both physical and psychological. So, selective abortion, infanticide, genital mutilation, crimes of honour, forced marriages, trafficking of women, sexual molestation, rape – which in some parts of the world are inflicted on a massive level and along ethnic lines – are some of the deepest injuries inflicted daily on the soul of the world, on the bodies of women and of girls, who become silent and invisible victims. Formation then, must

be strengthened, for all those who live in close contact with violence, and also a culture of living together between men and women, aware that the world is entrusted to both in equal measure.

- Domestic violence – inflicted by men in the home, be they fathers or brothers – is the main cause of death in the world for women aged between 16 and 44. This cold statistic raises two questions: Why are women killed by a husband, fiancé, partner or ex-partner after years of life together, perhaps by the father of children they have raised together? Why at the first physical act of aggression, or even at the first harsh words, do they not put a distance between themselves and the men who threaten, betraying conjugal love, destroying it, profaning it to the extreme?
- “Plastic surgery is like a burqa made of flesh.” One woman gave us this harsh and incisive description. Having been given freedom of choice for all, are we not under a new cultural yoke of a singular feminine model? What do we think of women used in advertising and in the mass media?
- From generators of life to producers? The scientific horizon poses questions: Does not the era of generating without bodies, especially women’s bodies, and the call to existence of a human being without relations between parents, and then without relations between mother and child, mean that we are going in the direction of a body-producer and no longer generator? Can we overlook the sophisticated interaction between culture, biology and technology?
- The body expresses the being of a person, more than an aesthetic dimension closed in on itself: how can we avoid a purely functional approach to women and their bodies (seductive, commercialisation, marketing)?

Theme IV: Women and religion: flight or new forms of participation in the life of the Church?

Women have sincere and painful questions. We seek to listen to their multifaceted discomfort with a rather obsolete feminine iconography in which they struggle to see and recognise themselves. We could open this last session of work with a new set of questions. Which kerygmatic proclamation should there be for women, one that is not closed in on a moralistic vision? Which indications do we need for a new pastoral praxis, for a vocational path toward marriage and family, toward religious consecration, in view of the new self-awareness that women have? Why are there so few and such inadequate answers to making the most of their bodies, their physical love, the problems of responsible motherhood? Why with their great presence have women had so little impact on the Church's structures? In pastoral praxis, why are we giving women only those tasks of a somewhat rigid scheme, the fruit of ideological and ancestral left-overs?

Yesterday. "But the hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is under-going so deep a transformation, women impregnated with the spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid mankind in not falling" (Message of the Council to Women). And again: "[Men and women] must bring the richness of their own dynamism to the building up of the world", for "today it is urgent, both in civil society and in the Church, that there be a work of waking up and promotion of the feminine. It is a matter of protecting the dignity of women, respecting what is genuinely feminine (and this is the real equality), and avoiding that the woman, in trying to insert herself responsibly into society that is markedly masculine, lose her femininity. It is with respect to this originality of women that the true development of the feminine position will develop" (Commission of Study on Women in Society and in the Church). Through this concise evocation from the

Second Vatican Council and from the works of the above mentioned Commission, let us continue on from our look at the past, which we can all remember.

Today. A look at the present leads us to the risk of rhetoric and clichés. Women were the first believers, the first witnesses. And it is they, as mothers and grandmothers above all, whom Pope Francis has asked to continue to proclaim hope and resurrection. Women have always been a sort of silent rock of strength in the faith, to them has always been entrusted the task of educating children to life as believers. An army of teachers, catechists, mothers and grandmothers that, however, instead of being seen as figures of the Church seem to belong to a small ancient world that is disappearing. In fact, it is in the area of young women that the crisis is starting to be felt. In the West, women between 20 and 50 years old rarely go to Mass, opt for a religious wedding less often, few follow a religious vocation, and in general they express a certain diffidence toward the formative abilities of religious men. What is not working, today, so that the image of womanhood that the Church has kept, does not correspond to reality? Today women no longer spend their afternoons reciting the rosary or taking part in religious devotions, they often work, sometimes as top managers engaged as much as, if not more than, their male counterparts, and frequently they also have to care for their families. They are women who, perhaps with great difficulty, have reached places of prestige within society and the workplace, but have no corresponding decisional role nor responsibility within ecclesial communities. There is no discussion here of women priests, which according to statistics is not something that women want. If, as Pope Francis says, women have a central role in Christianity, this role must find a counterpart also in the ordinary life of the Church.

A look to the future. The terrain, as we know, is plagued by prejudices and preconceptions from ancient positions and is rendered more inflammable by the fire of tradition and an excess of male presence often afraid of any encounter. It is no longer time for an automatic classification of all feminine requests in a great pool of feminism, in which claims that are more or less shared are thrown together. Every

historical era is marked by conflicts and expectations, which today make it impossible to deny complementarity between men and women. It is difficult terrain to plough but one which will give fruit in abundance, even to the Church itself.

It is not a question of bringing about a revolution against tradition. In other words, feminine voices of good sense are not thinking of or wanting to tear away the jobs and positions from men, turning on its head the relation of power between the sexes, nor, do they wish to wear a purple biretta, forgetting the recognition of women with the femininity that is theirs. A realistic objective could be that of opening the doors of the Church to women so that they can offer their contribution in terms of skills and also sensitivity, intuition, passion, dedication, in full collaboration and integration with the male component.

- What spaces are proposed to women in the life of the Church? Do we welcome them bearing in mind specific and changing cultural, social and identity sensitivities? Do we, perhaps, propose ways of participation based on schemes that are of no interest to them?
- Have we ever asked ourselves what type of woman the Church needs today? Is the way they participate thought of and worked out together with them? Or are we handing them preconceived models that either do not meet their expectations or respond to questions that have already been superseded?
- Are women deserting the Church? Perhaps in some cultural areas this is true, other geographic zones could suggest invaluable elements to be proposed and new horizons towards which our eyes can be turned. Could not the pastoral debate between different experiences, in which women are able to let their voices be heard and to offer their availability to serve, become a new “synodal” way of experiencing the faith and of living in the Church?
- What are the characteristic ways in which women are present in different societies and cultures, from which we can take inspiration for a pastoral renewal so that women may play a more active part in the life of the Church?