

## THE UNIVERSITY WOMAN IN THE MODERN WORLD

Some thoughts on the women's meeting being organized by Pax Romana in the Netherlands from April 9 - 16, 1958

Bridaine O'Meara,  
General Secretariat of Pax Romana.

Why this meeting? (supposing that people have thought about it at all)

I would say it has been called because some members of Pax Romana feel that the University woman today

- A. is not always fully what she should be
- B. is in a position to influence society more directly and thoroughly than ever before in the history of Western Europe (of mankind?), and therefore has a special contribution to make to society.

I take A. and B. in turn.

A. Is the University woman (student and graduate) living up to expectations? What in fact are these expectations? Are they justified? Can we as students and young women graduates do anything to ensure that we and our women colleagues live up to the hope placed in us?

What should we expect from the University woman? Let us first decide where she is going ultimately (and in this, she will be like every other woman). Woman, like Man, was created to know and love God here on earth and after to see and enjoy Him in Heaven (Catechism answer). God created her to do this knowing and loving by developing in her the feminine qualities of her sex, by being more truly a woman, by complementing the qualities proper to the masculine sex. She can do this complementing of masculine qualities most naturally in marriage which is every woman's natural vocation (this does not mean that many women do not marry - because they dedicate themselves to God, because they are never asked, because of family circumstances, historical events, war etc.). But whether she be married or single, rich or poor or what you will, we want to find out if University education turns out full women whose cultivation of the mind does not in any way harm their loveliness as women.

Here a digression to clear up two points before we go further.

(i) Both sexes are obviously a mixture of male and female elements. But we cannot deny that we expect from men certain qualities which we do not expect from women and vice versa. What qualities do we look for in women? (please add to the list): warmth, love, generosity, compassion, joy, kindness, service, forgetfulness, mercy, dignified courage---note that these are all qualities typically associated with woman's role as wife or mother, or as one who serves the community specially in social services, teaching etc.

(ii) Woman was never intended to be man's equal nor vice versa. Here we can examine our consciences and ask whether we have not been infected by the "as good as men", "same as men" cry. We might profitably re-read St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans 12, 6-16, Second Sunday after the Epiphany: "The spiritual gifts we have differ according to the special grace which has been assigned to each...each must perform his own task well." Surely the same applies to the basic gift of our different natures. (1)

- (1) These two points should be so obvious as to need no stressing in a meeting, specially of Catholic women students.
- (2) If these thoughts have any validity at all, they apply only to Europe.

We now go back to University education. It will help us to be practical if we ask a few questions. Is there dissatisfaction? Supposing there is dissatisfaction, from what quarters does it come

- a) from ourselves, the women students and graduates
- b) from the men with whom we work and study
- c) from any other sources e.g. society?

a) from ourselves. I feel that "ourselves" fall into three categories; girls who go to the University to have a nice time before getting married; girls (and I think they are the majority) who want to make the most of University life, to study well, play well, get a fairly good degree, perhaps practise a profession for a few years and marry; girls, who are intellectuals, for whom their studies mean everything, and who will dedicate themselves to professional work (as their vocation) - in this last category marriage definitely takes a second place, if any place at all.

To whichever group we belong, we have a duty to make the most of our years in the University including the butterflies. What problems do we meet in our studies? Here each person will have to fill in - I only give a few suggestions. Perhaps problems of pre-University orientation? Did you get help in choosing your Faculty? Are you happy with your choice? Can you do anything to see that in your school, girls are orientated? (This brings the problem of - are there studies which seem to suit women more than others? why?) Are these courses which you think can be orientated differently? Could you do anything about this through your students' council, or your women representatives on this council? Are there courses which, in your opinion, should be offered and are not? Courses which would appeal to the women students? e.g. in the Law Faculty? In the Social Science and Social Welfare departments? Presumably, if you are taking courses in the social sciences you need practical experience. Does the university arrange the sort of experience you want? Have you any choice in the matter? If you are a science student and also have to have practical experience, is any account taken of your wishes? Do you get help in finding temporary work in the holidays? or are you thrown in to do the same as the boys? Write down one or two thorny points which bother the girls in your faculty and see what can be done about them. Let us not forget that because University courses have been designed for men, we are not obliged to sit back and accept exactly the same for ourselves. (Unless of course, you believe that being equal to men, means being the same as men),

Our dissatisfaction may spring from the problems we face after graduation. If we have met with prejudice especially in the sciences (medecine, scientific, research etc.) did we overcome that prejudice and how? Do you think the University can help break down these prejudices? If you are married, or about to get married, have you the wrong idea (although it may be buried deep inside) that your university training will be wasted? If you have free time, are you using it well? Is there voluntary work you could do in your parish? etc. etc. (These questions overlap with B - woman's influence in society mentioned on page 1 and to be dealt with later).

b) dissatisfaction from the men with whom we study or work (not an academic dissatisfaction). We get furious with remarks like "Don't ask me to consider University women, women; nice companions and all that, but they are so determined to be our equal (meaning doing what we do) that you can't expect me to treat them any differently from my men friends." We get furious because our pride is hurt;

we may even overlook the grain of truth in this unpleasant comment. The reason is that we are being put in masculine situations (how long has your University existed? since when has it admitted women students? Also the men don't like being outstripped by women). An English woman-writer has expressed what is happening rather well: "Women are carrying heavy burdens hitherto unattempted and (1) drawing on qualities only recently made their own. They call up their resources, they call up every last man within them and he comes. It is seldom that she makes a pact with him: rarely is there a marriage between them giving equal honour. Her call to him is dictated by need and by panic. She shouts down the castle walls that the castle is undefended, and up comes every warrior and handy man about the place. Then masculinity takes over, and it could not be otherwise."

Masculinity is one problem. There is another. I want first to quote from Margaret Mead and then change the text somewhat to suit the European context: "We have the striking paradox of women who are educated like men and who can do most of the things men do but who still are taught to prefer marriage to any other way of life." I now change my sentence to read: "We have the striking paradox of women who are educated like men and who can do most of the things men do; yet the men look towards the women primarily as wives and mothers, and any woman who does not seem capable of fitting into this pattern, is considered only half a woman." (Men expect these qualities from married and un-married women alike). I think we must have the honesty to ask ourselves whether the men have the right to ask for these qualities from the women first? Do we agree with them? If we do, why? If we don't, why not? Also, do certain University women consider running a home and the education of children as inferior to having a career?

Let me hasten to add, before I am lynched by my fellow women students and graduates, that I am not against education or University education for women, that I am glad I went to the University, that, if I have daughters on day, I shall encourage them to go the University provided they have the necessary brains. I am merely asking how we girls are resolving the conflict between ourselves who are trained for careers, and the men for whom our training is of secondary importance. (2)

Passing now to c) dissatisfaction from other sources, I shall deal with this under section B of these notes - the influence which University women should exercise on society.

B. What is woman's role, and especially the University woman's role in society? Here I am attempting to define the undefineable. Woman preserves and improves. Through the home, she will preserve what is best in a country's heritage (culture, way of life). She will improve society by pouring into it, the influence of her feminine qualities. It is a platitude that women today influences every sphere of life. She may influence it directly by her work, because she is working in fields which were closed to her until recently; she may influence it indirectly by the

./.

- (1) Ann Lindbergh in "Gifts from the Sea" gives a good description of the metro-like tempo of an American woman's life today; same holds to a lesser degree in Europe.
- (2) This last sentence refers to categories 1 and 2 to which I refer on page 2, and especially to category 2 to which most University girls belong.

way she votes, and politicians have a knack of courting the women voters; by the way she brings up her children or other people's children (think of her responsibility as a teacher), by her social work paid or voluntary (without the women, what would happen to the social work?) Women are everywhere today. Are they doing their jobs well? Are they doing the right kind of job? It is a good thing that women are playing their part in society. What can we do to make it a better thing?

I feel that this section B. is of the greatest importance. In Africa, Asia, South America, women are being called to learn new jobs, new skills which we began to acquire 50 - 100 years ago. In Europe, we have, as it were, learned the know-how. We are now facing the more difficult task of spreading the right kind of influence in these new situations. Also, I think University women could be imbued with a greater sense of their responsibilities towards society. We can try to impart these responsibilities. But the best way is "seeing is believing" - that is, if some University women do a good job, others will follow like a snow-ball. I feel we would need a symposium of five or six University women in every walk of life to widen our horizons and inspire us.

C. What to do? Presumably we will find that all is not perfect with a) ourselves b) our federations c) the university.

a) ourselves - we have the remedy in our own hands, a personal challenge involving hard work, the grace of God, prayer

b) the federations - here I leave my betters to fill in! The Portuguese girls have wide experience here. However, I am against creating separatist movements; the girls may want to get together to discuss their problems and the boys too, that is natural. On the other hand, since the boys have to live with the girls and vice versa, problems should be worked out in common where possible. What we want to avoid is the atmosphere which says (in so far as an atmosphere is articulate): "Oh, the girls are at it again."

The federations could try to counteract some of the unfortunate characteristics of University women and make them fully integrated people. I suspect this happens in most federations though more needs to be done consciously; the girls may not even realize the need for thought on the subject, and will be more interested in severely practical approach. Also I think the federations could help by directing the girls' attention to the jobs waiting for them to do, e.g. bring home the notion of service to the community.

c) the university: mostly covered under a) page 2.

\* \* \* \* \*