



THE ROLE OF WOMAN IN THE MODERN WORLD

1. Introduction: an essential role in a changing world.

The future of our civilisation becomes more and more un-foreseeable. As a result of political strategy or of seemingly chance circumstances, an endless wave of fear and anxiety is going around the earth. Local agitations quickly take on the shape of tremendous worldwide problems, the calmness which has expected for ages in certain regions has suddenly been replaced by furious struggles and bitter prejudices; hates and untruths, errors of men, intelligence and heart, spread at a vertiginous speed from one continent to the others.

At the same time the power of man over created things is growing more and more; techniques are improved in every specialised field; there are new and unexpected possibilities of material welfare and progress.

And from this paradoxical situation a silent voice is heard, the choir of all men in all continents. A strong appeal comes forth from the whole world - from the worn out and rationalistic Europe, from restless and young America, from vital and dense Asia, from vibrating and emotional Africa, from this Africa "which perhaps is living to-day the most decisive moments in her millenary history"..... An appeal comes forth from the lips of all men - men of every race and culture - and this appeal is addressed personally to every man, to every human being.

This call is an essential one. It is a call for truth - truth in the fulfilment of the specific vocation of every human being.

This is the fundamental theme of this talk - what is the truth of our answer as women to the appeal of the modern world?

The Brazilian writer Gustavo ^{Cercão} ~~Conrad~~ in his book "The Frontier of Technique" criticises that answer in this way: "Women came to meet men in work. The last war saw feminine hands managing mechanical gadgets and controlling bombers. And this still goes on. They came to us but their contribution has only been in number, quantitative, mechanical. They came to us as individuals, as arms, as brains, but they did not come as women.

The choir of voices grew stronger, but it did not become more harmonious. Gestures as a whole increased but they did not become more orderly. They came to us to do the same things, with the same gestures.

And if they came to do what we can do, it is obvious that they felt defeated in what makes them different from us..... the world with that contribution from woman runs the risk of the most terrible of catastrophes: that of being strengthened in quantity and mutilated in quality."



First of all, in this rather severe criticism, the writer states an essential truth: the answer the woman has to give to the world, her presence in the different activities of social life must have special features. Only then will they be an authentic womanly answer, an effective presence of the true woman.

But the writer says even more: he supposes woman to know what makes her different from man. And he supposes woman to live and to "specialize" in that very difference.

Briefly, the writer states that woman has a specific role in the world. This statement is so obvious that it may look ridiculous. But in its obviousness, it contains an immense richness and unexpected potentialities. It is for us women, the scale for evaluating our own personal fulfilment and for judging the effectiveness of our contribution for the coming of the Kingdom, which is the ultimate sense of our destiny on earth.

.-.-.-.-.

Far beyond all the contingencies of space and time, woman is called to fulfill a well defined role in society. We may even say that woman accomplishes her destiny as a human person insofar as she is conscious of her role as woman. Of course, we don't mean that a conscious knowledge of the theoretical fundamentals is necessary for every woman, but we do mean that she needs keep awareness of the concrete implications of her vocation.

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

This specific role of woman is not an invention of our time. Through all the vicissitudes of the civilizations, there is a common denominator which is already the image of the full idea of God concerning women, though incomplete on the natural level and spoiled by the sin and error of mankind.

It is not the modern world, however complex and pressing its problems may be, which presses us to define that role. The role of woman is not defined, in its essence, by the accidental circumstances. It stands out of time, as a recognition of the plan of God creating "the second half of the human being".

A universal constant is kept along the ages and in that constant we can find woman's own specific answer to the plan of God. Antigone or Andromeda, in the vagueness of the natural values, as well as Teresa of Avila and Elizabeth of Hungary, in the fulness of the christian virtues, are the presence of the same essential values. And these values also have to be assumed by women in this time.

However, something is different to-day. The intuition of these values cannot be enough for the world now. So many circumstances are changing the way in which women fit into

Centro de Documentação e de Publicação
FUNDAÇÃO
CUIDAR
O FUTURO
*

society: - the entrance of women into the salaried work (in the U.S.A. alone women are 1/3 of the employed working population) - the disruption in the traditional walks of life in which woman moved for centuries - the introduction of new types of relationships and new structures in social life, - the disorder caused by a technical civilisation which has not yet been fully integrated in a strong cultural synthesis.

In such a different social condition, we need to go further, beyond intuition alone - we have to find the exact definition of the role of woman, in its theological content and in its sociological expression.

The multifariousness of the presence of woman in the modern world requires that definition. Undoubtedly the condition of woman in Africa is different from that of woman in Europe. Their participation in social life is different, resulting from civilizations grown out of definite historical processes and from cultures based upon different values. Nevertheless, the same role is assigned to them - the safeguard of the same spiritual principles in the world. If the women of every race and every type of culture are ~~every~~ conscious of this same essential role, they will be able to give to their own civilizations a truly feminine contribution, in the diversity of the values and situations in which they live.

The awareness of this role seems to be specially required in the present status of the African civilization. There is still time for the African woman to profit by the lesson of Western civilization's experience. She will follow the wrong way if she concentrates on fighting for that kind of equality of rights which only leads to an erroneous equality of tasks in social life. As Bishop Sheen stresses, what matters is equity and not equality. On the basis of recognition of the identical dignity of man and woman, woman should always go further: seeking her own place in the world, deeply aware of her role as a result of a specific vocation, understanding the necessity for the full harmony of mankind, according to the plan of God.

It is obvious that when we speak about the specific role of woman, we do not have in mind an exclusivity of functions. To woman belongs the safeguard of essential values, but not the monopoly - on the contrary, her role consists in keeping them alive in the whole of mankind.

-.-.- .-.-.-.

The role of woman cannot be expressed in just a few words. Nor is it possible to reduce it to some concrete tasks, uniformly suggested to or imposed on every woman in the world. Beyond any field of action, there is the inner attitude, the ~~vocational~~ ^{personal} answer.

Such a definition as the one we are looking for cannot come from more or less arbitrary opinions. These are very often based only upon personal experience which is always incomplete. We seek objective facts and not "poetical" interpretations. Only the



* objective truth may result in the engagement of the whole being and then in the effectiveness of action in the world.

The first objective fact is Revelation itself and so, to study woman we need the Holy Scripture and Theology.

Our concept of the vocation of woman is not built only on theology. It takes elements from other branches of knowledge as well. Psychology, sociology, philosophy, physiology, history and literature also have something to say "providing theology with a basis of the experienced profane knowledge".

Still, it is not only deep study and research which can help find an answer. It is life itself too. Throughout the world, in every walk of life, in virginity or in marriage, in the varied professions and fields of activity, women seek, through their own personal experiences the discovery, sometimes painful, of their specific role. Beyond all frontiers, women of every cultural background meet together in a great current tending towards the discovery of their common role.

II. Woman in God's Plan.

Being created with a dignity equal to man's ("and God created man to His image and likeness, man and woman He created him."), woman has, like him, the ultimate end of giving glory to God in the highest fulfilment of her liberty.

The threefold vocation of "being image of God, collaborating in the work of creation and dominating the earth" was given equally to man and woman and still there is the essential perspective of woman's vocation. Actually all this text of Genesis, though establishing quite clearly the fundamental dignity of both sexes, emphasizes undoubtedly their differentiation.

Like man, woman is the image of God, of His Being, His intelligence, His wisdom, of the perfect harmony of His Being. But she is a different image, showing through the limitations of the creature, new aspects of the infinite richness of God. If each being in Creation is the symbol of a value existing in the Creator, the human being - man and woman - by existing as a diversified image also shows different realities of God.

Like man, woman is a collaborator of God in the work of Creation, fostering life and giving continuity to it. Still they are collaborators in different ways. The way in which man shares in the creative process shows him as a symbol of God the Father in the initiative and determination with which he brings forth life. The woman's way points more to the forces of love in the Triune God, bringing fertility and overflow of life; it is thus that we may say that woman stands as a symbol of the Holy Ghost, sent by the Father as ~~vivifier of life~~.

Like man, woman ^{the} dominates all created things ("...everything is yours, but you belong to Christ and Christ to God"). Again the ways are different. Man has the role of giving a name to all beings - symbol of knowledge and power by means of ~~work and~~ *creative and inventive work.* Woman has the role of dominating through the very *creative and* ~~professions.~~ *work.*



place which she occupies in the series of Creation, by integrating the created things in the order established by God. The harmony of the universe, according to the order established by God, the fulfillment of the human being as image of God seemed to be lacking in something. And God created woman.

Being created the last by God, woman comes to totalize the already begun work, integrating it, simply by means of her existence, in the divine plan. So far it can be said that woman brings fulness and perfection to the created things. Especially she helps to integrate the human values in the divine order. Or, in simpler words (the very words in Genesis) woman comes to be the companion of man, helping him, even only by her presence alone, to keep a Godward direction. Her primordial vocation is to be response, receptivity, surrender, dedication.

In this receptivity she is the symbol of the basic attitude of mankind before God. So in the midst of society, she is the guarantee of that attitude, which will only reach its fulfillment when all men, congregated in the mystery of the unity of all nations will accomplish in its most perfect expression the oneness of Christ and His Church.

Not merely in the Old Testament, as a symbol, do we find this role of finishing and fulfilling the created things: there is the total reality accomplished in Our Lady in the New Era.

Because she was destined since all eternity to be the Mother of the Word made flesh, Our Lady is profoundly connected with the mystery of the Trinity. Our Lady is the one, who by her Fiat makes Incarnation possible. In her the womanly role of integration of the human values in the divine order acquires a full sense. In her the attitude of receptivity and surrender is total. The Fiat of Our Lady is the most perfect expression of the creature before her Creator. In it can be heard the voice of all inanimate things which praise the Lord only by the fact of their existence. All mankind is present in her total surrender and trustful readiness. And in it woman is particularly present. The "Fiat mihi" has a profoundly feminine shade, in the womanly attitude of total surrender, permitting the mystery of the will of God to be accomplished.

But the new order, which the Fiat of Our Lady made possible, is not the result of a cool rule. The new order is the reign of the Cross.

So the role of woman presents a deeper sense: she is the symbol and the guarantee of the attitude of receptivity and loving surrender which has its full expression in the Cross ("Christ became obedient for us unto death, even to the death of the Cross").

Therefore, after Revelation it is not enough to speak vaguely of an integration of values in the plan of God and of turning man in a Godward direction. It is through the Cross that woman has to fulfill her own role (the permanent presence of holy women in the Passion and Resurrection is a concrete indication of that specific role).

It is through the fulfilment of this role that woman plays her own part within the Church. Now (in this time during which the Mystical Body of Christ is becoming complete), the role of the Church is to bring to its fulness, through the ages and the continents, the redemptive work which Christ substantially has accomplished, once for all, during His historical presence upon earth.

We may say that woman shares, in a very special way, this mission of the Church.

Within the Church and under the Cross, the role of woman presents a sacrificial expression, parallel to that of man which has its highest expression in the priesthood.

Claudel expresses this idea in these words: "Le mâle peut devenir prêtre, mais ce n'est pas défendu à la femme d'être victime". The spirit of service, the generous sacrifice, reparation and above all the total dedication of the human person in the surrender of all talents and potentialities, are the values which woman incarnates in society.

Fulfilment, perfection, fulness, under the Cross and in love - this is the role of woman. But what does it mean concretely? In this role there are two fundamental characteristics: integration and universality. Woman cannot be a principle of division but, on the contrary, the way to oneness, an inspiration for a synthesis.

Because she is the source itself where life begins, her role to bring things to their fulness is a role of unification and integration.

First of all, she must continue the role of Our Lady helping mankind to find the way to the lost unity. Belonging to the Church en route which through the ages prepares the many-colored robe in which she will appear before the Lamb, at the end of time, the woman must be the constant appeal to the shaping of the unity of all peoples and nations. To the individual lives she must also be an example of the integration of all values in the economy of the Cross. In the society of our time, attracted by so many different interests, distracted by a growing dispersion of culture and activities, caught in the dizzy rhythm of work and amusements, woman must be the pole of unity, where life is renewed and restored.

Through this integration woman must always be the guardian of the permanent values which are ~~the human guarantee~~ of the stability of the Church and of the fulfilment of Her apostolic vocation.

~~While man is devoted to the values that come from invention, with which progress is made, woman keeps, safeguards, shelters, passes on. Therefore, though being in time, she belongs to an order out of time.~~

The integration can only be built on the totality of values. Here is the root of the universal character of woman's role, either in the wideness of the tasks to be accomplished or

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

on a human ~~and~~ level, the instruments for



(and this is the main point!) in the attitude of love with which she must look to every being. The role of woman is specially concerned with the love of all human creatures, beyond any prejudices of classes, frontiers or races. In that universality of love, the woman's role of integrating all values in the divine order, requires a deeply human meaning.

This deep share in the work of Redemption, by means of values of fulness, implies two essential attitudes in the woman's soul - the virginal and the motherly attitude.

The virginal attitude in woman ^{points to} ~~shares in~~ the most perfect expression of womanhood. By her very dedication to God in virginity, woman points out the supreme dignity of the human being. While she seems to be breaking the chain of generations, she but gives them the necessary support, showing without words that the human person has a value in itself, independent of the contribution to the propagation of the human species or to the temporal progress of mankind.

The motherly attitude, made up of the totality of life and of the universality of being, brings forth fecundity and security in love. "The mystery of motherhood is the mystery of fecundity and love fruitful in bearing life, love fruitful in fostering life and in bringing the new life to maturity."

~~Through this threefold attitude, woman is in society the safeguard of the religious values and of the dignity of the human person, expressing the submissive and loving dedication of the creature to its creator.~~

III. The specific role of woman in the world.

Woman is so much more woman as far as she is able to unify these ~~three~~ attitudes, as a guarantee of those values which she is called to symbolize in the world. And that consciousness of the plan of God for her own destiny and the constant deepening of its spiritual content are the necessary background to the attitude of the Church as Bride to the Word.

~~Through this threefold attitude, woman is in society the safeguard of the religious values and of the dignity of the role of woman.~~

Authentic and deep womanly activity is impossible if not coming from interior gestation, from generous dedication, from personal dialogue.

Beyond the concrete tasks that the modern world requires from woman, her presence must be the permanent appeal for spiritual values, for the loving response of mankind to God in the redemptive joy of the Cross.



In a society undergoing such a fast evolution as the African one, it would be a temptation to think that the role of woman is confined to the varied and important tasks that claim her attention. In the process of development that is taking place in this continent, there is a strong risk of making the values of technique and material progress autonomous. Before any activity and as a background to any womanly activity in society, woman must be, by her very presence, an invitation to spiritual values.

It is evident that this inner attitude must be expressed by a participation in the intimate life of the Church. Her role of giving achievement and perfection to beings and of integrating them into the divine order has no other scope than the deep participation in the apostolic role of the Church. All the concrete tasks which she is called to accomplish must, therefore, be faced in this light.

In all social fields and in all human activities, woman must be the image of the living Church, in her loving and motherly reality. In mission countries her responsibility assumes new forms and double urgency. The incarnation of Christianity in different cultural patterns, the building up of a Christian atmosphere in life are fundamentally the task of woman.

In Africa, where we find such deep intuition for symbols, the understanding of Christian life - a central mystery surrounded by symbols - can be prompted by the woman, with her specific sense for symbolism and the mysteries of life.

Woman must make Christianity alive and integrate it under permanent forms into daily life. As safeguard of the permanent values, woman should help build social structures and psychological conditions in which Christian life could bear fruit. In such a society as the African one, where paganism has still so much place, the conversion of souls has to be supported, more than in any other continent, by a true "conversion" of the social structures, which would make possible the perseverance in faith.

The vocation of love that characterises woman requires her to be a helpmate, on the plan of human fulfilment, of the community of love, which the Church is. It is unfruitful to oppose a cold doctrine that defends the primacy of the person over the social group or the unity of the family to the very strong ties of the clan or of the tribe. But it is much more possible to reveal and make appealing a still stronger community of love which can integrate the already existing ties in a Christianity deeply rooted in warm life. The contribution of woman to the shaping of this community is unique.

Because she is the community of love in its most perfect expression, the Church does not annihilate individuals. On the contrary, only in the Church the human person reaches the fulness of her singularity.



Woman is the guardian of the supreme dignity of the person in social relationships. Because this role attains its fulness in dedication to God, the importance of the vocation for total dedication in African society is evident, and we may even say that the respect which a society has for virginity is the sign of the place that the dignity of the person has there.

In which fields may this role be made concrete ? From the ideas presented here, from the needs of the modern world, and from the teaching of the Holy Father we may infer some fields of activity which are specially urgent in our time :

1) Safeguard of the family.

It is through family life that normally woman fulfils her role. To her belongs the guarantee of the sanctity of family life, building its unity and indissolubility. In order that such a stability may exist in the family, adequate social conditions are needed and to woman specially belongs their establishment. The family must be the living cell in society before any other structure. A work in education and law needs to be made in Africa in order to lead the family to its basic purity, without compromising the natural insertion in the trib or in the clan. *The presence of woman in marriage presents two specially important aspects in Africa: the problem of the dowry and of polygamy.* The situations are extremely complex and one cannot get a definite theoretical solution to these problems. Still, in spite of the different social contexts in which they take place, the dowry and polygamy touch so directly the role of woman that woman herself has to try to be in the forefront of a positive action towards their practical solution.

To the dowry its symbolical and religious meaning has to be given back, changing it from simple and repulsive purchase into an instrument for appreciation of the dignity of woman, as source of life and chain between the generations.

The danger of opposing to polygamy the "Western" family (with all its elements for disintegration) has to be avoided. A true Christian concept of the family has to be awakened in the African society. Only such an ideal can give the necessary spiritual support to the laws which intend to avoid or condemn polygamy.

2) The education of Youth and specially the education of feminine youth.

The role of transmission of values which belongs to woman has its immediate concrete expression in education of youth. When in a sole generation, centuries of traditions and established habits are uprooted, the education of the young people who suffer this evolution, becomes the primary problem in society.

Woman needs to be able to establish the chain between two generations that have little in common, and to direct youth to the maximum profit of the new values in the cultural fields to which, by their vocation as African people they have been called. This adaptation of youth is especially important in the case of the feminine youth. African young women must receive the necessary education to fulfil their role as women in social and family life. The possibility of ascending to all levels of education must be a fact for the African young woman. But it is necessary that this education aim at the formation of authentically feminine personalities.

3) Social progress.

In the midst of technical progress, which rashly seeks for the maximum profit of natural resources in the African soil, woman plays the role of helping each person to live according to a truly human level. To her belongs the prevention of that unjust social segregation which may be established in the present process of economical development as may be found in other continents.

Because of her role of contributing to the perfect distribution of richness, as the basis for a just social order, it is evident that the vain concern for luxury and exploitation of the less favoured classes is a fundamental treason to her role. As far as this is concerned, the role of the European woman in Africa is most important. Following the economical development, a movement for political emancipation is taking shape in Africa, which being just at its origin, runs the risk of fostering hate among the races. Inasfar as European and African women know how to surpass all the differences which characterize them, and how to live in love, beyond their race or color, in the midst of the wider community of mankind, they are shaping the true peace in the African continent.

4) Moral and cultural atmosphere.

~~Being an appeal~~ ^{Appealing} for spiritual values, woman must be in social life the safeguard of purity. The habits of a country in daily life, in the varied relationships among men, build the cultural and moral pattern of society. Through them woman may lead the youth to a life built upon a deep understanding of the supreme dignity of man: that of being the image of God on earth.

The relationship between both sexes, the amusements at the disposal of the masses, the imperatives of fashion, the increasing liberties in moral behaviour are some fields in which woman has a decisive and unique role to fulfil.

Since moral life is in intimate connection with the vision which man has of life and his destiny in the world, the field of cultural promotion cannot be alien to the action of woman. The motherly attitude of woman in mankind must lead her to seek for the cultural fulfilment of the person. Being attentive to the values that remain throughout generations, the African woman has to enrich and to develop those values which characterize the African civilization,



and the European woman in Africa has to encourage the people to discover their own cultural synthesis.

5) International peace.

Woman is specially called to contribute to peace among nations by entering deeply into the universality of the Church and in her apostolic concern. She ought to create an atmosphere of mutual understanding among men, which would lead to a real permeation of social structures, which have the duty to secure international peace. Woman must foster the deep personal dialogue beyond all frontiers and cultural differences, in the current of internationalism that at present goes through the world. This influence of international peace may be accomplished through three different aspects:

- 1) the achievement of the national political life to which woman will give her contribution by means of her specific activity;
- 2) the work in specialized organizations which, on a neutral level, help the understanding among men. In this light the presence of European women in Africa may be much more
- 3) the presence and real work in international Catholic organizations which seek to be, in the different fields of international life, the living presence of the Church ^{through} lay people. For some women, this work at the service of the Universal Church may be an appeal for a total dedication, origin of an unlimited apostolic fruitfulness.

Lay mission work, as ultimate expression of the ^{responsibility of the} ~~lay engagement~~ ~~at the service of the Hierarchy in mission countries~~, is one field in which European women may most deeply fulfil this vision of the universal church.

to unity in the Universal Church

IV. - Movements for the Apostolate of Woman and her specific role.

All movements for the apostolate of woman have to carry out a work in the formation of woman, leading her to find out the deep sense of her vocation and the ultimate dimensions of her role in the world.

This work of formation is also a means for apostolic action. Actually the discovery of the vocation of woman will also be a discovery of the truth of the person, of her intimate nature, and therefore a greater possibility for a discovery of God.



This is why a feminine movement will always have its own characteristics, if not in the final goals that it aims to reach, at least in the way of carrying them out. It is above all most important that, besides the formation for the different fields in which woman is called to fulfil her role in a specific way, all feminine organizations develop an intensive activity in the following points:

1) An authentic vision of the role of woman.

While Western civilization is necessary to destroy the myths with which woman is poisoning herself in Africa, it is necessary for her to be more than mere power for production integrating the natural of the motherly role of woman, existing in the primitive African society in the wider Christian outlook. African woman has to be educated in the profound understanding, free from any complex of inferiority and taught that she will not fulfil her role by bringing forth her own specific values and by living her own vocation.

2) Fields of activity for the woman.

It is very important to discover fields of action through which woman may fulfil herself completely. As long as mankind progresses and civilization improves, new and more specific tasks are being opened to the action of woman. The increasing movement of promotion of the African woman must be directed to those fields where her action is truly unique.

3) Integrated culture:

A human and not humanistic cultural pattern has to be developed, i.e. a culture that would mainly be the expression of an outlook, a certain philosophy of life, which would involve the whole being instead of only engaging the brain. Only in such a cultural pattern woman may develop as woman and in her turn give the contribution which society expects from her.

4) Generous dedication.

The movements for the Apostolate of woman must be an appeal and an inspiration for total dedication at the service of the Church by means of the engagement in action which they require and by the interior life which they suppose. In this sense they will contribute by the most authentic means to the creation of a truthful presence of woman in the world, in the complete fulfilment of her specific role according to the plan of God.