

The Word of God and Theme 4
Women and Men

“In the beginning was the Word” is not only the expression that opens John’s Gospel (John 1:1). It articulates historical fact. Christian tradition, from its very beginnings, depends upon the revelation that comes from the Word of God. The earliest Christians received the Sacred Scriptures of their parent, Israel, and began to produce their own “words,” some of which have been received, since 367 CE, as Christianity’s Sacred Scriptures. The great Councils that determined the articulation of the Christian faith, from Nicea (325 CE) to Constantinople II (680 CE) were determined by the interpretation of Scripture, regarded as the Word of God.

The exclusive nature of Western Christianity and the struggle with the European princes led to an authority-based, more legal understanding of Christianity that (among other influences) produced the Reformation. A tragic exaggeration followed. The Protestant churches turned exclusively to the Word, while Catholics affirmed and exaggerated the importance of Tradition. As Vatican II made clear to all concerned: we need both (*Dei Verbum* 9).

Many of us remember an almost Scripture-less Catholic Church until Vatican II insisted that the Word of God return to the centre of Catholic life and practice (*Sacrosanctam Concilium* in 1963 and *Dei Verbum* in 1965). What emerged at Vatican II had a long preparation. As well as the work of some skilled and courageous pre-Conciliar teachers and scholars, it was the product of the magisterial teaching of Pope Leo XIII (*Providentissimus Deus* in 1893) and Pius XII (*Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943). Since the Council, the Magisterium has insisted that such must be the case: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), the 2008 Synod of Bishops with the theme “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church,” the post-Synodal Exhortation of Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (2010), Pope Francis’ Encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013, esp. paras. 110-175), his dedication of the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time to the honouring of the Word of God, accompanied by his recent powerful insistence of the crucial role of the Word in his little-known *Scripturae Sacrae Affectus* (2020: *Devotion to Sacred Scripture*). He laments: “Credible interpreters and translators of our own tradition are in short supply.” He cites St Jerome (in whose honour this letter was written): “Read the divine Scriptures constantly; never let the sacred volume fall from your hands.”

The Plenary asks that we witness to the equal dignity of women and men (Theme 4). The themes of healing, communion, and participation (Themes 1, 2, and 7) are closely associated with Theme 4. Nowhere in documentation to this point has any reflection appeared on the role of the Word of God to guide the Plenary's discussions. What follows is a sketch of what may prove to be useful.

In what is perhaps his most forceful letter, in the early 60's Paul writes to the churches in Galatia, reminding them of the radical socio-cultural and religious transformation that flows from their baptism:

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:27–28).

The divisions of Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female were deeply inscribed upon Paul's cultural milieu. But he insists that they cannot exist in the community of the baptised. If we then recognise the association of Paul's words with the actual practice of baptism by immersion, they become more striking: it is *physically obvious* from the presence or absence of circumcision (Jew or Greek), the branding of the slave, and the differences between the female and male body that there must be a distinction. But Paul insists that culturally accepted divisions, based upon bodily differences, have come to an end in the transformed situation into which the Christian has entered through baptism.

A development of this message appears in the letter to the Colossians, written by someone from the Pauline tradition in the 80's. This disciple of Paul writes:

You have clothed yourselves with the new self ... *where* there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free: but Christ is all and in all (Col 3:10).

The rejection of culturally accepted division is maintained, but now there is a clearer awareness that this takes place in a community, in a place, *where* such distinctions can no longer have a role.

The narrative traditions found in the New Testament provide two further important crucial pieces that fill out the foundational Christian understanding of the roles of women and men. In the first place, they all reflect a Jesus of Nazareth whose attitude toward and relationships

with women broke through accepted cultural norms and practice. The sheer quantity of material from the Gospels is overwhelming:

1. Miracle stories where women are the main protagonists, very often associated with the unacceptable process of “touching.” Women touch Jesus, and Jesus touches them: the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31; Matt 8:14–15; Luke 4:38–39); the raising of the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:21–24, 35–43); the healing of the woman with the hemorrhage (Mark 5:24–34; Matt 9:20–22; Luke 8:43–48); the anointing of Jesus in Bethany (Mark 14:3–9; Matt 26:6–13; John 12:1–8. See Luke 7:36–50).
2. Attacks on the religiously respected, where women are used to present an alternative view: the attack on the Pharisees, using the poor widow as the model (Mark 12:38–44; Luke 20:47; 21:1–4); Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53–8:11).
3. Jesus’ association with women as disciples who travel with him (Luke 8:1–3).
4. Jesus’ rejection of current divorce laws, based upon the initiative of a male partner to hand over a bill of divorce (see Deut 24:1–4), so that the woman can no longer be a “tennis ball” struck from partner to partner. The two shall become one, a oneness established by God (Mark 10:1–12; Matt 5:32; 19:1–12; Luke 16:8). What right has a man to interfere?
5. Crucially, the presence of women at the cross, the empty tomb, and the first proclamation of the resurrection, with Mary Magdalene as a major protagonist (Mark 15:42–16:8; Matt 27:57–28:10; Luke 23:50–24:11; John 20:1–2, 11–18). The universal presence of culturally disrespected and unreliable female witnesses is the bedrock of historical reflection on these events.

It is rightly said that Jesus was rejected and executed because of the female company that he kept.

All four Evangelists to use major women characters, and especially the Mother of Jesus, to present the Christian agenda. Women who risked their reputations, including Mary, to enable the continuation of the Davidic line are a major feature of the genealogy of Jesus as it is reported in Matt 1:1–17. Mary is regularly singled out for special attention by Luke, especially in the annunciation account (Luke 1:26–38) as the first believer, both in terms of chronology (the first to believe) and quality (the best of all believers). For the Fourth Gospel she asks the question that initiates the unfolding of “the hour” of Jesus (John 2:1–11), and she becomes the mother of all disciples at the cross (19:25–27). From and because of that “hour”

she and the disciple form one “home,” reversing the situation described in the Gospel’s prologue: “He came unto his own home, and his own people did not receive him” (1:11).

By the end of the first century the centrality of women, as well as the Mother of Jesus, is essential to the Johannine development of Jesus’ story. The unforgettable roles played by the Samaritan woman (4:7-30), Martha and Mary (11:17-34; 12:1-8), and Mary Magdalene (20:1-2, 11-18), summarized by the image of a woman whose “hour” of pain leads to the birth of a son (16:21-24), all add to the counter-cultural nature of earliest Christianity.

Finally, the use of the woman clothed with the sun in Revelation 12:1 develops the symbolic use of a female character. She does not represent Mary, nor the Church, as is often claimed. She is a symbol of the potential of humankind, whose child is ripped away from her in the presence of Satan (vv. 3-5). She falls into the desert (v. 6), pursued by Satan, but God cares for her and nourishes her in her ambiguous situation (vv. 13-17). She can be identified with the prostitute who mounts the beast in Revelation 17:2-6, or the bride of the Lamb who inhabits the New Jerusalem (21:9). The author of Revelation is summoning his audience to make their choice.

Paul’s recommendation of the deacon Phoebe (Rom 16:1) is concrete evidence that women and men not only served as heroic foundational figures, but they shared in the community’s ministerial leadership. The steady use of women characters across the New Testament to portray models of faith and courage indicates that they were widely recognised as leading the way. They were to be followed.

This counter-cultural stance faded as the Christian Church become more closely identified with the Greco-Roman cultures of its time. The pseudo-Pauline literature, written late in the first and early in the second Centuries, does its best to return women to their traditional settings in the family and society (see 1 Tim 2:11-12; 3:9-11; Titus 3:4-6; 5:5), as does the nasty interpolation by a non-Pauline hand in 1 Cor 14:34b-35. By the middle of the third Century, a Gnostic author can report his version of the Mary Magdalene’s presence at the empty tomb:

Simon Peter said to them (the risen Jesus and his disciples): Let Mary go out from among us, because women are not worthy of life. Jesus said: See I shall lead her, so that I will make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you

males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven
(*Gnostic Gospel according to Thomas*, Logion 114)

This, of course, is a highly sectarian and unrepresentative point of view. Nevertheless, when measured by the matrix for the roles of women and men found in the Word of God, we must ask ourselves whether some traditional Catholic attitudes and practices are not closer to the *Gnostic Gospel of Thomas* than those of Jesus and his inspired first interpreters.

Our Catholic community, seeking a Gospel-based renewal, is summoned by the words of St Jerome: “Read the divine Scriptures constantly; never let the sacred volume fall from your hands.” That practice should lead us somewhere else.

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