

Conclusions

Our objective in compiling this study was to look again at the events of 1995, the year in which John Paul II published his Letter to Women and the United Nations convened the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing. It is because of these milestones that we can say that 1995 was an important year for the ecclesial magisterium on women, and also for the current feminine question. This study provided us with an opportunity to look back on events as well as to become familiar with the present situation, to study the problems and formulate objectives to guide our action.

Through the contributions that were sent to us by the experts we had consulted, we became even more aware of the important prophetic role played by John Paul II in 1995. He took every opportunity during that year to continue teaching about the true dignity and vocation of women. He took up many topics that were already present in earlier documents and he enlarged on some new themes. The most notable document that emerged that year on the subject of women was the Letter to Women. The Letter is short but to the point. It establishes a dialogue with women everywhere, and lays out the fundamental points of Christian anthropology as a sure basis for the true defence of the dignity and rights of women. In this sense, the Letter sets out a path that the Church must continue to follow as a participant in a dialogue in which humanity seeks answers. The Church must give light to this discussion through its concept of the human being created male and female.

Our experts chose topics that arise from the Christian biblical anthropology taught by John Paul II. These topics include: reciprocal complementarity between men and women, the essential presence of both with their respective gifts in families, the Church and society, and the importance of continuing to study the richness that this brings; the theology of the body, the depth of

the spousal significance of the human body, a precious gift in personal self-development; feminine genius, the importance of avoiding the “masculinisation” of women in order to give them a place in the Church and society, but rather to avail of their specific gifts for this purpose.

When we take up the Beijing documents once again and study their context, we see that many of the real problems facing women were discussed at that Conference. Relevant discussions were opened and some very solid analysis was undertaken. We could take the example of the forcefulness with which the full application of human rights for women and girls was called for in societies where they continue to be considered second-class citizens. The same determination was seen regarding female poverty, inequalities in access to education, and the call for the prevention and elimination of violence against women and the female slave trade. Other important topics are the role of women as educators and promoters of peace in situations of conflict, the elimination of occupational segregation and all employment discrimination, the fostering of coordination of responsibilities of men and women in the workplace and home, the safeguarding of the image of women transmitted by the mass media, the elimination of discrimination against girls in education, professional training, health and nutrition. These are all important current issues that are dealt with differently according to regions of the world, but that must continue to improve if we are to build a decent human society.

Unfortunately, however, the documents that emerged from the Beijing Conference show serious anthropological deficiencies. They opened the way for ideologies to emerge from the contents, and priority was given to implementing the objectives that pointed towards extending gender ideology. A particular view of sexual and reproductive health was promoted that followed reductive paradigms and was tainted with utilitarianism and hedonism. For example, the term “birth control” is used several times throughout

the document as a basic human right that would enable women to play a more important role in society.⁷⁴ The frequent recurrence of the word “control” in reference to female fertility leads to the assumption that “control” is equal to health and well-being. On the other hand, access to these means of control very often cause problems in health and fertility. The mentality of our times maintains that control over reality is an ideal to be achieved. There is no longer the dimension of mystery. Control is exercised over how we are born and when and how we die. We have lost a sense of reverence for the mystery of fatherhood and motherhood, for the gift and mystery of life, and for all that this means and brings with it.

It is also noticeable how often the terms “gender” and “gender perspective” are used and how frequently there is a call to implement the latter in legislation, policies, programmes and state projects. There was wide debate in Beijing about what was understood by the term “gender”. There was a final clarifying note explaining how the term should be understood, but the meaning of the consensus reached by nations at the Conference was not respected. As we have seen in this present study, an interpretation of the term “gender” that is heavy with ideology is the one that has been most prevalent since the Conference. The experts we consulted have shown that they are concerned about the prevalence of this ideology and about the important anthropological issues that derive from it and are increasingly more prominent in culture at an international level.

⁷⁴ We shall quote only a few examples: *Platform for Action*, no. 92: “... the limited power many women have over their sexual and reproductive lives and lack of influence in decision-making are social realities which have an adverse impact on their health ... and the right of all women to control all aspects of their health, in particular their own fertility, is basic to their empowerment.”; no. 96: “The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality ...”; no. 97: “The ability of women to control their own fertility forms an important basis for the enjoyment of other rights.”

While we were working on this present study, we noticed how Pope Benedict XVI has been speaking about the need to foster a “human ecology”.⁷⁵ He has been calling on our contemporaries to defend creation, and he has tied that in with the need to protect humanity from self-destruction. These messages are meant to alert us to the fact that self-emancipation from creation and the Creator is an illusion. They teach us that acceptance of the message of creation is not at variance with our freedom. It actually makes it possible. These teachings by the Holy Father provide us with a frame of reference with which to look back and understand the way things have been going since 1995 and the challenges that lie in the future. These past few years have shown us clearly the relevance of the task that is being asked of us by Pope Benedict. This task could be carried out very efficiently if we use the tools given to us by Blessed John Paul II when he presented Christian anthropology in a way suited to our times.

That is why we believe that it is necessary and urgent to educate lay people and everyone involved in pastoral ministry in the important anthropological issues of our times. In many of these issues the teachings of the Church correspond with the common sense of most people, and with the heritage handed down throughout history. They stand in contrast to the agendas and ideologies that are being imposed on the dominant culture. The role of the Church as guardian of the truth about humanity is becoming greater at this time in history, and the Church feels the urgency to exercise this service. The education of the laity is essential. They are at the forefront wherever these issues are being addressed, in schools, universities, workplace, media and the world of politics and culture.

We must help in the ongoing task of educating pastoral workers and the laity in general so that they may safeguard the

⁷⁵ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Christmas greetings to the members of the Roman Curia and Prelature, 22 December 2008; See also: Address during the visit to the Federal Parliament in the Reichstag Building, Berlin, 22 September 2011.

human being, created male and female. This education will mean providing instruments to enable people to be critical of the cultural revolution that is being imposed. This will help individuals and communities to recognise the depth and beauty of Christian anthropology and to offer and present it to our culture today.

Education on the anthropological challenges of the new ethic are part of the mission of evangelisation of the Church. It must be done in the ‘capillary’ way described in *Christifideles Laici*. The revolution will leave behind a huge vacuum because it does not give an answer to the cry of this generation that is clamouring for love and truth⁷⁶.

Within this great task there is a particularly important role for Christian women and the women of our times. Blessed John Paul II spoke of how God entrusted human beings to women in a special way⁷⁷. That is why the education of the laity is particularly urgent with regard to women. It enables them to take their place in safeguarding the human, and makes them aware of the growing anthropological crisis of our times. It helps them to preserve values and basic human truths.

Work must be done in providing training programmes for lay leaders, women, youth and families in the areas of marriage preparation and cultural projects that can present the truth, goodness and beauty of Christian anthropology. As well as presenting developments in philosophy, theology and anthropology, living witness must be seen. This can be applied in different ways according to regions and nations in order to respond to local and global needs.

⁷⁶ *Marguerite Peeters*

⁷⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, 30.