

## I. The *Letter to Women* from Blessed John Paul II

The Letter of John Paul II to Women was signed on 29 June 1995, published on Monday 10 July, and presented at a press conference chaired by the then-president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, Cardinal Eduardo Francisco Pironio, with the participation of Giulia Paola Di Nicola of the University of Teramo and Maria Graça Sales, an official of the Pontifical Council.

This is a special document in the format of a letter addressed “directly and almost confidentially”<sup>12</sup> to each and every woman. In the context immediately preceding the United Nations' 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women, the Pope speaks directly to women in order to engage them, to question them personally, and to invite every one of them to reflect on their personal, cultural, social and ecclesial responsibility that comes from being women.<sup>13</sup>

Many women wrote giving their reactions to the pope's initiative and thanking him for his words. They appreciated the novel and direct tone, and they accepted the task entrusted to them to engage directly in building society according to the characteristics of "feminine genius". Editions of *L'Osservatore Romano* in Italian subsequent to the publication of the Letter published the responses of many women and set up a sort of "ideal dialogue" between the pope and women.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Angelus, 9 July 1995.

<sup>13</sup> “Given the urgency and complexity of issues relating to the status of women today, the Holy See delegation's contribution to the Beijing Conference is not enough for the Pope. He wants each woman to become personally involved in this work, and therefore he speaks ‘directly to the hearts and minds’ of each and asks them to reflect with him on themselves and their cultural, social and ecclesial responsibility that flows from their being women (cf. 1).” (EDUARDO CARD. PIRONIO, “The fate of humanity in the Third Millennium will be played out in the heart and mind of every woman”, in: *L'Osservatore Romano* Italian edition, 10-11 July 1995).

The *Letter to Women* was written in continuity with the 1988 apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, incorporating and expanding its message. Both documents offer John Paul II's rich anthropological perspective.

It is in the *Letter to Women* and in *Mulieris Dignitatem* that John Paul II has expressed, perhaps more so than elsewhere, the most radical of human reality. Suffice it to recall passages of great depth in *Mulieris Dignitatem* such as the 'unity of the two' and the impressive interpretation of the passages of Genesis in which famous negations of Western tradition are superseded (n.7), or where he speaks of reciprocity as an 'evangelical novelty' (n.24)<sup>14</sup>.

This perspective has not lost its novelty, even after fifteen years, and it is an important patrimony to be offered to the people of our times as they face current challenges.

Perhaps the most salient feature of the *Letter to Women* is its positive tone, and the fact that it is full of proposals. It proclaims rather than condemn, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the proclamation in itself has the effect of conveying that there are things to be condemned. The Pope writes a letter "directly" to women, talking to each one of them.

By emphasizing his desire to establish a direct dialogue with women – women in their concrete existential reality (mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, consecrated women, women who work...), rather than with NGOs and lobbies claiming to "represent" women – John Paul II takes an implicit but clear stance of "independence" vis-à-vis the UN. At the same time he is entering into dialogue with the institutions of global governance<sup>15</sup>.

The starting point of his dialogue is to thank each and every woman for her commitment, often silent and hidden, in defence of human beings. It is a simple act, in no way commonplace, which itself proclaims a message about the way the Church speaks to women as daughters of God and as active members of the Mystical Body of Christ. In the person of the pope, the Church

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<sup>14</sup> Blanca Castilla de Cortázar

<sup>15</sup> Marguerite Peeters

speaks to women in a positive and special way, shining a penetrating light on modern dilemmas.

John Paul II recognised and acknowledged, courteously and honestly, the positive aspects and progress that can be attributed to the new awareness of the dignity of women that has taken place in recent years. He also welcomed the efforts made by UN institutions regarding the rights of women, and he called on that organization to maintain the course set by the Declaration of Human Rights.

The Letter confirmed that the Church not only has an 'appetite' for discussing questions concerning women in the Church and the world, but also a talent, a positive tone, a willingness to consider modern dilemmas, and fresh insights. Regarding tone, for example, John Paul II demonstrated "graciousness" in his reflections upon the past by not speaking of the negative aspects of some modern feminism, or its sometimes anti-Catholic stance. He preferred to emphasise its 'substantially' positive effects (n.6), the courage of feminists leaders, and the Church's regret for any part played in contributing to the oppression of women. That graciousness was effective in gaining an audience for the *Letter*. The *Letter* further clarified the Church's suitability to participate in the modern dialogue about women by recalling the Church's sympathy for global institutional efforts (such as those made by the UN) for women's human rights, and its substantive agreement with the notion of rights such as those expressed in the UN Declaration on Human Rights<sup>16</sup>.

#### *a. Biblical anthropology*

As in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, in his *Letter to Women*, Pope John Paul II also included beautiful and important reflections that are based on biblical anthropology. These were to illustrate the identity and vocation of the human being, created "from the beginning" only as man and as woman.

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<sup>16</sup> Helen Alvaré

John Paul II's interpretation, in *Mulieris Dignitatem* and in his *Letter to Women*, of the two passages of Genesis that tell of the creation of human beings, male and female, are particularly interesting. He reads them in parallel, interpreting the second in light of the first.

One pending task to be undertaken is the divulgation of John Paul II's strategy of hermeneutics in his interpretation of the two passages from Genesis about Creation. [...] They bring to light the fullness of the original beauty of Creation, the truth about the human being, male and female. I refer to both passages read together with the symbolism of the second interpreted in light of the first, as clearly expressed in *MD*, n. 5<sup>17</sup>.

Deeper study of the truth of creation leads to awareness of our identity being a gift entrusted to our freedom. This needs to be accepted and developed in the gift of ourselves to others in love. The deep anthropological truths we encounter in the story of creation are important today too, given the challenges of our times. The truth of the human being created in the image and likeness of God, created sexually differentiated, all with the same dignity, is evidenced in the first account of creation. The truth of the human being's vocational call to communion is evidenced in the second account which tells of how God decided that solitude was not "good" for the human being he had created. Hence the need to provide "adequate support". This support is not in the physical or psychological sense. It is ontological support, mutual help, mutual complementarity to achieve the fulfilment of manhood and of womanhood. The truth of creation entrusted to men and women is that their task as co-creators is entrusted to both of them.

The anthropological foundation of human dignity, and hence of women, can be found within the first pages of Genesis, specifically in the two accounts of creation that John Paul II discusses in his *Letter to Women*. [...] God entrusts man and woman with the same tasks. They are called to perpetuate the human race and transform

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<sup>17</sup> Blanca Castilla de Cortázar

the earth. From the beginning, then, men and women have equal responsibility in the world<sup>18</sup>.

*b. Theology of the body*

As part of his weekly catechesis at the Wednesday general audiences between 5 September 1979 and 28 November 1984, John Paul II offered a series of catecheses dedicated to deepening the identity and vocation of man and woman and the role of human love in God's plan. This series of catecheses has been widely studied and published with different titles: *Man and Woman He Created Them*, *Human Love in the Divine Plan*, and *The Redemption of the Body and Sacramentality of Marriage*, but perhaps the best known is *Theology of the Body*, a title used by the pope himself when he spoke about this catechesis in the apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*. These were over 125 catecheses dedicated to explaining the mystery of human beings, male and female, uniting theology, philosophy, anthropology and ethical reflection. Traces of these lessons can be glimpsed in many later documents of John Paul II's magisterium, including, *Mulieris Dignitatem* and the *Letter to Women*.

The reflections on the human being, love in God's plan and the meaning of human embodiment presented by the pope in *Theology of the Body* characteristically offer a holistic view of human beings. They show that the path to humanity's fulfilment must harmoniously integrate body, soul and spirit, according to God's divine plan.

His proposal recovers the biblical idea that the image of God in the human being is also reflected in the body, understood as “an expression of the person”, and expressed in his or her masculinity and femininity in a “spousal meaning”. By taking the body as a starting point, John Paul II aims to identify the spousal structure of the human person. This leads to the discovery that the fullness of God's image is

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<sup>18</sup> Nuria Calduch Benages, MN

not so much in people as individuals, but rather in the “communion of persons”<sup>19</sup>.

As John Paul II was studying the theology of the body, he made it clear that the Christian faith is an incarnated faith. It has nothing to do with spiritualism or Manichaeism of which it is often accused by those who are unfamiliar with it. Christian faith is a faith that has a positive view of the human body and integrates it within God's plan for the happiness of human beings.

Some of the experts have proposed the wider diffusion of the teachings of the *Theology of the Body* in order to make the wealth of Christian anthropology better known. It offers a vision that responds to the longing of every human being for fulfilment in love, and it presents a challenge to the reductionism of gender ideology. This corpus of teaching helps penetrate the mystery of what it means to be a man or woman, to understand the link between the identity and vocation of human beings and the biological fact of their male or female corporeality, and it helps to better understand the logic of the gift by which every human being is called to self-fulfilment.

John Paul II uses the same arguments being used by those he intends to criticize. He is looking for dialogue above all else. To those who champion the sexual revolution he makes an even bolder proposal. He raises the issue of body as a privileged field of gift and communication, as a place where *Eros* and *Ethos* meet. However, he stresses that the body has its own laws and principles that are intrinsic to its very nature<sup>20</sup>.

The vision that emerges from Pope John Paul II's teachings is far from being a biological fact that reduces the mystery of human beings to their physical embodiment. It is a vision that helps us understand the fact that human beings are always born male or female.

The corporeality of human beings, with all the aspects that characterize the natural dynamism and the imprint of their instincts

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<sup>19</sup> Blanca Castilla de Cortázar

<sup>20</sup> Paola Binetti

and impulses, may become one of the most interesting ways to counter “gender ideology”. The undeniable dimension of human sexuality, with a specific physical form, is largely determined by genes, chromosomes, hormones and subsequently by all other aspects of characterological and educational aspects that unequivocally sculpt it. Being a man or woman, is not so much what I feel, but what I am and that a thousand signs and symptoms of my body tell me and suggest to me from day to day<sup>21</sup>.

In a world like ours that is invaded by concepts that reduce sexuality to a mere object of pleasure, humanity is in need of the treasure trove of teachings in the Church that speak of the dignity and worth of human sexuality within God's plan.

### *c. The uni-duality of man and woman*

In recent times, reflections on "women" have perhaps become characterised by a growing interest in certain circles to avoid limiting these discussions to the identity and vocation of women by inserting them within reflections on the identity of men and women and the meaning of the relationship between both. Arguably, this development marks the transition to a next stage which is, after the period of claims and demands has passed, to face the strong contemporary cultural problems in male and female identity. This requires us to focus our reflections on the question of identity, the specificity of each one and the inter-relationship between both.

From the cultural point of view, people are slowly becoming aware that the campaigns focussing on women should be reformulated according to the male-female relationship. This is because the freedom of both depends on the freedom of the other. It is also because the role of males is essential for effective equality, one that is based on appreciation of their respective talents in joint responsibility in the family and home, in active cooperation with social partners, civil society and the private sector<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Paola Binetti

<sup>22</sup> Giulia Paola di Nicola

The concept of uni-duality in the *Letter to Women* expresses this mutual relationship. It refers to the fact that God confides to the unity of the two, man and woman, not just the task of procreation, but the very construction of history. The richness of this concept of uni-duality is in the fact that it not only saves the essential human equality of men and women, but also expresses the richness of their difference and of the relationship that is based on this difference.

This concept can allow us to overcome, both in terms of theoretical reflection and existential concreteness, the extremism found on both sides. These are denounced in no.8, as 'static and undifferentiated equality' or 'irreconcilable and inexorably conflictual difference'. [...] The Letter outlines (especially nos.7 and 8) a very clear and precise anthropology that does not sacrifice the essential human equality of man and woman, nor the richness of difference and the relationship that is based on it<sup>23</sup>.

The concept of uni-duality is eminently relational. It refers to the mutual help between a man and a woman, and this is not limited to the sphere of action. It belongs above all to the sphere of being.

From this he concludes that male and female “are complementary not only biologically and psychologically, but above all from the ontological point of view” (no.8). [...] These claims are like “gold doubloons”, which have not yet been fathomed either in theory or in practice<sup>24</sup>.

The concept of uni-duality is linked to other concepts that appear in John Paul II's documents such as reciprocity, mutual complementarity and mutual responsibility for each other received as a "gift". In the context of the family, the first area of mutual cooperation, the uni-duality can be perceived in the fact that fatherhood and motherhood are necessary, and depend on each other.

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<sup>23</sup> *Giorgia Salatiello*

<sup>24</sup> *Blanca Castilla de Cortázar*

Its most profound dimension is seen in responsible reciprocity, in so far as woman has been gifted to man who from the beginning was entrusted to her. That means that she is his responsibility as he is her responsibility. Therefore, not only does paternity depend on maternity, but maternity is entrusted to paternity. Maternity is a task of paternity<sup>25</sup>.

However, this first area of collaboration is not the only one. Mutual collaboration also benefits social, economic, political and ecclesial life. Uni-duality helps us to understand that the family and culture both form part of the common mission of men and women, and they require the specific contribution that each can give and the relations of communion between them.

The relationship between family and work, and the conviction that the contribution of woman and man together is necessary in every field, is a message that needs to be developed. We need a culture with a mother and a family with a father. This *Letter*, more than any other writings, emphasises the importance of the contribution of women in professional work and world governance. Fortunately, this truth, contained in Genesis, has been rediscovered in twentieth century society [...]. In order to properly settle this shared view of the world and family we need to delve deeper into the meaning of fatherhood, which is the only effective defence that can save motherhood. [...] Moreover, fatherhood – to love and provide for the good of others in a way that pertains to men – must be exercised within their families and towards their wives in a special way, and also in the public sphere where they must advocate in favour of motherhood, a woman's way of loving, also in the professional and cultural field. [...] If we persist in insisting on the incorporation of women into a work environment that does not allow for dedication to family, we prevent them from making their unique humanising contribution to the shaping of society. Responsibility for this does not only depend on women, but also on those who accept their work only if they work in the same way as they do. The contribution of women – giving life and humanizing the world – is necessary in order to maintain the family and to ensure that work is not only compatible but that it is in the service of the family and the

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<sup>25</sup> Blanca Castilla de Cortázar

individual. [...] the unitary vision of the family and of governance of creation has yet to be properly assimilated and developed<sup>26</sup>.

The difference between men and women is ontological. It is not a cultural creation nor mere nature. It is a relational difference that requires personal categories in order to be explained. Pope John Paul II's descriptions of this co-existence of man and woman as being-with or being-for shows the use of philosophical categories of a personal matrix that can express the reality of the relationship. Men and women are persons, but they are distinguished by a different relationship that is constitutively intrinsic to the person of each.

Personalist anthropology states that nature is to be distinguished from the person, just as Thomist philosophy sees a real difference between the essence and act of being. If you read these two distinctions together, sexual difference could be found in the binomial that is relatively opposite to nature or essence, that is to say, the person or act of being. The proposal underlying the statements of Pope John Paul II allows us to glimpse how this relatedness is inscribed in our very being as an act, namely, the person. Our substance is not incompatible with being relational, as pointed out by those who have described it as co-existence, or as BEING-WITH or BEING-FOR. We can deduce from this that the relationship that places men and women face to face, implies for each a different ontological relationship which affects or transversely conditions the whole nature – body and soul – of each. It is as if we were to say that they are two different people, not because each individual is unique and unrepeatable, but because of a different relationship – derived from the source – constitutive and intrinsic to the person of each one<sup>27</sup>.

Men and women are equal with a "non static or non uniform" equality and are different in a way that is not "irreconcilable and inexorably conflictual". They are one for the other in a manner that is non-equal in either sense.

If equality is reflected in reciprocity, the difference that must be safeguarded allows for the complementarity of a particular mutual

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<sup>26</sup> Blanca Castilla de Cortázar

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'help'. This help is not identical in both directions, but each one says and needs, from himself or herself, the other<sup>28</sup>.

Yet in some contexts disquiet in highlighting the difference between men and women still persists. This is not only for fear that this will deprive women of access to roles considered traditionally male, but also because the current culture that attempts to normalise different types of "families" (single parents or same-sex couples) sees complementarity as an anthropologically dispensable accessory.

The Letter robustly proposes complementarity (nos. 7 & 8), yet the notion is under quite specific attack in the United States. It is overtly demeaned by scholars in many fields and regarded as a tool serving women's regression. Its neurobiological, psychological, evolutionary and philosophical bases are sharply contested, even while it is agreed that there has been little research done on complementarity in these areas because it is inherently difficult to study<sup>29</sup>.

There is also a prevalence of "gender distrust" among some women towards men, a tendency to try to replace them instead of working on complementarity and cooperation with them.

A strong element of the anti-complementarity campaign relies upon 'gender-mistrust' of males. It includes a strategy to 'replace' men – in jobs, and even in parenting – with either other women (lesbian relationships), the state (welfare funding) or some combination of private corporate policies (flex-time, maternity benefits and leave, 'mommy track' schedules) and personal resources (friends, grandmothers, personal savings). This directly contrasts with the idea of 'collaboration' – of working synergistically with men in a variety of spheres – so wonderfully presented in the *Letter* and in *On the Collaboration of Men and Women*. The decline of marriage and the precipitous rise of single motherhood are the fruits of this thinking. More attention to the existence and the good of complementarity – in theological, philosophical and various scientific inquiries – is desperately required<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Blanca Castilla de Cortázar

<sup>29</sup> Helen Alvaré

<sup>30</sup> Helen Alvaré

The personalistic categories used by John Paul II can help overcome resistance to these relational concepts of complementarity, reciprocity, uni-duality.

I think [that resistance to the idea of reciprocal complementarity] stems from two reasons. The first concern is to distance themselves from the myth of the androgyne, for which one single being is divided into two, and each sex is only that half of the whole. There are good reasons for such denial, because from a personalist perspective it is clearly perceived that every person has value in him/herself. The second reason for this difficulty comes from the idea that marriage requires complementarity, which makes the interpretation of celibacy for the 'Kingdom of Heaven' difficult, a vocation revealed by the Messiah and that continues to arise spontaneously in Christian families, in imitation of the same Jesus Christ. But Pope John Paul II, and all the magisterium, has no qualms talking about complementarity. In fact, reading carefully you notice that he solved both problems. His approach is not only very far away from the idea of the androgyne, but it is the opposite. In fact, he does not neglect to point out that 'in principle' God created TWO so they may be ONE, which is the opposite movement from that of the myth. As for celibacy, the Pope knows that marriage is the first dimension of complementarity, but not the only one. Man and woman need each other in other areas such as work, culture and other joint projects, as well as within the family and the Church. In the sharing of a project, relationships can be complementary at different levels of intimacy and respect the commitments that each has in his/her own state of life<sup>31</sup>.

John Paul II does not use these concepts in isolation. On the contrary, he specifically points out that complementarity is mutual.

In many passages he warns that marriage is the first but not the only dimension of complementarity which is present in the mundane realities of government and the creation of culture and, of course, in carrying out the mission of the Church. In other words, reciprocity, complementarity and mutual complementarity are truths which

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<sup>31</sup> *Blanca Castilla de Cortázar*

demand to be studied in depth and to be understood. It is an important task for the development of human thought<sup>32</sup>.

We are entrusted with the task of deepening our reflections on this important concept of uni-duality in order to propose the mutual man-woman complementarity as an anthropological treasure to be safeguarded in our time.

#### *d. The feminine genius*

As in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, in the *Letter to Women* John Paul II speaks of the "feminine genius". He calls for it to become more visible so that society will be more humane, more respectful of the dignity and vocation of each person, and more to the measure of the human being.

Adding to the idea of complementarity, the idea of feminine genius serves to highlight the specificity of women and their particular vocation in the Church and society. Our Lady is the highest expression of "feminine genius". She is the prototype for all human beings, men and women, but is especially so for women. We need to look at Our Lady when thinking about the question of women. We can be inspired by her to discover the richness of the feminine genius, the vocation to being custodians of human beings in a particular way, and to safeguard the meaning of love.

In full harmony with the magisterium, Chiara Lubich taught us to see Our Lady as 'the' answer to women. Mary's greatness is love. Women, therefore, are called today more than ever to develop the greatest of gifts, love, in the Church following the example of Mary. If women do not look to Mary, she affirmed in 1991, then they 'have lost all possibilities.' With this vocation to save love, women can make a contribution to the flowering of the 'Marian profile' of the Church, following the example of Mary who gave life to Jesus, to Jesus in us, Jesus in our midst<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Blanca Castilla de Cortázar

<sup>33</sup> Maria Voce

Perhaps a particularly appropriate term to express the characteristic of this "genius" of women can be found in the expression "the immense availability of women to spend themselves in human relationships" (*Letter* no.9). This dimension is certainly not alien to men, since every human being is called to self-surrender in love, but women know how to bring this dimension to the fore in a particular way. This is undoubtedly an important part of the wealth they bring, something of which humanity is very much in need.

It is important to promote understanding and appreciation of the "feminine genius" as a particular vocation to serve God, the Church and society. It is an offering of oneself as a gift to others in order to serve as a contrast to an individualistic and exploitative mentality, and to live spiritual motherhood as a dimension proper to women's commitment and service to others.

However, there is still some lack of understanding of the fact that the real expression of 'genius' includes service to God, to the Church, and to society. Women are called to offer the gift of self and to be present for others in ways which contradict the individualistic mentality that seeks self-gratification at the expense of others. Acts of Christian charity recall the tender care given by Jesus to each one in need of His healing touch. The attributes of nurturing and encouraging are examples of the well-lived vocation of 'spiritual motherhood' to which all women are called no matter whether they are married, single or vowed religious<sup>34</sup>.

In addition, the "feminine genius" can be a valuable category for conceptualizing the contributions that women as women make to society. It could encourage a greater contribution from this female resource in those areas of public life in which women are present – and in which sometimes, regrettably, they have adapted to male models rather than contribute the wealth that is particular to women.

There has been far more conversation, in both Catholic and secular circles, about women's particular contributions toward the spousal

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<sup>34</sup> *Karen Hurley*

and parenting enterprises. But the notion that women's gifts can be made visible wherever women assume roles permeates the *Letter*. Even if it might be observed that these gifts are *de facto* offered by women today, there is a dearth of reflection upon them. This is likely one result of a fear of 'upsetting' the gains women have achieved in non-domestic spheres. Pointing up sex differences is apparently still considered a dangerous gambit. This reticence is potentially problematic for two reasons. The first is that it easily leads to women failing to deploy – and society failing consciously to value – feminine gifts. Secondly, it may lead to a concomitant unwillingness to acknowledge women's gifts even in the sphere in which woman's unique identity is most irreplaceable – the familial sphere<sup>35</sup>.

The call for women to contribute their specific attributes to the building of a more humane culture is recurrent throughout the *Letter*. The Holy Father recognises that women have a special vocation. He asks them to engage in resisting the market logic that focuses only on economic gain and uses the logic of competition, and to offer a logic of solidarity and caring relationships that will create a more humane society.

[In the *Letter*] there is a call made to the genius of women. It calls for due appreciation of female qualities (but that are not inaccessible to men) that alone seem capable of going beyond the kind of organisation that is founded solely on the logic of profit and economic success. Taking this call seriously could bring about the development of an original project by Catholic women and men aimed towards integral human progress in which the contribution of women is essential in articulating a general proposal, one that adheres to the truth of the human being<sup>36</sup>.

If women are part of the structures and contribute this element that is so specific to them, and if they do not give in or adapt it to a utilitarian model, then they will find channels of expression for their creative affectivity that will be for the benefit of human beings.

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<sup>35</sup> Helen Alvaré

<sup>36</sup> Giorgia Salatiello

John Paul II looked at our market-oriented logic that focuses only on profit, a logic that creates a degree of competitiveness that leads to conflict, and he proposed that we replace it with a logic of solidarity in which the care ethic will characterise all human relationships. The humanization of our society depends on greater involvement by women in the basic structures on which society is built. They can make a unique and effective contribution in dealing with major issues such as large-scale migration and the serious pollution of the material and cultural environment that is taking place. At the same time they safeguard life in all its fragility by caring for the terminally ill, for those who no longer want to live, for drug addicts, for the lonely and the elderly etc. The pope sees a feminine presence caring for needs in all of these areas with typically feminine creativity<sup>37</sup>.

In the fifteen years since the publication of the *Letter to Women* much has been done to cultivate appreciation of the "feminine genius", but much more still needs to be done. Above all, women themselves need to be more aware of this particular vocation and to live it out more fully.

It seems fitting that the discourse on 'feminine genius', which finds ultimate expression in *Our Lady*, so well expressed during the pontificate of John Paul II and taken up several times by Benedict XVI, be given further attention. Women must make greater efforts to reflect the elevated reality described in the *Letter*, to know how to accept this gift, and to be other Marys in our time. There is also a need for greater acceptance of this message by men too<sup>38</sup>.

To really understand this concept in all of its richness, we need to understand that it must go hand in hand with the concept of uni-duality and complementarity of gifts with men.

Feminine genius must always be considered from the perspective of a mutual relationship, one that can combine attention to the female specific with that of the male so that there is full appreciation of the gifts that both can make available to the entire community. We also need to emphasise the close relationship between the issue of feminine genius and all the issues associated with the commitment of

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<sup>37</sup> Paola Binetti

<sup>38</sup> Maria Voce

laity, men and women, in the life of the Church in collaboration with priests<sup>39</sup>.

Cardinal Eduardo Pironio said in his presentation of the *Letter to Women*:

But it is not only in social and political life that the Pope wants to see more space given to the feminine genius. Its specific vocation, 'prophecy' contained within femininity must keep improving the life of the Church. For this, however, women must live in a conscious loyalty to the 'difference' of their femininity and of their particular mission compared to those of men. To understand this imperative, however, there is a need to distance ourselves 'from the canons of functionality typical in human societies'. To start from the 'specific criteria of the sacramental economy, that is, from that economy of 'signs' which God freely chooses to render himself present among humanity.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Giorgia Salatiello*

<sup>40</sup> CARDINAL EDUARDO PIRONIO, *cit.*, 4