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Bishop Wenski - Columns

The Dignity of Women - June 2007

During his recent visit to Brazil, Pope Benedict XVI had occasioned to condemn the “chauvinistic mentality that ignores the ‘newness’ of Christianity in which the equal dignity and responsibility of women relative to men is acknowledged and affirmed.”

Too often, proponents of a “feminist narrative” (both within and outside of the Church) allege that Church teachings harbor an anti-woman bias. For example, some fringe groups within the Church have proposed the idea of women’s ordination alleging that the fact that only men are ordained priests is the result of such a bias.

Yet, the uncritical propensity of these critics to believe anything negative about the Church has blinded them to the historical record. In fact, Catholic Christianity far from being anti-woman raised the dignity of women wherever it took root. In the first centuries of evangelization, pagans mocked their Christian neighbors precisely because women were treated as equals to men. Pagan societies were hardly “pro-women” – and this was true of civilizations of high culture like that of the Greeks and Romans as well as the less “cultured” barbarians. Where the gospel took root, however, the status of women improved. That Middle Ages were considered the “Age of Chivalry” shows how deeply the gospel penetrated societies that had once treated women as chattel.

That the Church only ordains men to the priesthood is not a comment on

the status or state of women but a statement on the nature of the priesthood as instituted by Jesus Christ. The only justification of ordaining only men, then, is the will of Christ himself. John Paul II states in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*: “The Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women”. (*O.S. #4*) Issued in 1994, this document was intended to clarify that the practice of admitting only men to the ordained diaconate and priesthood was not subject to change. The ordained priest acts “*in persona Christi*”; that is, he acts in the place of Christ who is the Bridegroom of the Church, his bride.. To say that a woman cannot be a bridegroom in no way detracts from her essential dignity as a human being or her equality with men. That being said, there is, to be sure, much anthropological confusion in our culture today as evidenced in the current push to legitimize so-called same sex unions. However, a Catholic anthropology can affirm the equality and dignity of both men and women without denying the God-made differences between the sexes.

Of course, this is not to say that women were always treated with dignity or received their due within the Church. While the Church is not “of the world”, too much of the world is found in the Church. Believers have, in this as well as other areas, have often failed to live in a way congruent to our beliefs. We are always called to conversion – and Pope Benedict’s criticism of a “chauvinistic mentality” must be seen within that call to conversion from which no Christian can exempt himself – or herself. In any case, Church teachings on the equal dignity of men and women give no aid or comfort to those who would hold for the “inferiority” of women relative to men or to those would justify any discrimination or exploitation of women on such grounds. As the Scriptures attest: every baptized person is fully entitled as a child of God (cf. Gal. 3: 28, Acts 2: 17).

When asked about the role of the laity, Cardinal Newman once quipped that the Church would look very odd without them. And to be sure, the Church would be very odd looking indeed if one were not to take into account the presence and the contributions of her female members. Both women as well as men are called through baptism to witness to the Lord. (cf. Jn 20: 17) And lest we forget, salvation came to the human race through the free yes of a woman, Mary.

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