

## FEMINISM AND THE VATICAN

EDWARD COLLINS VACEK, S.J.

*[The recent "Letter on the Collaboration of Men and Women" (2004) published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith continues Pope John Paul II's strong affirmation of women in church teaching, but also unfairly critiques two forms of feminism. Contemporary philosophical and theological feminist reflection on both equality and difference suggests a better, dialectical approach that requires women's full participation in Church and society, encourages what is special to the "genius of women," and overcomes what is unacceptable in "complementarity."]*

THE "LETTER ON THE COLLABORATION OF MEN AND WOMEN,"<sup>1</sup> recently signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Archbishop Angelo Amato of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, entered a war zone. Some readers, not unreasonably, said that the document is so bad that they did not know where to begin in response to its invitation to dialogue. I hope to show that the pontificate of John Paul II has developed a surprisingly positive understanding of women that reverses millennia of church teaching. Nevertheless, that teaching is still unstable, and there remain numerous problems. I suggest that a dialectical, analogical approach is the path the Church should now take.

One of the novel approaches of John Paul II's papacy has been to rethink theology in terms of sexuality. Luke Timothy Johnson has insightfully pointed out that even John Paul's much vaunted theology of the body is not

EDWARD COLLINS VACEK, S.J., received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Northwestern University and his S.T.L. in theology from Loyola University Chicago. He is currently professor of moral theology at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Cambridge, Mass. He recently published essays in *Spirituality and Moral Theology*, ed. James Keating; in *Inquiring After God: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Ellen Charry (Blackwell); and *Medicine and the Ethics of Care*, ed. Diane Fritz Cates and Paul Lauritzen (Georgetown University, 2001). He has an essay on "Passions and Principles" in *Milltown Studies* (Winter 2003). Besides two entries accepted for the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Sex*, he is working on projects related to "Virtues of Old Age," "Religion and Medicine: Collaborative Pastoral Care," and "Love and Moral Discernment."

<sup>1</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter on the Collaboration of Men and Women," *Origins* 34 (August 26, 2004) 169–76.

really about bodies, but only about the sexual aspect of embodiment.<sup>2</sup> The result for some readers has been a liberation and celebration of sexuality; for others, this approach verges dangerously on pansexualism. The Congregation's "Letter" tends to view all human relations in terms of marriage and to see marriage in terms of the happy relation of "bride" and "groom" rather than, say, the more day-to-day lives of husband and wife.<sup>3</sup> Following the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, sexuality has nearly become a religio-metaphysical category.<sup>4</sup>

The "Letter on Collaboration" is not really about collaboration. It scarcely mentions the myriad ways men and women collaborate. Rather, it focuses on the relationship between husband and wife or rather bridegroom and bride. With marriage as its model, it reductively implies that all collaboration between women and men should be "loving" rather than, say, competitive or impartial. It urges us to understand the relationship between the sexes not as they are found in the real world, but rather as they were intended by God "from the very beginning."<sup>5</sup> And it imagines this beginning as a well-ordered garden where two persons lived in harmony. Contemporary feminists can learn from this idyll, but they have to live in a world of over six billion people of diverse ages and cultures, etc., who endure a scarcity of resources and a long history of ongoing oppressions. Feminists want to affirm diversity and reduce the oppression.

Peter Steinfels compares the feminist movement to the major revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries, revolutions which the Church resisted for over a hundred years. "In fact," he writes, "feminism ultimately chal-

<sup>2</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, "A Disembodied 'Theology of the Body': John Paul II on Love, Sex, and Pleasure," *Commonweal* 128 (January 26, 2001) 11–17, at 12.

<sup>3</sup> Susan A. Ross does a fine critique of the nuptial imagery in *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1998) 97–136; "Can God Be a Bride? Some Problems with an Ancient Metaphor," *America* 191 (November 1, 2004) 12–15; also Tina Beattie, "Carnal Love and Spiritual Imagination: Can Luce Irigaray and John Paul II Come Together?" in *Sex These Days: Essays on Theology, Sexuality, and Society*, ed. Jon Davies and Gerard Loughlin (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1997) 160–83, at 174; similarly, Luke T. Johnson, "A Disembodied 'Theology of the Body'" 15; Cristina Traina, "Papal Ideals, Marital Realities: One View from the Ground," in *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung with Joseph Andrew Coray (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2001) 269–88, at 276–81.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Gonzales, "Hans Urs von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theology," *Theological Studies* 65 (2004) 566–95, at 568; Patricia Huntington, "Contra Irigaray: The Couple Is Not the Middle Term of the Ethical Whole," *Listening* 38 (Spring 2003) 163–89, at 171; Susan Ross, "The Bridegroom and the Bride: The Theological Anthropology of John Paul II and Its Relation to the Bible and Homosexuality," in *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism* (see n. 3 above) 39–59, at 42–43, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Congregation, "Letter on Collaboration" nos. 5, 8.

lenges Catholicism even more profoundly at the level of sacred texts and fundamental religious symbols and theology."<sup>6</sup> Put all too simply, feminism is a reaction to patriarchal history. Cecilia Ridgeway and Shelley Correll observe that, although the meaning of being a male or a female changes throughout history, what does not change is that men are thought to be more powerful and important.<sup>7</sup> Barbara Winslow adds: "The major religions buttress male authority by ordaining that men should rule over women."<sup>8</sup>

The very first sentence of the "Letter," by claiming that the Church is an "expert in humanity" puts off many of the very readers whom it seeks to address.<sup>9</sup> On this issue, the Church hardly seems an expert since, as Christine Gudorf notes: "Before Vatican II, popes assumed and explicitly taught women's inequality and subordination to men, as well as condemned advocates of both women's equality and public roles for women."<sup>10</sup> Further, the basic theme of the document, namely, collaboration, is existentially undercut because there is no acknowledgment that women were involved—if they were—in its composition. The "Letter" missed a perfect opportunity to practice what it preached. It imputes, in a highly problematic way, unintelligent or perverse motives to those with whom it disagrees.<sup>11</sup>

Feminist writing tends to be strongly motivated by what it is against. As

<sup>6</sup> Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003) 275–76; see also Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., "Feminism and Sharing the Faith: A Catholic Dilemma," in *American Catholic Social Teaching*, ed. Thomas J. Massaro and Thomas A. Shannon (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2002) 107–22, at 112. To the contrary, Gregory Vall, "Inclusive Language and the Equal Dignity of Women and Men in Christ," *Thomist* 67 (2003) 579–606.

<sup>7</sup> Cecilia Ridgeway and Shelley Correll, "Unpacking the Gender System: A Theoretical Perspective on Gender Beliefs and Social Relations," *Gender and Society* 18 (August 2004) 510–31, at 522.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Winslow, "Feminist Movements: Gender and Equality," in *A Companion to Gender History*, ed. Teresa A. Meade and Merry Wiesner-Hanks (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004) 186–210, at 187.

<sup>9</sup> Congregation, "Letter on Collaboration" no. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Christine Gudorf, "Encountering the Other: The Modern Papacy on Women," in *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teaching*, Readings in Moral Theology no. 13, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Paulist, 2003) 269–84, at 270.

<sup>11</sup> The "Letter" blames one kind of feminism for its "tendency to emphasize strongly conditions of subordination in order to give rise to antagonism." Feminists do emphasize strongly conditions of subordination, but most do so "in order to give rise to" justice. And even when antagonism has resulted, such is not uncommon in the struggle for justice. When the "Letter" criticizes the victims of abuse of power for trying to obtain power, it seems to have a raw notion of power, with the likely result that victims will remain victims. Feminists will not appreciate that the Congregation then blames those who advocate equality for undermining the family, obliterating the differences between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and pro-

Elizabeth Johnson observes: "The engine that drives feminism is women's experience of being marginalized, with all the suffering this entails."<sup>12</sup> The engine that drives this "Letter" is rejection of two kinds of feminism, one that foments antagonism between the sexes and another that denies any distinctiveness of the sexes. Strangely, the "Letter" does not explicitly acknowledge what John Paul calls the "new feminism." Briefly, the pope says we must "acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation."<sup>13</sup>

Steinfels helpfully distinguishes three levels in play. The first is the set of grievances that women have. The second is the social movement for women's equality, which engages and reacts to these grievances. The third, our concern here, is feminist theory which analyzes the ideology behind the grievances and proposes a better way of thinking about women (and men).<sup>14</sup>

What is feminism? Elizabeth Johnson offers the following definition: "Feminism, in a generic sense, is a worldview or stance that affirms the dignity of women as fully human persons in their own right, critiques systems of patriarchy for their violation of this dignity, and advocates social and intellectual changes to bring about freeing relationships among human beings."<sup>15</sup> Johnson's definition leads to a straightforward criterion for making moral judgments: "Theories, attitudes, laws, and structures that promote the dignity of the female human person are salvific and according to the divine will; theories or structures that deny or violate women's dignity are contrary to God's intent."<sup>16</sup> While feminist theory is most prominent in economically developed countries, Lisa Sowle Cahill observes that its ethi-

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posing polymorphous sexuality. Feminists will have even greater difficulty when the Congregation claims that their deepest motive is not to achieve equality but rather to free themselves from their biological conditioning and "constitute themselves as they like." Finally, biblically literate feminists will be offended when they are warned against "criticism of sacred Scripture, which would be seen as handing on a patriarchal conception of God nourished by an essentially male-dominated culture." In other words, for all the important concerns of the document, the "Letter" seems designed, if not to offend, then at least not to be serious about the dialogue it invites (Congregation, "Letter on Collaboration" nos. 2-3).

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, "Feminism and Sharing the Faith" 108.

<sup>13</sup> John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, in *Origins* 24 (April 6, 1995) 689-730, no. 99, at 723; Francis Martin, "The New Feminism: A New Humanism?" *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 8 (2001) 5-26.

<sup>14</sup> Steinfels, *People Adrift* 277.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, "Feminism and Sharing the Faith" 108; see also, Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M., *Religious Life in a New Millennium*, vol. 2: *Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life* (New York: Paulist, 2001) 164.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, "Feminism and Sharing the Faith" 112.

cal edge is most needed in countries where women are treated like property and are subject to oppressive customs.<sup>17</sup>

The Scylla and Charybdis for feminism has been “difference” and “equality,” while “complementarity” has been its Sirens. As Cahill observes, the compatibility of these three has yet to be worked out.<sup>18</sup> If we say that men and women are different, then, since men (or, worse, White, middle-class, Western men) are assumed to be the paradigmatic form of humanity, women in their difference are thought to be less than fully human.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, if we say that men and women are equal, then—again assuming that men are the paradigm—women have to become like men to achieve full humanity.<sup>20</sup> “Complementarity” has signaled to women that they should not rock the boat, staying down below in the galley.

Most surprisingly, John Paul II has bent so far over backwards to end this way of thinking that he seems to reverse this hierarchy. Women become the paradigmatic form of being human. In their difference, they are by nature inclined to fulfill the two great commandments. In their equality, women should now do just about everything that men do.

### EQUALITY AND SAMENESS

The movement for equality springs, in great part, from the recognition that differences usually lead to inequality and inequality leads to oppression.<sup>21</sup> The feminist strategy, as Alkeline Van Lenning notes, has been to eliminate consideration of difference and thereby undercut the basis for such injustice.<sup>22</sup> Hence, down with difference and up with equality. As Janet Kalven protests: “No more assigning of head to man and heart to woman. After all, every human being has both head and heart.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Marriage: Developments in Catholic Theology and Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 64 (2003) 78–105, at 104–5.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Feminist Theology, Catholicism, and the Family,” in *Full of Hope: Critical Social Perspectives on Theology*, ed. Magdala Thompson (New York: Paulist, 2003) 94–111, at 106.

<sup>19</sup> Schneiders, *Selling All* 165; but see 166–67; also, Rita Gross, “What Went Wrong? Feminism and Freedom from the Prison of Gender Roles,” *Cross Currents* 53 (Spring 2003) 8–20, at 11–12; Christina Hughes, *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2002) 37.

<sup>20</sup> Sarah Donovan, “Overcoming Oedipal Exclusions: An Irigarayan Critique of Judith Butler,” *Philosophy Today*, SPEP Supplement (2002) 128–32; Gross, “What Went Wrong?” 9.

<sup>21</sup> David Lee, “Hitting Below the Belt: Sex-Ploitive Ideology and the Disaggregation of Sex and Gender,” *Regent University Law Review* 14 (2001) 214–39, at 221.

<sup>22</sup> Alkeline Van Lenning, “The Body as Crowbar: Transcending or Stretching Sex?” *Feminist Theory* 5 (2004) 25–47, at 43–44.

<sup>23</sup> Janet Kalven, “Feminism and Catholicism,” in *Reconciling Catholicism and*

### Vatican on Equality

Past theologies, such as that of Pius XI, located sexual inequality in a doctrine of creation.<sup>24</sup> He argued that subordination was divinely willed, and hence ought not be changed. Other theologies located this inequality in the punishment due to sin. As such, escaping this God-given punishment would also be against God's will. But John Paul and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith hold that inequality is a terrible consequence of original sin. Accordingly, they teach this consequence can and should be remedied.<sup>25</sup>

For current Catholic theology, the basis of equality is that men and women are both "created in God's image" and both of them "are equally capable of receiving the outpouring of divine truth and love in the Holy Spirit."<sup>26</sup> Put in more philosophical terms, their equality is "based on *the recognition of the inherent, inalienable dignity*" of women and men.<sup>27</sup> As a consequence, Gudorf notes, the Church's "public-realm teaching on women since the early 1960s has focused on the equality of women, their right to be accorded equal education, work, pay, and political rights and to be protected from discrimination against their gender."<sup>28</sup>

### Social Constructionists on Equality

One way to remove difference from being a relevant basis for discrimination is to reject the system of gender altogether. Social constructionists hold that gender (some also include sex<sup>29</sup>) is completely a cultural creation. They then argue that we could, if we had the will, change culture and its

*Feminism?: Personal Reflections on Tradition and Change*, ed. Sally Barr Ebest and Ron Ebest (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2003) 32–46, at 39; Rita Gross, "What Went Wrong?" 10.

<sup>24</sup> Pius XI, *Casti connubii*, in *Official Catholic Teaching: Love and Sexuality*, ed. Odile Liebard (Wilmington, N.C.: Consortium, 1978) nos. 26, 28, 74–75.

<sup>25</sup> Congregation, "Letter on Collaboration" nos. 8, 11; also John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* no. 11, in *Origins* 18 (October 6, 1988) 270.

<sup>26</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* nos. 6, 16, at 265, 273. Nevertheless, Gareth Moore argues persuasively that basing equality on the biblical "image" is eisegesis, not exegesis (*Question of Truth: Christianity and Homosexuality* [New York: Continuum, 2003] 119–23).

<sup>27</sup> John Paul II, "Welcome to Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Woman," in *The Genius of Women* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1999) no. 2, at 38; see also Linda Hogan, "Boundaries and Knowledge: Feminist Ethics in Search of Sure Foundations," in *Bodies, Lives, Voices: Gender in Theology*, ed. Kathleen O'Grady, Ann Gilroy, and Janette Gray (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1998) 24–39.

<sup>28</sup> Gudorf, "Encountering the Other" 270.

<sup>29</sup> Lenning, "The Body as Crowbar" 30 (see n. 22 above).

institutions,<sup>30</sup> thereby eliminating the differences that subjugate women. “Equality,” then, is another name for eliminating irrelevant differences such as gender in deciding what people can do.<sup>31</sup>

The claims of social constructionism should not lightly be dismissed. The “Letter” rightly suggests that a simple split between biology and culture or sex and gender is mistaken.<sup>32</sup> Rather, I think, it is necessary to see the relation between sex and gender as a dialectical or mutually informing process. On the one hand, Alison Stone argues: “cultural mediations shape the way we inhabit our bodies and so shape how those bodies develop and act.”<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, she rightly adds: “matter actively shapes the process whereby it becomes acculturated. . . . We need . . . to reconceive bodily materiality as actively impelled to inflect and modify inherited cultural forms.”<sup>34</sup>

One reason why the pitch to eliminate the differences between the sexes is at least initially plausible is that, as social scientists have shown, sexual difference is usually present only (but almost always) as a “*background identity*. . . . It operates as an implicit, cultural/cognitive presence that colors people’s activities in varying degrees but that is rarely the ostensible focus.”<sup>35</sup> Another reason why ignoring sexual differences has seemed like a plausible path to eliminating discrimination is the growing awareness that people do not fall neatly even into the biological categories of male and female. There are several stages—from chromosome to brain differentiation to walking patterns—in developing as a male or female; deviations can and do happen all along the line.<sup>36</sup> The male/female binary is further stretched by people who are transsexual, transgendered, intersexed, or transvestite.<sup>37</sup> The most important reason why the pitch to eliminate differences has become persuasive is that millions of women now quite successfully do what used to be masculine tasks such as run major companies or fight in the military; and a growing number of men have taken on formerly feminine roles.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Sexual Ethics,” in *A Call To Fidelity: On the Moral Theology of Charles E. Curran*, ed. James J. Walter, Timothy E. O’Connell and Thomas A. Shannon (Washington: Georgetown University, 2002) 113–33, at 126–27.

<sup>31</sup> Hughes, *Key Concepts* 68.

<sup>32</sup> Congregation, “Letter on Collaboration” no. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Alison Stone, “From Political to Realist Essentialism,” *Feminist Theory* 5 (2004) 5–24, at 14; see also Mundy, “Hitting Below the Belt” 220–22.

<sup>34</sup> Stone, “From Political to Realist Essentialism” 14–15, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Ridgeway and Correll, “Unpacking the Gender System” 516.

<sup>36</sup> Ethel Spector Person, M.D., “Some Mysteries of Gender: Rethinking Masculine Identifications in Heterosexual Women,” *Sexual Century* (New Haven: Yale University, 1999) 296–315, at 298–303.

<sup>37</sup> Lenning, “The Body as Crowbar” 30, 43 (see n. 22 above).

<sup>38</sup> Consider the remarkable account in Traina, “Papal Ideals, Marital Realities: One View from the Ground” 281.

### Proper Range of Women's Activities

If women are not different but rather equal to men, what roles are they suited for? For the Vatican, nearly every role is open to women. The Congregation writes that "women should be present in the world of work and in the organization of society, and that women should have access to positions of responsibility which allow them to inspire the policies of nations and to promote innovative solutions to economic and social problems."<sup>39</sup> Similarly, John Paul commends women for their "indispensable contribution" to "social, economic, cultural, artistic and political" life.<sup>40</sup> The pope adds that men and women are equal as witnesses and actors "in regard to the 'mighty works of God'."<sup>41</sup>

The pope encourages the women's movement as "one of the great social changes of our time." He insists that women can and should be able to work in various capacities, including taking executive responsibilities. Their role as mothers should not be used as an excuse to deny them "equal opportunity" for work outside the family.<sup>42</sup> Their right to active involvement in all areas of public life should be guaranteed by law.<sup>43</sup> In this regard, the pope would reject sole reliance on spiritual solutions such as those of Francis Martin who recommends inner conversion instead of changing structures of power.<sup>44</sup> Rather, for the pope, it is "profoundly unjust" to prevent women "from developing their full potential and from offering the wealth of their gifts."<sup>45</sup> Any restrictions on roles is not to be "the result of an arbitrary imposition, but is rather an expression of what is specific to being male and female."<sup>46</sup>

What is true of women in public life is also true within the Church. John Paul urges "the whole Church community to be willing to foster feminine participation in every way in its internal life."<sup>47</sup> He recalls "those great Christian women who have enlightened the life of the Church throughout the centuries and who have often called the Church back to her essential mission and service." He urges "women of the Church today to assume new

<sup>39</sup> Congregation, "Letter on Collaboration" no. 13.

<sup>40</sup> John Paul II, "Letter to Women" *Origins* 25 (July 27, 1995) 137-43, no. 2, at 139.

<sup>41</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* no. 16, at 273.

<sup>42</sup> John Paul II, "Equal Opportunity in the World of Work," in *The Genius of Women* nos. 1-2, at 32-33; also Steinfelds, *People Adrift* 275-77.

<sup>43</sup> John Paul II, "World Day of Peace" (January 1, 1995), in *The Genius of Women* no. 9, at 16.

<sup>44</sup> Martin, "The New Feminism" 24; Huntington, "Contra Irigaray" 173-74.

<sup>45</sup> John Paul II, "The Feminine Genius" in *The Genius of Women* no. 1, at 27.

<sup>46</sup> John Paul II, "Letter to Women" no. 11, at 142; also John Paul II, "Welcome to Gertrude Mongella" no. 5, at 40-41.

<sup>47</sup> John Paul II, "Woman's Role in the Church," in *The Genius of Women* no. 1, at 35.



forms of leadership in service.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, with the major and highly symbolic exception of ordination to the priesthood, women are urged to do just about everything men do.

### Cost of Stressing Equality

Jean Bethke Elshtain observes that the cost of promoting equality is high: “one abstracts from embodiment, strips away parent-child relationships, and downplays sexual orientation. . . . Equal rights, then, pertain to generic beings with bodies that carry no ethical weight.”<sup>49</sup> Feminists such as Michelle Gonzales point to an internal contradiction in any feminism that tries to eliminate difference: “how can one emphasize one’s embodied existence while simultaneously denouncing that it results in any serious distinctions between men and women?”<sup>50</sup> Some feminists further hold that the very desire to set aside sexual difference is typically male.<sup>51</sup>

Pleading for the elimination of differences also undercuts the feminist agenda in other, more practical ways. Susan Ross points out that equality can only be achieved when women attend to the very concrete sexual differences that a theory of equality wants to leave behind.<sup>52</sup> Also, Christina Hughes suggests, if one says that women should be treated as individuals and not as members of a group of people that share “woman’s nature,” then there can be no affirmative action on behalf of “women” or laws against sex discrimination.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, there would be no positive reason why “women” should be ordained, only a negative argument against the injustice of their exclusion.<sup>54</sup> For these reasons, the sort of egalitarian individualism that wants to treat everyone as equal persons *but not also* as women or men seems to be waning. Still, can we put these two concepts together? Women and men are equal, and they are different. Is this a square circle?

<sup>48</sup> John Paul II, “Letter to Mary Ann Glendon and the Holy See’s Delegation to the Fourth World Conference on Women,” in *The Genius of Women* 62.

<sup>49</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Women and the Dilemma of Equality,” *Logos* 6 (Fall 2003) 35–50, at 38–39; Hughes, *Key Concepts* 74.

<sup>50</sup> Michelle Gonzales, “Hans Urs von Balthasar” 592.

<sup>51</sup> Lenning, “The Body as Crowbar” 42–43.

<sup>52</sup> Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections* 101.

<sup>53</sup> Hughes, *Key Concepts* 42–45, 58. Some feminists, in response, have argued that, although there is actually no such thing as a group of women, still one can proceed to advocate non-discrimination for women “as if” they belonged to such a group, because in fact society currently discriminates against them “as if” they were such a group.

<sup>54</sup> See Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections* 106–10.

## DIFFERENCE

It is a telling commentary on human priorities that in nearly every society what counts most is what men do, even when in the same society women are widely thought to be ethically and religiously superior. For example, men are thought to be “‘by nature’ violent, disorderly, destructive, and violative. . . . [W]omen are identified with care, peace-lovingness, and attunement with nature.”<sup>55</sup> Where women are pictured as dedicated to love, men embody the truth that “human beings take themselves as the center or axis of the universe.”<sup>56</sup> Rita Gross comments that the competitive aspect of men, including a focus “on military prowess, physical superiority, and beating everyone” hardly resembles the “spiritually mature practitioner.”<sup>57</sup> As will be noted later, the Vatican supports a version of this highly favorable view of women.<sup>58</sup> Sometimes in disbelief, feminists have responded either that the Vatican does not realize what it is saying or that, once again, the Vatican is wrong to stereotype women.<sup>59</sup> My own view is that the Vatican may know what it is talking about—not, of course, with reference to each and every woman, but with reference to tendencies that typologically distinguish the sexes.

*Animae naturaliter Christianae*

The essence of manhood or womanhood, according to John Paul II, is “by no means something merely biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such.”<sup>60</sup> This deep difference, he writes, is not a matter of “roles to be held and functions to be performed,” but rather is part of God’s “wise and loving plan.”<sup>61</sup> Hence, Elshtain remarks, femi-

<sup>55</sup> Elshtain, “Women and the Dilemma of Equality” 38; George Lawless, O.S.A., “‘infirmior sexus . . . fortior affectus’”: Augustine’s *J. ev. Tr.* 121, 1–3; Mary Magdalene, “Augustinian Studies” 34 (2003) 107–18; Gudorf, “Encountering the Other” 273; “The Mission of Fatherhood,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 9 (2002) 42–55, at 49; Gross, “What Went Wrong?” 16. While these masculine values seem hardly Christian, that judgment depends in part on the current forgetfulness that Jesus of the Gospels caused a great amount of stress, conflict, change, and division.

<sup>56</sup> Huntington, “Contra Irigaray” 179.

<sup>57</sup> Gross, “What Went Wrong?” 16; Steinfels wonders how such rogues are fit for priesthood (*People Adrift* 298).

<sup>58</sup> In an odd sort of way, this puts the Vatican in line with “first-wave” or gynocentric feminists (Hughes, *Key Concepts* 59, 62).

<sup>59</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Feminist Theology, Catholicism, and the Family” 102; Johnson, “Feminism and Sharing the Faith” 113–14.

<sup>60</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1982) no. 11, at 9.

<sup>61</sup> John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, Postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation (December 30, 1988) no. 50; Elizabeth Stuart, arguing from her lesbian experience, holds

nism is misguided if it “overlooks or eliminates difference in favor of a sense of a common essence.”<sup>62</sup>

John Paul’s self-appointed task has been twofold: first, to argue the equality of women against those who would subordinate or needlessly restrict women; second to resist the loss of the “unique richness and inherent value of femininity.”<sup>63</sup> For him, “The personal resources of femininity are certainly no less than the resources of masculinity: they are merely different.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, he asserts the primacy of women in the order of love and insists on “the *unique role which women have in humanizing society* and directing it toward the positive goals of solidarity and peace.”<sup>65</sup>

The Vatican view depicts men and women as different in an absolute sense and in relative senses. In an absolute sense, their bodies are different. Women are capable of motherhood. Far from being oppressive, motherhood is one path to their fulfillment and one way they contribute to society.<sup>66</sup> The pope seems to hold that motherhood is more central to a woman’s identity than fatherhood is to a man’s. Indeed, he indicates, men have to learn fatherhood from mothers, and men often have to be urged by society to fulfill their family responsibilities.<sup>67</sup>

From this maternal nature arises what John Paul calls the “genius of being a woman,” a term more laudatory than precise.<sup>68</sup> Relative to men, women are more oriented to persons rather than things and more interested in love than external action.<sup>69</sup> The fundamental contribution women make is to accept and love others, not for their “usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty, or health,” but rather as persons with dignity. Women must teach men to do likewise.<sup>70</sup> Without women, the “Letter” adds, hu-

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that the male-female binary is far from divinely created (“Sex in Heaven: The Queering of Theological Discourse on Sexuality,” in *Sex These Days* [see n. 3 above] 184–204, at 188–89).

<sup>62</sup> Elshtain, “Women and the Dilemma of Equality” 38–39.

<sup>63</sup> John Paul II, “Welcome to Gertrude Mongella” no. 3, at 39.

<sup>64</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* no. 10, at 269.

<sup>65</sup> John Paul II, “Welcome to Gertrude Mongella” no. 5, at 40–41; John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* no. 29, at 280; see also Charles Curran, “John Paul II’s Use of Scripture in His Moral Teaching,” *Horizons* 31 (2004) 118–34, at 132.

<sup>66</sup> John Paul II, “Welcome to Gertrude Mongella” no. 3, at 39; Elshtain, “Women and the Dilemma of Equality” 44. The pope likely was supporting women who heard from early second-wave feminists that motherhood was an oppressive institution (see Hughes, *Key Concepts* 47).

<sup>67</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* no. 18, at 274; Gudorf, “Encountering the Other” 273; John Paul II, “Welcome to Gertrude Mongella” no. 3, at 39–40.

<sup>68</sup> John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* no. 99, at 723.

<sup>69</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* no. 18, at 274.

<sup>70</sup> John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* no. 99, at 723, similarly, Congregation, “Letter on Collaboration” no. 16.

manity would become “closed in self-sufficiency, dreams of power and the drama of violence.”<sup>71</sup>

The “Letter” claims that this “capacity for the other” profoundly structures a woman’s personality, whether or not she ever becomes a mother, and it makes her like the Trinity.<sup>72</sup> John Paul adds that, while women have made a contribution to science and technology, their “genius” is much more important in the areas of social and ethical life because these areas are the principal measure of human progress.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, he holds that women characteristically have a special sensitivity for Christ and the gospel.<sup>74</sup>

As a consequence, the “Letter” writes, women mature more quickly, have a better sense of life’s seriousness and responsibilities. They have greater endurance than men and are able to “persevere in adversity.” Women also have a better feel for the concrete, and they are less bedeviled by “abstractions which are so often fatal for the existence of individuals and society.”<sup>75</sup> In this regard, John Paul praises the fidelity of the women at the cross and resurrection as representative of women’s ability to overcome fear and be stronger than men.<sup>76</sup> Given the Church’s high estimation of women’s God-given natural abilities in the areas of morality and spirituality, a neutral observer might be tempted to say that priesthood should be reserved to them.<sup>77</sup>

### Dialectical Thinking

In developing its thought on the difference between men and women, the Vatican tends to use what might be called a thesis (affirm equality), antithesis (affirm difference), synthesis (affirm degrees in difference) pattern. Put another way, church teaching utilizes “both/and” or analogical thinking

<sup>71</sup> Congregation, “Letter on Collaboration” no. 17.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. nos. 6, 13, at 172, 174; on the other hand, John Paul says Christ’s love is especially the pattern for men (*Mulieris dignitatem* no. 25, at 278); see Ross, *Extravagant Affections* 108.

<sup>73</sup> John Paul II, “Letter to Women” no. 9, at 141.

<sup>74</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* no. 16, at 273.

<sup>75</sup> Congregation, “Letter on Collaboration” no. 13.

<sup>76</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* no. 16, at 273.

<sup>77</sup> From another viewpoint, Steinfels wryly argues: the Church’s teaching on the “Complementarity of the sexes, for example, might be said to *require* both men and women as priests rather than limit priesthood to one sex. The spousal imagery of Church as bride and Christ as bridegroom, it might then be noted, should provide for women alongside men on the bridegroom (Christ/priest) half of the symbol no less than it recognizes men alongside women on the bride (church) half of the symbol” (*People Adrift* 299).

to avoid some of the pitfalls in what is often called “essentialism.”<sup>78</sup> Analogy encompasses a unity-in-difference, where both the unity and the difference are modified by one another in the concrete. Thus, it is not quite accurate to say that men and women are same in their humanity but different in their sex, as if in the concrete people’s “humanity” is unaffected by their sex. Sexuality is not a “post-it” note stuck onto a rock called humanity.

Following this dialectical pattern, John Paul insists that (thesis) men and women “have fundamental dimensions and values in common,” but that (antithesis) “woman has a genius all her own.” The synthesis is that “in man and in woman these acquire different strengths, interests, and emphases and it is this very diversity which becomes a source of enrichment.”<sup>79</sup> Similarly, the Congregation, building on papal argument for “equality,” emphasizes that there are distinctive feminine values. But then it adds, the “feminine values mentioned here are above all human values. . . . It is only because women are more immediately attuned to these values that they are the reminder and the privileged sign of such values.”<sup>80</sup> Similarly, Schneiders writes, “Obviously, nothing can be said absolutely or universally about men or about women beyond the recognition of certain biological facts of anatomy and physiology. In most areas there seems to be as much diversity within each gender as between the two. However, there do seem to be patterns of ideas, behaviors, sensibilities, and interests that surface repeatedly.”<sup>81</sup>

### Differences on Difference

The ascription of distinctive character traits to women and men is a precarious enterprise. For example, the Congregation lists six feminine dispositions of Mary: “listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting.” It claims that these dispositions are essential and do not represent “a historically conditioned model of femininity.”<sup>82</sup> But few feminists would applaud the one-sidedness of this set of virtues. Some feminists, however, might agree with Paul Vitz when he contrasts the competitiveness of boys with the tendency to cooperate found in girls and who holds that women are more inclined to have a “personal relationship with Jesus and

<sup>78</sup> Hughes, *Key Concepts* 48: “essentialism” is not so much a repudiation of, say, Thomistic essences as it is an accusation that one has failed to acknowledge diversity, relatedness, and other ways of being.

<sup>79</sup> John Paul II, “Culture Must Respect Femininity,” in *The Genius of Women* no. 2, at 27–28.

<sup>80</sup> Congregation, “Letter on Collaboration” no. 14.

<sup>81</sup> Schneiders, *Selling All* 166–67; also May, “The Mission of Fatherhood” 52.

<sup>82</sup> Congregation, “Letter on Collaboration” no. 16.

with God.”<sup>83</sup> Some also might agree with Luce Irigaray, for whom a woman’s nature is “more closely linked, by virtue of her incarnation, to immediacy, to cyclical growth, and to the reciprocity and connectedness of all things” in contrast to men who “have a more distant relation to the body and their environment.”<sup>84</sup>

Very few feminists, however, would agree with the views of William E. May and Hans Urs Von Balthasar. William May argues strongly that “God himself has entrusted this sublime mission [leadership and authority in a family] to the man, the husband/father, and not the woman, the wife/mother.”<sup>85</sup> The reason May gives for this subordination is that a husband’s strength is to deal with the external world, while his wife deals with the inner life of the family.<sup>86</sup> Balthasar takes a more extreme and androcentric view of sexual difference. Thus, when he describes a woman as receptive, as “a vessel of fulfillment specially designed for” man, a feminist reader might be forgiven for thinking that an image of “missionary position,” penis-thrusting-inside-vagina sex, guides his thought and that of others like him.<sup>87</sup>

### Critique of Difference Theology

A major theme of the “Letter on Collaboration” is that men and women must not be antagonistic but must cooperate.<sup>88</sup> Unfortunately, the Congregation does not distinguish, on the one hand, between the antagonism of feminist theory to ideas that disenfranchise women and, on the other, the antagonism of the feminist movement to men (or women) who resist progress toward dignity and equality.<sup>89</sup> John Paul better hits the mark when he says that women may rightly resist domination. As he says, “Christ’s way of acting . . . is a consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women.”<sup>90</sup>

The Vatican emphasizes women’s capacity for motherhood as the basis for her “special genius” of love. Still, given past history in which women

<sup>83</sup> Paul Vitz, “The Fatherhood of God: Support from Psychology,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 9 (2002) 74–86, at 83–84.

<sup>84</sup> Huntington, “Contra Irigaray” 166–67; Lenning, “The Body as Crowbar” 30; Stone, “From Political to Realist Essentialism” 18.

<sup>85</sup> May, “The Mission of Fatherhood” 43.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* 48, 52.

<sup>87</sup> Gonzales, “Hans Urs von Balthasar” 570; Ross, *Extravagant Affections* 109; Paula Jean Miller, F.S.E., “The Theology of the Body: A New Look at *Humanae Vitae*,” *Theology Today* 57 (January 2001) 501–8, at 506–7.

<sup>88</sup> Congregation, “Letter on Collaboration” no. 2, at 171; for the theologian likely behind this view, see Gonzales, “Hans Urs von Balthasar” 581–82; also Elshstain, “Women and the Dilemma of Equality” 39.

<sup>89</sup> Margaret Farley, “Feminism and Hope,” in *Full of Hope* 20–40, at 21 (see n. 18 above).

<sup>90</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* no. 15, at 272.

were confined to this role, the Congregation and other theologians need to do more to speak of women's many other capacities. Johnson points out the problem: "women are pre-ordained to social roles of loving, nurturing, and caring for life, while their capacity for thought and active leadership are counted of little worth."<sup>91</sup>

This emphasis on the genius of women provoked an intriguing response from Gerald Brown, past president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men. Protesting that men also make spiritual and cultural contributions to society, he points out that these days men suffer discrimination on the basis of their maleness. In an ironic reversal of history, he chides the Vatican's emphasis on women because it suggests that maleness is "the remainder of what is left over after all the dimensions of femininity have been articulated."<sup>92</sup> Similarly Gudorf comments that "the popes have lifted women's pedestal so high as to deny in many ways the basic humanity and Christian potential of men."<sup>93</sup>

Those who emphasize differences too seldom state which qualities pertain to men and which to women. Perhaps this is so because the project is so dubious. Rita Gross points out that "in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, compassion is said to be 'masculine' while wisdom is 'feminine.'" In the United States, the opposite is the case. Thus any strict assignment of virtues and roles to men or to women is likely to be mistaken.<sup>94</sup> Even the "Letter," after insisting on difference, turns around and says "that which is called *femininity* is more than simply an attribute of the female sex. The word designates indeed the fundamental human capacity to live for the other and because of the other."<sup>95</sup>

Preferable to any lists of attributes, it would be closer to the truth to say, for example, that women are caring in a feminine way and men are caring in a masculine way. Similarly, women are aggressive in a feminine way and men in a masculine way. This approach, however, pushes the marker only one step. We would still have to name what we mean by a masculine and a feminine way of caring, being chaste, fighting, and so forth.

### COMPLEMENTARITY

John Paul II has set down his basic principles for understanding complementarity between men and women. First, "Even though man and woman

<sup>91</sup> Johnson, "Feminism and Sharing the Faith" 113–14.

<sup>92</sup> Gerald Brown, "Dialogue Urged on Men's Gifts and Concerns," *Origins* 25 (July 27, 1995) 143–45, at 144.

<sup>93</sup> Gudorf, "Encountering the Other" 273.

<sup>94</sup> Gross, "What Went Wrong?" 10; see also, Lenning, "The Body as Crowbar" 43–44.

<sup>95</sup> Congregation, "Letter on Collaboration" no. 14.

are made for each other, this does not mean that God created them incomplete."<sup>96</sup> Second, "Woman complements man, just as man complements woman. . . . Womanhood expresses the 'human' as much as manhood does, but in a different and complementary way."<sup>97</sup> They are "complete" in themselves, but for forming a couple they are incomplete.<sup>98</sup>

The Vatican usually speaks as if there is but one form of complementarity, that between a woman and a man who are committed to love one another. This approach neglects a myriad of other forms of complementarity. In football, a quarterback and a center are complementary; and so are the opposing teams. A man's housekeeping abilities and his wife's legal profession might contribute to a well-balanced family.<sup>99</sup> More broadly, Gudorf points out that "we need to relate to both men and women in order to develop our own gender identity successfully."<sup>100</sup> In other words, women not only need men but also women if they are to develop as women. And similarly for men. Unfortunately, Martin and many others who follow the pannuptialism of the pope hold that the marital relationship is "paradigmatic of all human relating." Susan Ross has rightly argued for the inadequacy of this view.<sup>101</sup>

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops writes of properly *sexual* complementarity.<sup>102</sup> But John Paul wants to make sexual complementarity go all the way down to every aspect of a person's being, and thus make men and women deeply complementary in every aspect of their relationships. For most activities, however, a person's sexuality is a background feature of relative unimportance.<sup>103</sup> Since, as we have seen, the

<sup>96</sup> John Paul II, "World Day of Peace" no. 3, at 12; the opposite in Martin, "The New Feminism" 15.

<sup>97</sup> John Paul II, "Letter to Women" no. 7, at 141; see also Vitz, "The Fatherhood of God" 76–78.

<sup>98</sup> John Paul II, "Authentic Concept of Conjugal Love," *Origins* 28 (March 4, 1999) 654–56, at 655; Gudorf notes, however, that the "the popes seem to forget their teaching on complementarity of the sexes when they discuss celibacy" ("Encountering the Other" 277); similarly, Curran, "John Paul II's Use of Scripture" 132.

<sup>99</sup> Traina, "Papal Ideals" 279, 281.

<sup>100</sup> Gudorf, "Encountering the Other" 277.

<sup>101</sup> Martin, "The New Feminism" 15; Ross, "Bridegroom and the Bride" 42–43, 47.

<sup>102</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Between Man and Woman: Questions and Answers about Marriage and Same-Sex Unions," *Origins* 33 (November 27, 2003) 433–34, no. 3, at 434; also John Paul II, "Authentic Concept of Conjugal Love" 655; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Administrative Committee, "Statement on Marriage and Homosexual Unions," *Origins* 33 (September 25, 2003) 257–59, at 259. Moore argues that Genesis does not warrant any wider complementarity than sexual (*Question of Truth* 126–34).

<sup>103</sup> Ridgeway and Correll, "Unpacking the Gender System" 516; James Keenan,



Vatican asserts that various “masculine” and “feminine” traits should actually be present in everyone, then—outside of sexual coupling—the significance of male-female complementarity is further lessened. And while the Vatican consistently argues that every effort must be made to enable women to nurture their children, this position has to be balanced by the increasing experience that some husbands nurture children better than their wives. The necessity even for typical sexual complementarity disappears in the case of two homosexual persons. Elizabeth Stuart probably smiles when she asserts that “lesbians are the greatest threat to the ‘straight mind’ because we subvert the content of the signifier ‘woman’ by being women unrelated to men.”<sup>104</sup>

Although the term “complementarity” conjures up the subordination of women, it need not have that meaning.<sup>105</sup> Still the tendency to overlook women is strong. For example, the “Letter” says that in the Old Testament “a story of salvation takes shape which involves the simultaneous participation of male and female”; but the actual story told by the Congregation includes only the work of men, giving the impression that women made no important contribution.<sup>106</sup> Reversing this tendency, the pope writes chiefly about the nature of women and seldom about the nature of men. He even interprets Galatians 3:28, “there is neither male or female,” to mean that the feminine is the paradigm for all humanity.<sup>107</sup> Avoiding language of receptivity, he describes a woman as a person “endowed with a subjectivity from which stems her responsible autonomy in leading her own life.” When he says that “motherhood in its personal-ethical sense expresses a very important creativity on the part of the woman,”<sup>108</sup> he is not speaking of passive endurance, as some anti-feminists do, but rather seems to acknowledge the experience many women have of actively “growing” their child.<sup>109</sup>

Summing up the issue, Steinfels wisely cautions: “Catholic feminists may

S.J., “The Open Debate: Moral Theology and the Lives of Gay and Lesbian Persons,” *Theological Studies* 64 (2003) 127–50, at 130.

<sup>104</sup> Stuart, “Sex in Heaven” 188–89; see also, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Between Man and Woman” no. 3.

<sup>105</sup> “Letter on Collaboration” no. 9. See also Curran, “John Paul II’s Use of Scripture” 132; Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Family and Catholic Social Teaching,” in *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teaching*, Readings in Moral Theology no. 13, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Paulist, 2003) 253–67, at 261.

<sup>106</sup> Congregation, “Letter on Collaboration” no. 9.

<sup>107</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* no. 25, at 278. Curiously, the Congregation, in the “Letter on Collaboration” no. 12, interprets this text of Galatians to say that “the distinction between man and woman is reaffirmed more than ever.”

<sup>108</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* no. 19, at 274.

<sup>109</sup> Steven E. Rhoads, *Taking Sex Differences Seriously* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004) 36. Compare, Martin, “The New Feminism” 15; also May, “The Mission of Fatherhood” 43.

be overly quick to reject all notions of male-female complementarity out of hand, flying in the face of a good bit of evolutionary theory, biology, psychology, primatology, and anthropology. But given the abuses of complementarity as a way of legitimating female subjection, there is every reason to be suspicious of any such notion unless it arrives accompanied by a full awareness of its sorry history and a convincing strategy for not repeating it."<sup>110</sup> Elshtain rightly warns that working out complementary relationships "will, at times, be one of struggle as men and women 'work' one another, grappling with sameness and difference."<sup>111</sup>

### DIALECTICAL ETHICAL CRITIQUE

Gender difference is "a fundamental principle for organizing social relations in virtually all spheres of social life."<sup>112</sup> Lenning wisely adds that we are highly unlikely to get rid of gender. But, she says, we can stretch to better approximate justice.<sup>113</sup> Gross well points out, "the problems with the traditional female gender role are not the tasks assigned to it, which must be done, or the psychological traits associated with it, which are emotionally healthy, but the rigid way in which these tasks and traits were assigned to women alone, at the same time as women were confined only to those tasks and traits."<sup>114</sup> Feminism demands an end to sex-based restrictions that needlessly prevent women from fully developing their talents.<sup>115</sup> While human beings should not deny the reality and influence of their biological differences, the development of human freedom means that they can modify or transcend many restrictive aspects of sexual difference.<sup>116</sup>

What is the ethically appropriate form of unity-in-sexual difference? The answer can, I believe, only be worked out in practice. There is a parallel in the Church's social ethics, where the Church has given up its attempt to describe in detail one correct economic system (a "third way") between the extremes of pure communism and pure capitalism. The Church points out values that should underlie any economic system, and it criticizes inadequacies in present systems. Similarly, the Church's position on feminism might be: (1) men and women are "equal" in basic dignity and destiny; (2) men and women are "different," where their differences add important ways of being human; (3) anything that violates "(1)" and "(2)" must be not be affirmed and usually should be opposed; (4) subject to these limits, each

<sup>110</sup> Steinfels, *People Adrift* 299.

<sup>111</sup> Elshtain, "Women and the Dilemma of Equality" 40-41.

<sup>112</sup> Ridgeway and Correll, "Unpacking the Gender System" 521.

<sup>113</sup> Lenning, "The Body as Crowbar" 43-44.

<sup>114</sup> Gross, "What Went Wrong?" 11.

<sup>115</sup> Teevan, "Challenges to the Role of Theological Anthropology" 585.

<sup>116</sup> Gross, "What Went Wrong?" 18; Mundy, "Hitting Below the Belt" 234.

culture and each person will have to work out its own paradigms for helping men and women develop into mature human beings; (5) restrictions on roles such as parenting or leadership and on social arrangements such as bathrooms or sports are a suspect category and need to be justified; and (6) in this finite and sinful world, any cultural solution—in the Church and in the world at large—will always be inadequate and subject to critique and revision.

Considering the highly contentious and extraordinarily sophisticated debates that have been waged among figures such as Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, Iris Young, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Nancy Chodrow, and so many others, it might have been better if the Vatican had kept silent on the topic of feminism. Nevertheless, the topic is too important to be left only to those who are regarded as experts. And the pope and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith should not be faulted for trying to make a much needed, distinctively theological contribution to the conversation.