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Remember the Ladies: A Call to Prioritize Women's Experiences in Catholic Social Teaching

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Abstract:

The Church appears to lack a concrete framework for analyzing and responding to violations of women's dignity. This oversight can be addressed by applying the principles espoused in Catholic Social Teaching to the present-day situation of women worldwide to articulate an affirmative Catholic vision for the protection and promotion of women. This paper examines the tradition of the Catholic Church and her scriptures in order to find positive affirmations of the dignity of women and call to mind places where such affirmations are still lacking. It then seeks to establish a new framework that empowers the Church to more consistently uphold the dignity of all people.

Keywords: women, imago dei, Catholic social teaching, gender equality

“But the hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved.”¹ On the feast of the Immaculate Conception, Pope Paul VI issued this prophetic announcement at the closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council in 1965. Nearly 60 years later, it is worth examining to what extent women have achieved this “influence” that the pope confidently asserted. In recent decades, women worldwide have continued to gain significant political, legal, and economic rights, including, property rights, the equality of spouses within marriage, and protections against sex-based discrimination. Yet even with these significant advances, women continue to suffer violations of their dignity in distinct ways tied to

¹ Paul VI, “Address of Pope Paul VI to Women,” 1965, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651208_epilogo-concilio-donne.html.

their embodiment as women, including sexual violence, domestic violence, and gendercide through sex-selective abortion. These issues are facets of the same fundamental problem: a routine devaluing of women that recasts them as less human than their male counterparts.

Since Paul VI, popes have increasingly mentioned the dignity, vocations, and rights of women in a variety of contexts. These themes are notably concentrated in the writings of Pope John Paul II, including in the apostolic letter “Mulieris Dignitatem” and the “Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women.” Such documents, their antecedents within the body of Catholic Social Teaching and in the scriptures, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church provide a tremendously foundational view of women as equal to men, endowed with the same dignity befitting creatures formed in the image and likeness of their creator. Yet despite this affirmation of women’s inherent dignity, and the priority that Catholic Social Teaching places upon care for the vulnerable and marginalized, the Church appears to lack a concrete framework for analyzing and responding to violations of women’s dignity. This oversight can be addressed by applying the principles espoused in Catholic Social Teaching to the present-day situation of women worldwide to articulate an affirmative Catholic vision for the protection and promotion of women. In the first part of this paper, I will examine how the dignity of women is upheld throughout the Catholic tradition. I will then explain how despite these teachings, Catholic social teaching lacks a coherent understanding of threats that still exist to the flourishing of all women. In the final part of this paper, I apply the different principles of Catholic social teaching and the understanding of the dignity of women in Catholic tradition to create a new framework that responds to the violations of the dignity of women and can empower the Church to uphold the dignity of all people.

I. The Dignity of Woman in the Catholic Tradition

A. The Imago Dei

“God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27).² This short verse encapsulates the link between Creator and creature that forms the center of Christian anthropology, and it leads to conclusions which constitute the basis of the Catholic Church's teaching about the inviolability of human dignity and life. God's creation of humankind on the sixth day illustrates the special role of humankind within the created order: humankind is the pinnacle of God's creation and participates in exercising dominion and stewardship over the rest of the created world (Gen. 1:26–31). Both creation accounts detailed in Genesis emphasize the relationship between Creator and creature and between the first man and woman. “Man's life comes from God; it is his gift, his image and imprint, a sharing in his breath of life... The biblical text is concerned to emphasize how the sacredness of life has its foundation in God and in his creative activity.”³

Humankind is created for relationship with God to reflect God's own relational nature in the communion of persons in the Trinity. The creation of humankind begins the story of the relationship between God and humankind that culminates in the Incarnation and Passion of Jesus Christ; namely, a story of love.⁴ By entering into a relationship with their Creator, human beings present a witness of the image of God and begin to participate in their destiny, the communion of God and humanity in the beatific vision. In this life, human beings “are most profoundly themselves when they discover their relation to their Creator. Therefore the image of God also means that human persons are beings of word and of love, beings moving toward Another,

² The NRSV translation of the Bible will be used throughout this paper.

³ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 1995, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html, no. 39.

⁴ Benedict XVI, *In the Beginning . . . : A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsay, O.P. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 30.

oriented to giving themselves to the Other and only truly receiving themselves back in real self-giving”.⁵

Yet the *imago dei* women possess as God’s beloved creatures and daughters has often been minimized. Beginning with the Fall, the original relationship of equality between man and woman was fractured by sin, leading to conflict and the domination of woman by man. Eve’s role in giving the fruit of the tree of life to Adam was frequently invoked to justify men’s authority over women and a characterization of women as inherently more sinful than men. As the Catechism notes, this misconstrues the nature of both God and human beings. Both men and women equally reflect the God who willed them into being; it is humankind who are made in God’s image, not God in man’s: “In no way is God in man’s image. He is neither man nor woman. God is pure spirit in which there is no place for the difference between the sexes. But the respective ‘perfections’ of man and woman reflect something of the infinite perfection of God: those of a mother and those of a father and husband.”⁶

In writing about the dignity of women, Pope John Paul II argued that this passage from Genesis “contains the fundamental anthropological truths: man is the highpoint of the whole order of creation in the visible world; the human race, which takes its origin from the calling into existence of man and woman, crowns the whole work of creation; *both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God’s image*” (emphasis added).⁷ Men and women are both made in the *imago dei*, and both fell short of God’s plan for humanity. The Catechism of the Catholic Church observes the naturalness with which men and women

⁵ Ibid., 48.

⁶ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994), no. 370.

⁷ John Paul II., *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 1998, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html, no. 6.

complement each other while emphasizing the communal nature of humankind: “Man and woman were made ‘for each other’—not that God left them half-made and incomplete: he created them to be a communion of persons.”⁸ This complementary relationship is most clearly manifested in marriage, in which both man and woman cooperate to bring the divine gift of life, whether biological or spiritual, to a new generation.⁹ Especially in generating new life, man and woman need each other to truly participate in God’s relational nature and reflect the image of God. Even outside of the context of marriage, men and women are meant for interdependence and cooperation because “human persons are not closed in upon themselves: they must always be aware that they are situated in the context of the body of history, which will ultimately become the body of Christ.”¹⁰

B. The Example of Jesus Christ

From the beginning of Jesus Christ’s public ministry at the wedding at Cana, to his post-Resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene, God in the person of Jesus Christ engaged women with a deep sincerity and sensitivity. While not among the twelve apostles selected by Christ, Jesus nonetheless displayed a remarkable openness to deep friendship with women and reliance on their support of his ministry. His healing ministry too included several noteworthy examples of responding to the suffering of women, including that suffering experienced as part of a society which considered them primarily in their capacity for sexual activity and devalued their worth. The first person Christ raises from the dead is the unnamed daughter of Jairus, a synagogue official. Jairus pleads with Jesus to hurry to his home to heal his young daughter, who is critically ill and “at the point of death” (Mk. 5:22–25). En route to the house of Jairus, a woman

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 372.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *In the Beginning*, no. 34.

who had “suffered greatly” with hemorrhages for 12 years without cure was healed immediately upon touching Jesus’s cloak (Mk. 5:25–29). Due to her illness, the woman would have been considered unclean according to Mosaic law and thus unable to participate in social life, religious worship, or marriage. Upon questioning her, Christ expresses a concrete love for the woman by referring to her as his daughter, and he praises her faithfulness: “Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction” (Mk. 5:30–34). Not only does the woman receive solace from the healing of her physical ailment, but she also receives a new life free of the socially imposed suffering and isolation imposed by her condition, one that could only be experienced by a woman. After healing the woman with a hemorrhage, Jesus continues on his way to the home of Jairus, though by this time, the young daughter has died. Jesus claims that she is merely asleep, takes the girl by the hand, and says to her “ ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise!’ ” (Mk. 5:41). Immediately, she is able to rise and walk.

Jesus expresses a similar compassion and mercy when the Pharisees test him by bringing a woman caught in adultery to him. They ask whether she should be killed, as prescribed by the law in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, asserting that “Moses commanded us to stone *such women*” (Jn. 8:3-5) (emphasis added). Famously, Jesus tells the Pharisees that whichever of them is without sin should be the first to cast a stone at her. The Pharisees leave one by one, leaving the adulterous woman alone with Jesus, who asks her if any of the crowd had condemned her. “She replied, ‘No one, sir.’” Then Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go, [and] from now on do not sin any more’” (Jn. 8:9–11). In this dramatic episode, Jesus accompanies the woman in her time of need and rescues her from a horrific death. Rather than condemnation, Christ in his mercy calls her to a new way of life, one without sin.

In his interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus transgresses both the ethnoreligious boundary between Jews and Samaritan and the one between men and women. As the woman herself notes, “How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan *woman*, for a drink?” (Jn. 4:6–9) (emphasis added). During their exchange, Jesus prophesies that he can provide water to quench all thirst and reveals that he knows of her complicated marital history. She professes her faith in the coming of the Messiah, and Jesus reveals the messianic secret to her. When the disciples return to Jesus, they are “amazed that he [is] talking with a woman” (Jn. 4:27). The woman testifies to her community about Jesus’ revelation to her and his knowledge of “everything I have done,” and the Samaritans of her town welcome Jesus to stay with them (Jn. 4:39–42). Through his encounter with the woman at the well, an entire community comes to receive Christ.

A similar dynamic—healing followed by faithful discipleship—is evident in the story of Mary Magdalene. Perhaps Jesus’s most loyal follower, she is described in Luke’s Gospel as one of the Galilean “women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities,” along with two other named women: Joanna and Susanna (Lk. 8:1–3). Mary Magdalene receives new life after Christ healed her of the seven demons which had afflicted her; in return, Mary centers her new life on Jesus. With Joanna and Susanna, she “provided for [Jesus and the Twelve] out of their resources,” which suggests that Mary may have been a widow, as a single woman would have been unlikely to have possessed significant resources (Lk. 8:1–3).

Mary’s faithfulness to Jesus extended throughout the culmination of his ministry in the Passion, during which Simon Peter betrayed Jesus and all of the Twelve except John fled. Though not mentioned in Scripture, Church tradition holds that a woman named Veronica wiped the bloody face of Jesus as he carried the cross to Golgotha, an act commemorated as the sixth

station of the devotion of the Way of the Cross. At the eighth station of the Way of the Cross, Jesus comforts a crowd of weeping women from Jerusalem “who mourned and lamented him” (Lk 23:27–31). He challenges them not to cry for him but to prepare for the upcoming judgment. In John’s account of the Crucifixion, John the beloved disciple stands at the foot of the cross, joined by Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and one or possibly two other women (Jn. 19: 25–27). In the synoptic Gospels, a group of women is described as watching Jesus’s Crucifixion and death from a distance; once again, Mary Magdalene is explicitly named among them. The group “had followed him when he was in Galilee and ministered to him;” they were joined by “many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem” (Mk. 15:33–41). Women had received healing and solace from Christ committed themselves to following him in his own suffering and death.

Even after his death, several women remained with Jesus’s body, assisting in preparations for the burial, according to various descriptions found within the synoptic Gospels. Luke describes the Galilean women following Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb, after which “they returned and prepared spices and perfumed oils” before the Sabbath (Lk. 23:55–56). In Mark’s account, only two women who witness his burial: “Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses watched where he was laid” (Mk. 15:46–47). Perhaps most striking is the scene presented by Matthew, in which Joseph of Arimathea seals the tomb by rolling a stone across the entrance, just prior to the beginning of the Sabbath. Two women, Mary Magdalene among them, remain, undeterred by the threat of darkness or the coming Sabbath: “But Mary Magdalene and the other Mary remained sitting there, facing the tomb” (Mt. 27:61).

All four Gospels agree on one point about the female followers of Christ: Mary Magdalene was the first to see the empty tomb and witness the risen Christ (Mt. 28:1–10, Mk.

16:1–11, Luke 23:55–24:11, Jn. 20–1:18). In John's Gospel, as well as the longer ending to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus specifically entrusts Mary with sharing the news of resurrection and imminent ascension with the disciples, for which she is colloquially known as the apostle to the apostles, the one who shares the ultimate good news. The Johannine account includes an additional detail that testifies to the significance of Jesus Christ's relationship with Mary Magdalene. While weeping at the empty tomb, Jesus appears to Mary, but she does not recognize him, whether due an altered appearance or the confusion caused by grief. Mistaking him for a gardener, she asks where he has taken her Lord. Jesus calls Mary by name, and she immediately recognizes him, referring to him as "Rabbouni," her Teacher. The significance of a name lies in the relationship between the recipient of the name and the one who bestows it: "In the human being God enters into his creation; the human being is directly related to God. The human being is called by him. God's words in the Old Testament are valid for every individual human being: 'I call you by name and you are mine.' Each human being is known by God and loved by him."¹¹ One word—her name—is enough to alleviate Mary Magdalene's fear and remind her of the God who willed her being and granted her a new life.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is acutely aware of the suffering, both physical and spiritual, present within the lives of women. He extends to them unreserved compassion and the promise of new life, both literal and figurative. He raises them from the dead, heals their illnesses, casts out their demons, and calls them to repentance. He is present when they celebrate, as at the wedding at Cana, and when they mourn, as when Martha and Mary of Bethany call for Jesus as their brother Lazarus lies dying. When these women encounter Jesus, their lives are transformed, they proclaim what the Lord has done for them, and they respond by following him

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *In the Beginning*, nos. 44–45.

to the very end. They contribute financial resources to Jesus's ministry and minister to the disciples. They accompany him to Calvary, keep watch while he is on the cross, and lovingly prepare his body for burial. They are the first to visit the empty tomb, and Christ uniquely entrusts them with proclaiming the good news of his resurrection.

II. Church Teaching and Women: From Vatican II to Present

A. The Vatican II Era

In 1963, during the midst of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII issued the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, a reflection on the postwar order and a call for establishing the conditions of a just peace. While primarily focused on the rights of individuals, relationships between individuals and society, and relationships between states, in reflecting upon the “Characteristics of the Present Day,” the Pope made a noteworthy observation of woman’s increased presence in public life. The encyclical notes that “the part that women are now playing in political life is everywhere evident,” though this progress has been slower in some cultures and states than others.¹² The Pope pronounced favorably that “[w]omen are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons.”¹³ This statement presents the first encyclical which is unabashedly supportive of woman’s assertion of her own dignity and an expanded role for women within public life, though such a role was still limited by social contexts. The Second Vatican Council’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* commented favorably on women’s increased engagement

¹² John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 1963, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html, nos. 41.

¹³ *Ibid.*

in economic life, observing that “Women now work in almost all spheres. It is fitting that they are able to assume their proper role in accordance with their own nature. It will belong to all to acknowledge and favor the proper and necessary participation of women in the cultural life.”¹⁴

Two years after *Pacem in Terris*, in his address to women at the close of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI spoke in soaring language about the imminence of woman entering the fullness of her vocation, which would lead her to “acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved.”¹⁵ As the Pope noted, it was fitting that women, who “constitute half of the immense human family” should share in influencing the direction of the human family, no matter their state in life, whether “girls, wives, mothers and widows ... consecrated virgins and women living alone.”¹⁶ The address closed with a dramatic conclusion which calls for women to bring truth into all areas of life: “you do know how to make truth sweet, tender, and accessible; make it your task to bring the spirit of this council into institutions, schools, homes and daily life. Women of the entire universe, whether Christian or non-believing, you to whom life is entrusted at this grave moment in history, it is for you to save the peace of the world.”¹⁷ While inspirational in tone, it seems strange that such a document would presume women had achieved a fullness of their vocations sufficient for this lofty goal, especially since a mere two years had passed since Pope John Paul XXII positively noted women's increased advocacy for recognition of their natural dignity. Paul VI's address thus charged women with the immense responsibility “to save the peace of the world” while many still lacked the fundamental political and economic rights which would aid them in the fulfillment of this duty.¹⁸

¹⁴ The Second Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, no. 60.

¹⁵ Pope Paul VI, “Address of Pope Paul VI to Women.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

B. The Teaching of Pope John Paul II

The exploration of the dignity and vocation of women finds a more thorough examination in the writing and teaching of Pope John Paul II, particularly in several documents either addressed to women or centered on the nature of woman. His Apostolic Letter “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” published in 1988, is the first magisterial document specifically about women. In the letter, the Pope recalls the equal dignity of woman and man and examines the role of woman in salvation history through contemplating Eve and Mary. After the Fall, the relationship of equality, unity, and complementarity between the man and the woman is fractured, leading to man’s domination of woman, which “takes the place of ‘being a sincere gift’ and therefore living ‘for’ the other: ‘he shall rule over you’.” This ‘domination’ indicates the disturbance and *loss of the stability* of that *fundamental equality* which the man and the woman possess.”¹⁹ While this deformation of God’s design for man and woman can be seen primarily within marriage, its effects are widespread. As Pope John Paul II noted, “[t]hese words of *Genesis* refer directly to marriage, but indirectly *they concern the different spheres of social life*: the situations in which the woman remains disadvantaged or discriminated against by the fact of being a woman.”²⁰ While such sin demonstrably harms woman in a distinct way, the sin also affects man: “whenever man is responsible for offending a woman’s dignity and vocation, he acts contrary to his own personal dignity and his own nature.”²¹

As the new Adam, Jesus affirms woman’s dignity and guides her away from sin, rather than collaborating in evil and seeking to blame her for it. As John Paul II details in an exploration of the plight of the woman caught in adultery, Jesus is unafraid to enter “*into the*

¹⁹ Pope John Paul II., “*Mulieris Dignitatem*,” no. 10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

concrete and historical situation of women, a situation which is *weighed down by the inheritance of sin*. One of the ways in which this inheritance is expressed is habitual discrimination against women in favour of men,” (emphasis added) and injustice that Christ rectifies in calling the Pharisees to consider their own sinfulness.²² Furthermore, John Paul II notes, Jesus reminded women of the dignity that was their rightful inheritance as daughters of God.²³ The letter continues its exploration on the nature, dignity, and vocation of women by examining the connections between the vocations of motherhood and virginity embodied in Mary, the Virgin Mother, and providing an explication of the theology of the Church as the Bride of Christ. In its conclusion, Pope John Paul II expresses his gratitude on behalf of the Church “*for all the manifestations of the feminine ‘genius’* which have appeared throughout history.”²⁴ Women welcomed the introduction of this concept of feminine genius, by which the Pope communicated an appreciation for the distinct ways in which woman understands and applies her vocation to bring a gift of self to the world, not simply as human but as *woman*.

The theme of gratitude for the feminine genius women express in their vocations was taken up again by Pope John Paul II in his “Letter to Women.” on the eve of the 1995 United Nations’ Fourth World Conference on Women, the letter sought to straightforwardly “consider the essential issue of the *dignity* and *rights* of women, as seen in the light of the word of God.”²⁵ In an echo of the introduction to Pope Paul VI’s “Address to Women” thirty years earlier, the Pope addresses women of all vocational states and engaged in various occupations and expressly thanks them for bringing their womanhood to all aspects of life. The letter both reaffirms

²² Ibid., no. 14.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., no. 31.

²⁵ Pope John Paul II, “Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women,” 1995, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html, no. 1.

woman's inherent equality with man and presents a view of woman that extols her unique gifts, for "[w]oman expresses the 'human' as much as manhood does, but in a different and complementary way.²⁶ In particular, Pope John Paul II commends woman's receptivity toward other persons, observing that:

Perhaps more than men, women *acknowledge the person*, because they see persons with their hearts. They see them independently of various ideological or political systems. They see others in their greatness and limitations; they try to go out to them and *help them*. In this way the basic plan of the Creator takes flesh in the history of humanity and there is constantly revealed, in the variety of vocations, that *beauty*—not merely physical, but above all spiritual—which God bestowed from the very beginning on all, and in a particular way on women."²⁷

Notably, John Paul II explicitly acknowledges what his predecessors had sidestepped: the denial of women's dignity constitutes a widespread historical phenomenon, one with significant lingering effects: "Unfortunately, we are heirs to a history which has conditioned us to a remarkable extent. In every time and place, this conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women. Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves."²⁸ The Pope decried the related pattern of objectification that causes women to be "valued more for their physical appearance than for their skill, their professionalism, their intellectual abilities, their deep sensitivity; in a word, *the very dignity of their being*" (emphasis added).²⁹

Yet it is worth considering how significant these developments in papal documents have been in articulating a comprehensive vision for promoting the dignity and rights of women. Pope John Paul II was "convinced that the secret of making speedy progress in achieving full respect

²⁶ Ibid., no. 7.

²⁷ Ibid., no. 12.

²⁸ Ibid., no. 3.

²⁹ Ibid.

for women and their identity involves more than simply the condemnation of discrimination and injustices, necessary though this may be.” Rather, such progress could and should be sought “through an effective and intelligent *campaign for the promotion of women*, concentrating on all areas of women's life and beginning with a *universal recognition of the dignity of women*.”³⁰ The Pope's letter thus expands beyond simply a reflection on women and an appreciation of their gifts. It creates a call to action to guarantee women's dignity: “everyone, and in a special way States and international institutions, should make every effort to ensure that women regain full respect for their dignity and role.”³¹ Over twenty-five years later, the United Nations and a plethora of other international organizations continue to champion an end to violence and discrimination against women and promote their integration into the core of every society.³² But has the Church made such an effort?

C. Shortcomings within Catholic Social Teaching

As previously mentioned, the apostolic letter “*Mulieris Dignitatem*” constitutes the first papal teaching document centered on woman. But as an apostolic letter, it lacks the authority of a papal encyclical. As of 2023, the Church still lacks an encyclical on the dignity, vocation, and rights of women. The two papacies which have succeeded Pope John Paul II have thus far not produced any additional teaching or clarified any existing teaching about women. Pope Francis has issued well over a hundred letters on a variety of occasions and topics during his decade-long papacy. The only one that directly involves women is an affirmation of women's ability to

³⁰ Ibid., no. 6.

³¹ Ibid.

³² This is not meant to suggest agreement with the United Nations' promotion of abortion as both a necessary instrument for achieving women's equality and as a right, both of which are contrary to Catholic teaching and detrimental to women themselves. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012, #2270–2274; *Pope John Paul II, Evangelium Vitae, The Holy See, 1995*; and Pope John Paul II, “Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Mrs. Gertrude Mongella Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women of the United Nations,” The Holy See, 1995.

participate in the lay ministries of acolyte and lector; however, it does not include any substantive analysis on the nature of woman or her gifts.³³

One bright spot seen despite these trends is a homily given by Pope Francis on the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, which coincided with the 53rd World Day of Peace in 2021. Francis expounded upon the soteriological necessity of Mary's motherhood and the life-giving nature of womanhood while lamenting the remarkable injustice of routine violence and mistreatment committed against women.

The rebirth of humanity began from a woman. Women are sources of life. Yet they are continually insulted, beaten, raped, forced to prostitute themselves and to suppress the life they bear in the womb. *Every form of violence inflicted upon a woman is a blasphemy against God, who was born of a woman.* Humanity's salvation came forth from the body of a woman: we can understand our degree of humanity by how we treat a woman's body. How often are women's bodies sacrificed on the profane altars of advertising, of profiteering, of pornography, exploited like a canvas to be used (emphasis added).³⁴

Early in 2023, Pope Francis continued his condemnation of these atrocities in a speech given to the diplomatic corps of the Holy See. The Pope observed that women still face very real dangers and discrimination "They are subjected to violence and abuse, and are denied the opportunity to study, work, employ their talents, and have access to healthcare and even to food."³⁵

More troubling than the inconsistent of recognition of woman and the violations of her dignity is the lack of attention to the dignity of woman within the Church's authoritative texts. "[H]ow can we not mention the long and degrading history, albeit often an 'underground' history, of violence against women in the area of sexuality? ... The time has come to condemn

³³ Francis, "Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Regarding Access of Women to the Ministries of Lector and Acolyte," 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20210110_lettera-donne-lettorato-accollato.html.

³⁴ Francis, "Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis," 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200101_omelia-madredidio-pace.html.

³⁵ Francis, "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See," The Holy See, 2023.

vigorously the types of *sexual violence* which frequently have women for their object and to pass laws which effectively defend them from such violence.”³⁶ Despite this call from Pope John Paul II in his “Letter to Women”, the Church still lacks a thorough teaching about sexual violence, a phenomenon that women are vastly more likely to experience than men.³⁷ Yet the word “rape” is found only once in the Catechism: under the category of “Offenses against chastity.” Though the definition and description of rape clearly state that “it is always an intrinsically evil act,” it is not included with other acts which are always “gravely illicit by reason of their objects,” such as “blasphemy and perjury, murder and adultery.”³⁸ Neither is rape nor any other kind of sexual violence against women included within the Catechism’s discussion of social sin,³⁹ social justice and respect for the human person,⁴⁰ respect for bodily integrity,⁴¹ or the nature of man, woman, and marriage.⁴²

The concept of domestic violence is completely absent from the Catechism, despite its similarly widespread occurrence. According to data sourced from the U.S. Department of Justice and assembled by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, approximately one in four women have experienced “severe physical violence” or “sexual violence” by an intimate partner; one in ten women have been raped by an intimate partner.⁴³ Domestic violence is even more common in certain states and populations; Native American women in particular face extremely high rates of violence. In considering rape and domestic violence internationally, the numbers are even starker: the World Health Organization estimates that one in three women worldwide

³⁶ John Paul II, “Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women,” no. 6.

³⁷ World Health Organization, “Violence against women,” World Health Organization, 2021.

³⁸ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2356, 1756.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, nos. 1868–1869.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 1929.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* no. 2297.

⁴² *Ibid.*, nos. 2201–2203

⁴³ National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, “Statistics,” National Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.”⁴⁴

Neither sexual violence and domestic violence are mentioned in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*, the comprehensive magisterial document which encompasses the Church’s social teaching framework. Despite its examination of the human person, human rights and social justice, the *Compendium* neglects to include a significant discussion about woman’s dignity and vocation other than reiterating catechetical language about the creation of man and woman in the imago dei and their equality within marriage. The sole mention of denial of woman’s dignity is found in a discussion of “forms of discrimination offensive to the dignity and vocation of women in the area of work.”⁴⁵ The *Compendium* introduces four fundamental principles which undergird the whole of the Church’s social teaching: the dignity of the human person, the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity. Though the four principles are presented as fundamental in nature and generally applicable, they have yet to be appreciably applied in discussion of the dignity of woman.

Additionally, the *Compendium* itself cites every papal Message for the World Day of Peace from the year 1992 to 2004, except for the message from 1995. Notably, that year’s Message is the only one which centered women in its theme, expounding on the role of women as peacemakers and urging bishops to examine and imitate their example.⁴⁶ Other frequently cited messages for the annual day of peace focused on human rights, children, and outreach to the poor. While each of these is certainly worthy of inclusion, it seems odd that the only message

⁴⁴ World Health Organization, “Violence against women,” World Health Organization, 2021.

⁴⁵ Pastoral Council for Justice and Peace. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005, no. 295.

⁴⁶ Pope John Paul II, “Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the XXVIII World Day of Peace, Women: Teachers of Peace,” The Holy See, 1995.

in a span of 13 years excluded is the sole document which condemns violations of women's dignity and lauds women's unique capacity for redressing violence and sowing peace. Such omissions reflect a lack of serious thought paid to the ongoing, interconnected ways in which women's human dignity is denied. A failure to protect and promote the dignity of woman and her involvement in public life does a disservice to the Church and to humanity as a whole and its potential for a true and lasting peace: "[w]hen women are able fully to share their gifts with the whole community, the very way in which society understands and organizes itself is improved, and comes to reflect in a better way the substantial unity of the human family. Here we see the most important condition for the consolidation of authentic peace."⁴⁷

Prior to the Vatican reorganization undertaken by Pope Francis, though Pontifical Councils existed for a variety of purposes and groups, including interreligious dialogue, pastoral care of migrants, and the family, none focused on the dignity of women. Under the new dicastery system, women still lack an office directed to addressing challenges to women's dignity and rights. Through its dicasteries and Secretariat of State, the Holy See does maintain a robust record of frequent advocacy against two specific harms to women: abortion and human trafficking.⁴⁸

III. Potential Solutions

A. A preferential option for women?

In his 1995 letter to the Secretary General for the Beijing Conference on Women, Pope John Paul II observed that "development and progress imply access to resources and

⁴⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁸ Msgr. Anthony R. Frontiero, "Statement During Working Session 12: Humanitarian Issues and Other Commitments; Trafficking in Human Beings," The Holy See, 2007.

opportunities, *equitable access* not only between the least developed, developing and richer countries, and between social and economic classes, but also *between women and men*,” especially in education, health care, and employment.⁴⁹ John Paul II thus linked concerns about inequitable progress and development, subjects explored in depth within the *Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*, to inequality between women and men, a rare application of Catholic Social Teaching to the unique situation of women. A thorough application of Catholic Social Teaching principles to the situation of women holds the promise of enumerating a fleshed out vision of the dignity of women that Catholic thought currently lacks.

A potential solution to the lack of magisterial attention to the plight of women would build on this first step taken by Pope John Paul II. What would it mean to apply the essential principles of Catholic Social Teaching to women? A comprehensive look at the dignity of the human person would expand its discussion of the nature, dignity, and vocation of woman beyond simple reference to creation in the *imago dei* and equality in marriage. Rather, it would build on the foundation of John Paul II’s exploration of the nature of woman in documents like “*Mulieris Dignitatem*.” The expanded view would include a robust examination of the signs of the times that reveal denials of woman’s human dignity, especially pervasive sexual and physical violence, in addition to the harms visited upon women by abortion and human trafficking. Discussion of the common good merits an acknowledgement of the ways in which male-centered institutions pursue a common good that is not truly common, because it is defined and pursued solely or primarily in relation to the interests of man without regard for woman’s own needs.

⁴⁹ Pope John Paul II, “Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Mrs. Gertrude Mongella Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women of the United Nations,” The Holy See, 1995.

Promotion of subsidiarity does not challenge or prevent women from fulfillment of their rights and vocations; instead, it provides a vehicle for cooperation between men and women, and for promoting women's inclusion and advancement as core members of the family and community. Lastly, to truly teach and practice an authentic solidarity, the Church must bear witness to the ways in which women face suffering and injustice due to their physical vulnerability and longstanding and continued marginalization. The preferential option for the poor detailed within the *Compendium* furnishes a template for the Church to consider in enumerating a social teaching specific to women. The preferential option for the poor is not an elevation of one group above another, nor is it simply an expression of pity. Rather, it expresses the Christian necessity of prioritizing the marginalized, namely, the poor: “[t]he principle of the universal destination of goods requires that the poor, the marginalized and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of particular concern.”⁵⁰ The preferential option for the poor stems from the tradition of Christian charity inspired by Christ's invocation that “whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt. 25:34–45). A similar recognition of women's vulnerability and marginalization would both echo and reaffirm key components of Catholic Social Teaching and articulate an expansive affirmation of woman's human dignity.

Only when a particular emphasis and attention is paid to the vulnerable and marginalized can their protection and equality be possible. The Church has a longstanding record of acknowledging this dynamic in its teaching on the poor, the sick, and the unborn. Yet it has neglected to apply this kind of thinking to the situation of women, the “half of the immense human family” who are “among the most frequent victims of this blind violence ... the

⁵⁰ Pastoral Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), 182.

outrageous and barbaric behavior which is deeply abhorrent to the human conscience.”⁵¹ Such an approach is necessary to achieve the natural security Pope John XXIII expressed his hope for in *Pacem in Terris* in a discussion of the work of the United Nations: “[m]ay the day be not long delayed when every human being can find ... an effective safeguard of h[er] personal rights; those rights, that is, which derive directly from h[er] dignity as a human person, and which are therefore universal, inviolable and inalienable.”⁵²

In addressing the rights of woman and the threats to her dignity, the Church must incorporate substantive discussion of the evils of sexual and domestic violence, which constitute concrete threats against women in our time. In addition to their inclusion within the body of Catholic Social Teaching and magisterial documents, the Church can provide a powerful witness to woman’s dignity by pairing increased efforts against these practices with its longstanding and successful advocacy against human trafficking and against abortion. In its witness against the violence of abortion, the Church should include an examination of how the practice of sex-selective abortion adds another layer of harm to women. This shift to a more comprehensive consideration of women should be reflected within the organization of the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life, which presently undertakes initiatives to elevate and celebrate families, youth, and grandparents and the elderly. World Meetings of Families, World Youth Days, and World Days for Grandparents and the Elderly should be supplemented and enhanced by the addition of similar initiatives and programming aimed at women.

⁵¹Paul VI, “Address of Pope Paul VI to Women,” 1965; John Paul II, “Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the XXVIII World Day of Peace, Women: Teachers of Peace,” 1995, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121994_xxviii-world-day-for-peace.html#:~:text=Only%20loving%20and%20compassionate%20concern,future%20with%20confidence%20and%20hope.&text=Women%20have%20the%20right%20to,men%20as%20well%20as%20women, no.10.

⁵² John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, no. 145.

The Church faces the ongoing challenge of conforming, both in teaching and in public witness, to Christ's demonstrated love for women. In elucidating a Catholic Social Teaching oriented to women, the Church can and should seek to emulate the example of Christ as described within Scripture and elaborated upon in the apostolic letter "Mulieris Dignitatem" and the "Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women." In his encounters with women, Jesus recognized the dignity of women which had often been denied: "Transcending the established norms of his own culture, Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance and tenderness. In this way he honoured the dignity which women have always possessed according to God's plan and in his love."⁵³ The solutions proposed within this paper provide a path through which the Church can more perfectly imitate Christ, the goal she aspires to in every way, in every age.

⁵³ John Paul II, "Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women," no. 3.