

## Women's sensitivity and gifts: A new Gospel proclamation

# Reawakening the maternal essence of the Church

### Interview with Marta Rodriguez

*Given society's patriarchal structure at the time of Jesus, it is remarkable that the resurrection was first proclaimed by women and the title of "apostle of the apostles" bestowed upon Mary of Magdala. Women, in fact, play a prominent role throughout the Gospel story. Yet ecclesial consciousness has remained limited in their regard. Instead, the feminine potential needs to be discovered in all its uniqueness and decisively 'exploited'. We spoke with professor Marta Rodriguez at the Institute of Superior Studies on Women at the Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum (Rome). She also serves on the editorial board of the Osservatore Romano's magazine, Donna Chiesa Mondo (Women, Church and the World), and was the first head of the Women's Office of the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life.*

*Do you believe women have specific contributions to offer in proclaiming the Gospel today? Can we speak more specifically of gifts and of the sensitivity of women?*

Yes, I believe both men and women have gifts and charisms that are more connatural to each, although they do not belong exclusively to men nor women. But, if I were to answer affirmatively, I think there is still the risk of falling into those kinds of clichés so hotly contested (justifiably in my opinion) by feminists. These consist in stereotypical, idealized concepts of the "woman" that are often far removed from reality. But despite this risk, yes, I do believe women have a specific contribution to give to evangelization today.

*What do you mean by 'stereotypical concepts' of women?*

I am referring precisely to concepts that come from stereotypical understandings of differences between men and women, concepts that serve only to rigidly separate each one's own characteristic abilities. Such an excessively fixed viewpoint has caused a rigid categorization of roles and idealized the so-called *passive attitude* of women.

*Despite this, do you still believe it is possible to speak of unique gifts and of the sensitivity of women in relation to evangelization? What would be the key points in a discussion of this kind?*

I am not sure I would say it is the essence, but one fundamental element is that of a woman's ability to welcome a life within herself. This potential for biological maternity represents a way of being in this world, a way that can give rise to a whole, other relational modality.

*Are you referring here to motherhood? But isn't this a stereotype in itself?*

I am referring to maternity. However, I absolutely do not think it is a stereotype. While historically it has been the reason women have remained on the outskirts of cultural spheres and it has contributed to the perpetration of stereotypes, it certainly is not in itself a stereotype! Maternity, I believe, is an enormously rich trait of every woman, even if she does not have biological children, that is much needed in numerous environments. To connect maternity with stereotypes would be like throwing the baby out with the bath water!

*How does maternity translate into gifts for evangelization?*

A few qualities come to mind that are more connatural to women, although not belonging exclusively to them. Pope Francis often speaks of the need to awaken the maternal face of the Church. Who is better suited to embody and render it visible than women themselves? In the face of today's challenges regarding evangelization, I believe the Church precisely needs this maternal aspect. It encompasses the capacity to welcome those on the outskirts, to completely change our way of speaking to others, and a sensitivity for those societal elements implicit in proclaiming the Gospel, to name just a few examples.

*Can you say more regarding these points?*

Of course. Regarding the importance of welcoming another, I find the section of *Evangelii Gaudium* entitled, *A mother with an open heart* (46-49), to be one of its most beautiful parts. There, the Pope speaks of the Church as the house of the Father with doors wide open and embodying, as in the parable of the prodigal son, the father's same attitude seen in the parable, of keeping arms and doors flung open so that his son may once again return and reenter without difficulty. The Pope calls for an outwardly focused Church that goes forth, one that is particularly focused on the poor and sick.

We need to be conscious that world is no longer Christian. Traditionally Catholic countries like Spain or Italy are also deeply secularized, almost pagan. I am struck by how many of their youth never received basic catechism, or if they did it was often very superficial and lacking an experiential encounter with Christ. In some ways, humanity today is reflective of the prodigal son: It is far from the Father, unaware of its own dignity, and deeply wounded because of one's own sins and those of others. The mother Church must be seen and encountered through the faces of those who are most able to welcome, embrace, and console. There is a need for persons capable of making others feel profoundly welcome and profoundly valued in the eyes of God.

*But isn't this going back to the same stereotypes you mentioned earlier?*

No, I have already said maternity is not a stereotype. Our body is made to welcome the other. The so-called *difference feminism* often reflects on the fact that women welcome love and life into their bodies. This gives us a particular capacity for receptivity and acceptance, which are part of the "relational modality" I spoke of prior. It is not something passive or less worthy. If we look at the question of immigration, for example, we clearly see that to truly welcome the others requires forceful and courageous action!

Laura Paladino, a biblical scholar and researcher at our Institute, explains how the women of the Bible have "life-saving" traits, ones that serve to reveal their creativity and maternity in sometimes unimaginable ways. Think of Moses' mother and her sister: they found a way to both follow the Pharaoh's order (to throw children into the river), but also to save his life by first placing him afloat in a basket.

Today, such maternal capacities are particularly important for an outwardly focused Church called to the farthest outskirts and, like the Good Samaritan, to stoop down to attend to the needs of the suffering and injured, tenderly and carefully dressing their wounds. As women, I believe we are particularly capable of re-awakening these aspects because our whole being has inscribed within its very nature the calling to save and protect life.

However, not everything is plain sailing. As women, we are also wounded in our maternity and this can manifest itself in a distorted tendency to "swallow up" the other: failing at times to cut the umbilical cord and making others emotionally dependent on us. Here, we could speak historically of 'castrating mothers' as studied from a psychological perspective. This kind of a caricature of motherhood is one that certainly does not embody that maternal reality to which the Church is called.

*This is fascinating! You also speak of other challenges related to evangelization for which you see women being particularly adept....*

I also mentioned conversion regarding language. Precisely because our world is deeply secularized, it does not understand many terms used to present *kerygma* and doctrine. I believe today's Church must try to speak the language of contemporary men and women, meeting them where they are at in order to journey together. The Synod of Young People called for a relational face of the Church, for a Church where listening, welcoming, dialogue and discernment are at the heart (Final Doc., N. 122). This is a complete and challenging initiative in itself. We cannot provide answers to unasked questions: therefore, we need to first help people connect with their own inner thirst and searching. It requires a tremendous capacity for empathy and making others feel welcome as I mentioned before.

We also need to translate the Christian proclamation into easily understandable words in order to connect and correspond to the existential reality of people today. It is not a question of giving up classical and necessary theological vocabulary. Rather, it is one of developing a pastoral ministry that gradually introduces people to these truths.

Why do I believe women can play a particular role here? It is because we are the ones who teach children to speak and who know how to spontaneously adapt concepts to each one's level of understanding. "[T]he good mother knows how to recognize all that God has sown in her son, listens to his concerns, and learns from him" (EG, n. 139). Thus, in women I think there is a particular pedagogical predisposition for this. You may tell me it is not so much a natural trait as a cultural consequence. Perhaps, even if I believe that both go together, because in the human person it is impossible to separate nature from (nurture). The fact is, in my opinion, such a pedagogical capacity exists, and it is an indispensable requirement for evangelization today.

*You speak of a third aspect as well?*

Yes, *Evangelii Gaudium* reminds us that, "Both Christian preaching and life, then, are meant to have an impact on society." (n. 180). Unfortunately, however, this does not always happen. Gross violations of human dignity, such as forms of domestic violence, exploitation of the weakest and extreme poverty, often co-exist within so-called Christian cultures, for example. We cannot become desensitized to such injustices and do nothing or be satisfied with merely cynical, passive cries of "we already know all this by now". Pope Francis often speaks of this. *Kerygma* challenges us, urging us to collaborate in the spreading of the Kingdom in today's world.

How do I see this in relation to women? A mother would not remain silent in the face of such attacks on her children. If we, too, have become complacent, perhaps it is because we allowed the maternal essence and depth of the Church to fall asleep. This is the time for a reawakening. At the end of our lives, we will be asked if we have given food and drink, clothed the naked and taught the ignorant. Evangelical coherence is indispensable in order to be credible before a world that no longer tolerates formalisms but rather gives much value to true, authentic witness.

*But are today's women consciously able to place these gifts at the service of evangelization?*

This is the first path in need of development. I believe Pope Francis has a kind of prophetic intuition when he speaks of the need to awaken the feminine, maternal face of the Church, and to think of the Church in feminine terms. As women, I also believe we should be able to make a particular contribution in this regard. Yet, the problem is that we, ourselves, are often unaware of the full significance of what it means to be women. We must first reconnect with our own corporality and femininity. Then, we will be able to awaken this dimension within the essential context of a man-woman alliance in the Church.

**Editorial Team**