

Our true being as a person is found only through our relationships with others

Men and women: covenant partners

Marta Rodríguez

On February 7th, 2019, an *Ekklesia*-sponsored roundtable was held at the Pontifical Alphonsian Academy (Rome) on the theme, "How to be Church Today: Potential pathways for a changing era". Among the presenters was Marta Rodríguez, then Director of the Office of Women's Issues in the Vatican Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life. We are publishing her talk in its entirety.

In attempting to contribute to our reflection on how to be Church today, I would like to focus, by using the lenses of faith and hope, on two seemingly contradictory realities in order to discover the hidden possibilities contained within them. I'll speak about challenges and opportunities related to women, because it is both my area of work and because I believe the issue of women today constitutes a true opportunity for Church renewal. Let me start from a few concrete experiences.

When I began my service at the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life, I felt a need to widen my gaze and understand those challenges facing women outside the European context, which was the one for which I had the most experience. So, I dedicated my time to meeting persons from very different backgrounds and experiences. Among other things, I asked them, '*What is it that women expect from the Church?*'. And I was struck by the fact that a large majority of women responded: "That the Church listens to us."

I reflected deeply on their responses and wondered, in a Church where women more frequently partake of the sacraments and are more often responsible for filling our churches, sacristies, and catechesis, why it is that they do not feel heard today? I realized that it was not so much a question of not being listened to, but rather one of not being taken into consideration *as women*. In other words, through their dissatisfaction emerged the fact that the Church has spoken a great deal *about* women, but spoken very little *with* women, and even less in a context that is *inclusive of women* around questions related to Church life and society.

The desires of the women I met with during those weeks and afterwards are reminiscent of similar claims made in the past by what's been called, *difference feminism*. Born in the 1960's, it denounced a culture composed primarily of masculine categories, a culture unable to accept women's perspectives and contributions. Couldn't it be said that the yearnings of Catholic women today to be heard by the Church may have some of the same root causes as those claimed by difference feminists in the past? But, without negating this possibility, I'd like to go beyond a socio-cultural analysis and look today at the situation with "prophetic eyes", in order to discover the important opportunity that presents itself here.

Teaching to encounter 'otherness'

Difference feminists were correct in saying sexual difference was never even considered. And if that's true, it's even truer that it was never *taught* either. And this is exactly here where I see new horizons unfolding before us. As a Church, I believe we need to focus on formation in what it means to establish *sexualized relationships* (not sexual ones!). And, here I don't mean the imposition of stereotypes that end up rigidly characterizing men and women by roles, qualities, and capabilities. Rather, I mean education in how to have sexualized relationships that render us capable of welcoming the other for who they are, each with their own distinct traits.

Without this learning around encountering the other, we remain impoverished as men (laity, religious or priests) and women. It's been found that in men or women who live isolated from contact with the other sex (as in some religious communities or military situations, for example), the so-called "defects of their own sex" become more evident: men become more individualistic, aggressive, incapable of dialoguing with their emotions . . . while women tend to become more complicated, oversensitive, and subjective. Instead, through encounters with 'the other', each one helps the other -- male and female -- to grow and develop.

The Church is slowly becoming aware of this and speaks to this explicitly, for example, in the *Ratio* for priestly formation in 2016¹, where it repeatedly reiterates the need for women in priestly formation. In this regard, I see the first signs of a *pedagogical conversion* already underway. It must lead us not only to make women feel truly listened to by the Church, but to assure that they become protagonists together with men, in this outwardly oriented Church, one always in a state of continuous, pastoral conversion.

In what I believe are prophetic words during an address to the Pontifical Academy for Life, the Holy Father said: "[T]he covenant between man and woman is called to be a guiding force for society as a whole. We are invited to be responsible for the world, in the realms of culture and politics, in the world of work and economic life, as well as in the Church. This is not merely a matter of equal opportunities or mutual appreciation. It involves the way men and women understand the very meaning of life and human progress. . . . [S]peak to one another as covenant partners, because neither of the two – neither man nor woman – can assume this responsibility alone."²

In the Church and in society, the covenant between man and woman signifies much more than listening to women. Rather, today's Church must journey towards much more tangible horizons. Discovering the need for such a covenant means entering into the realization that only through an encounter with 'another', only in relation with the 'other', can we be fully ourselves. The image and likeness of God inscribed in the human person, makes of us *beings in communion* (not for selfish autonomy or individualism). The Church is a people of God, where all vocations are revealed and understood, and each is at the service of the other.

Rediscovering sexuality's meaning and importance

The alliance between man and woman is possible only when each begins from his or her own solid identity, and from there enters into a reciprocal relationship with the other. Human realities obey the anthropological rule: "there is no 2 without 1; and no 1 without 2"³. This means that identity is affirmed through encounter with the 'other', but this encounter is possible only beginning from the well-established identities of each one.

In speaking of relationships and the covenant between men and women, another difficulty also arises: *what does it mean today to be a man or a woman?* It's no longer so clear! In fact, today we prefer to talk about *women* rather than 'the woman', in deference to the plurality of ways in which womanhood can be lived out. If, on the one hand, this sign of our times is a result of

instability and confusion among women and men of all ages, on the other it represents a further opportunity for rediscovering the profound meaning of human sexuality. Sexuality is a dimension of the whole, human person and cannot be reduced to mere biological elements. Both cultural and biological factors come into play in human identity, and both must be freely and fully developed (in the sense that it requires, without disregarding one's given limitations, both a person's will and intelligence). St. John Paul II spoke of God's particular likeness inscribed also in our human sexuality, as 'a gift and a task'⁴. *Gift* because it's something freely given; *task* because it's not been merely given to us in all its entirety.

All of this anthropological understanding requires new pedagogical pathways. The Church has a long way to go in this regard, given that formation around sexuality has, until recently, been relatively neglected in the teaching of youth, couples, seminarians, and other consecrated persons. Today, moralistic attitudes are no longer sufficient: Youth participating in the recent Synod expressed an explicit desire for further conversation around questions of male and female identity, and the importance of sexuality and corporality⁵. How are we teaching young people to discover the meaning and value of their own bodies? How are these issues being addressed when preparing couples for marriage? Are there avenues by which consecrated persons can fully integrate the sexual dimension into their own life choice? These are tasks that demand concrete action and initiatives, and can no longer be ignored.

There would be other aspects to discuss, but our time is limited. Through the eyes of faith, I've tried to look at situations where our response has been insufficient up until now, certain that it is precisely through these difficulties that the Holy Spirit is beginning to open new horizons before us, and a new springtime will soon emerge from the winter darkness in which we find ourselves today.

The author, originally from Spain, is a consecrated member of Regnum Christi and has served as director of the Institute for Higher Women's Studies (Istituto di Studi Superiori sulla Donna) of the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical Athenaeum, since 2010. She holds degrees in Bioethics and Philosophy (with a specialization in Anthropology). From May 2017 to May 2019, and at the time of the article's original publication, she was head of the Women's Office of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life.

¹ Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation, Ratio Fundamental Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, December 8, 2016.

² Pope Francis, *Address to the General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life*, October 5, 2017.

³ J.G. Ascencio, *Complementarità*, ISSD-APRA, Roma 2019.

⁴ John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, 7.

⁵ Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on *Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment*, 37-39.