

Reports, forum

The Person and the Challenges
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“The hour is coming, in fact has come,
when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness,
the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence,
an effect and a power never hither to achieved”

(Pope Paul VI¹)

The Most Relevant Topic of Our Time at the International Conference “Dignity and Vocation of Woman” on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Pope John Paul II

In recent decades, a huge divide in the understanding of femininity has begun to emerge. On one side, there is the aggressive intention of *gender* ideology which endeavours to strengthen the concepts of *gender and sex* and to erase any trace of the expression of femininity; on the other side, there are the tentative efforts to present the foundations of Christian anthropology and contemporary

¹ Paul VI, Pope, 1965, Address to women, https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651208_epilogo-concilio-donne.html

Catholic teaching on women. Today, in the context of the spread of *gender* ideology, Pope John Paul II's works on women, and in particular his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, becomes an invaluable legacy that can provide a comprehensive answer to a woman's dignity, vocation, and distinctiveness. As stated in the book "Pope John Paul II speaks on women", "Pope John Paul II's philosophy of woman moves beyond both patriarchy and feminism as ideologies that fail to do justice to the fullness of human experience and suppress the aspiration of men and women to their proper fulfillment in a communion of persons."²

The ideological challenges of today, and the fact that 2020 was a year dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the birth of Pope John Paul II, were a big boost for organizing an International Conference "The Dignity and Vocation of the Woman" on this particular occasion. The International Conference was organized by the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow and the Faculty of Catholic Theology of Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania) on the 2nd of October, in Kaunas. The goal of the conference, according to honouring the words of John Paul II, was to reflect upon "a broader vision of the situation and problems of women in general, in an attempt to promote the cause of women in the Church and in today's world."³ The conference venue had to be adjusted due to the corona virus pandemic. Some participants attended the conference with appropriate precautions, but it was still streamed online for foreign speakers and for those who were in quarantine. More than 30 academics from Poland, Latvia, Spain, Slovenia, Italy, Austria and Lithuania presented their papers at the conference. During the opening of the conference and after blessing its participants, the Archbishop of Kaunas and the Great Chancellor of the Faculty of Catholic Theology H.E. Kęstutis Kėvalas encouraged all participants with the words: "We must work like this International Conference team, and meet more often, for two reasons: if we want to commemorate John Paul II and his theological idea about woman's dignity and her genius, we must talk more about femininity. Jesus started to redeem the feminine side of the human person, and this process is continuing. We see in Jesus' behavior that he treated women very differently than in the setting and culture of His time. He started a revolution and a different approach to the woman and the woman's culture. So, we need

² *Pope John Paul II speaks on women*, Ed. B.W. Deely, Catholic University of America Press, 2014, p. Xii.

³ *Pope John Paul II. Letter to Women*. 1995. Available at internet http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html

to continue this revolution to continue the same kind of redemption of femininity. We must go forward. John Paul II gave us the project of the Theology of the body; a project in fostering woman's theology. It is a great step, a great push for us to work harder to make this world more human, more beautiful, and to discover women as a *genius* for this time, for the changing of the culture, and for the changing of our mind sets."

The conference's agenda consisted of two plenary and four parallel sessions. During the plenary sessions, the dignity and vocation of women considered from the perspective of Christian anthropology, primarily as it appears in Saint John Paul II's apostolic letter „*Mulieris Dignitatem*”, were discussed. Professor Žaneta Narkeviča, (Riga's Institute of Religious Sciences at the Pontifical Lateran University, Latvia) during the presentation titled “Woman's identity and freedom in John Paul II's apostolic letter `Mulieris Dignitatem`: An Anthropological Perspective”, said that a woman and a man do not exist side by side, but for each other. Man and woman form a communion where the exchange of love can take place by analogy to the inner life of the Trinity. Jesus Christ returns and restores women's identity and freedom, referring to the truth that is revealed in the Book of Creation”.

The president of the Scientific Committee of the Conference, Rev. Professor Józef Stala (the University of Pope John Paul II in Krakow), delivered the presentation “The dignity of a person in the teaching of Pope John Paul II” and analyzed the basis of anthropology according to Pope John Paul II's personalistic norm, recognizing the personal greatness and dignity of everyone, without any exception. Each person is seen as a human person created by God, oriented towards him, saved by him and constantly sanctified.

Rev. Professor Modris Lacis (Pontifical Lateran University affiliation of Riga Theological Institute) in his presentation: “The creation of the women: Saint Pope John Paul II and Emmanuel Levinas”, analyzed the story of the creation of the woman in the Bible. The history of philosophy and theology shows the development of different doctrines and teachings about this subject. In the teaching of Saint John Paul II, the very foundation of women's dignity is actualized in the 20th century. Some aspects of the Jewish approach by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, were also analyzed in parallel with the Christian perspective.

Rev. Professor Marek Chmielewski (John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin) focused on “A meditative dimension of woman's genius”, in which he expressed the main idea that the term “woman's genius” was used for the first time by John Paul II during the sermon to textile workers in Łódź (Poland), in 1987.

Although this expression has been used only twice in the apostolic letter “*Mulieris Dignitatis*”, the Pope gave an extensive explanation of it. This is a special and inherent sensibility of the woman towards the human being as a person, and towards God.

The second plenary session was addressed to the issue of femininity from a wide range of perspectives. Associate Prof. Micaela Menargues Carreño, (Catholic University of San Antonio in Murcia, Spain) gave the presentation „The person in the three layers: an anthropological personalist approach”. Following personalist anthropology, she explained human sexuality and the rule of each layer on it. Vyngantas Malinauskas PhD, (VMU) disclosed the prevailing concept of dignity in recent times; that it is based on assumptions which themselves are based on an individualistic anthropology. This inevitably affects the state’s social policy aimed at improving the situation of women in society, and the implementation of the protection of women’s rights.

Summarizing his report „Women’s Dignity and New Technologies”, Rev. Prof. Andrius Narbekovas (VMU) stated that a woman’s dignity is exposed when she is treated as an object of commercial structures, which treat the procreative function of women as a purely zoological function.

The work of the conference was crowned by 4 parallel sessions, each dedicated to a specific area. The first parallel session “Dignity and vocation of the woman from the historical perspective” focused on the woman’s dignity from the historical point of view. The second parallel session “Woman dignity and reproduction rights” analysed the Philosophical Basis of Reproductive Rights, Gender ideology and the dignity of women, Certain aspects of modern feminism, Woman’s procreative function, infertility and natural family planning. In the third group “Woman in society: challenges to woman’s dignity” the reflections on the anthropological, psychological, pedagogical, and theological foundations of women were discussed, and the role that women can and ought to have in the Church and in society, were analysed. The moderator of the third panel, Prof. Elżbieta Osewska underlined that restoring the dignity of the woman is a crucial factor in establishing a healthy relationship with people and God. In addition to the historical and social aspect of femininity, much has been said in the fourth session: “Women’s dignity and the theological dimension”. According to the moderator of this session, the Dean of the Faculty of Catholic Theology in Kaunas, Associate. Prof. Dr Benas Ulevičius, there was a lot of discussion about the relationship between femininity, motherhood and chastity, and that each report could become the topic of a separate conference.

The full programme of the conference and the abstracts are available on the internet: <https://teologija.vdu.lt/mokslas/konferencijos/> Most of the scientific presentations delivered at the International Conference “Dignity and Vocation of Woman” are, or will be presented as scientific articles and published in the scientific journal of the Faculty of Catholic Theology, SOTER, which is available on the internet: <https://ejournals.vdu.lt/index.php/SJRS/about>