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RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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First Anniversary of Pope Francis' Election

“Women in the Church”

It is quite likely that seminarians, when ordained, will work in a parish church with an office staff primarily made up of women. I often hear people say that women do not have a voice in the church, but no local church functions without the faith and the work of incredible women. Whether in the administration of the parish, parish ministries or daily mass, women are at the heart of the church. I address this topic because it is so essential that priests and seminarians are comfortable within their own skin and comfortable interacting with women. And not just comfortable, but confident that women are gifts to us as priests and are gifts to parishes for their life-giving ministry. We will look at two movements in this relationship with women: our way of living with them and our way of working and collaborating with them to build up the body of Christ.

Jesus stands for us as our model for relating to women. It is quite apparent from the sacred Scriptures that Jesus had many positive relationships with women, beginning with his mother and continuing through his friendships with the sisters Martha and Mary and, later, Mary Magdalene. Pope John Paul II's *Holy Thursday Letter to Priests*¹ in 1995 begins with a reflection on the primal relationship of every man to his mother. This is the starting point of the priest's relationship with and appreciation for the women in his life. As a celibate man, Jesus remained in a unique and loving relationship with his mother from the Annunciation to the Crucifixion. The *Stabat Mater* expresses Mary's close relationship with Jesus. Many priests are blessed with similarly strong ties to their own mothers—a gift and a mystery they are able to share with Jesus and Mary.

We can contemplate Christ the chaste, celibate man in how he conducts himself with women with both naturalness and ease. We can imagine that there was no awkwardness as the woman washed his feet with her tears (Lk 7:36–50), as he forgave the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:1–11), as he allowed himself to be served by Martha and visited by Mary (Jn 10:38–42) and as he related to his mother. Jesus is our role model in his dealings with all people and particularly with women.

I was recently meditating on John 7:36–50 regarding the uninvited woman who interrupts a dinner Jesus was attending. She enters and immediately anoints his feet with oil and dries them with her hair. How incredibly intimate this moment is! Pope Francis comments on this scene in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “We see [Christ's] sensitivity in allowing a sinful woman to anoint his feet.”¹¹ For a lesser man, this encounter would be fraught with disordered *eros*, but for Christ it is filled with *agape* and the properly ordered *eros*, which is his passionate love for all of humanity.

Human eros needs to be purified in the heart of Christ. Jesus Christ reveals a new way of loving, through the gift of self.

Pope Benedict XVI clarified that the two loves, *eros* and *agape*, can never be truly separated: “*eros* which seeks God and *agape* which passes on the gift received.”ⁱⁱⁱ They ultimately lead one to the other. The Pope Emeritus summarized: “Fundamentally, ‘love’ is a single reality, but with different dimensions; at different times, one or other dimension may emerge more clearly.”^{iv} It is the *agape* of Christ that leads to integration. The danger of compartmentalization can happen very easily. The priest must guard against a divided heart, living with disordered *eros* as he strives to share Christ’s *agape* for the world. It is the power and force of Christ’s love, especially the integration of Christ’s *eros* with *agape*, that transforms hearts.

Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that Christ redeems any disordered *eros* through his purity and passion for each of us: “God ... is at the same time a lover *with all the passion of a true love*. Eros is thus supremely ennobled, yet at the same time it is so purified *as to become one with agape*.”^v

The priest lives as brother and father to humanity. He is called to espouse himself to the church as Christ did. Paradoxically, there is great fruitfulness in chaste celibacy. As a priest gives himself—“This is *my* body”—so too he receives grace from the body of Christ, the church, as he learns how to be ever more a man through the women in his life: mother, sisters, religious, parish staff, parishioners, married women, single mothers, widows, and so on. Their collective “feminine genius” encourages him to be ever more committed and faithful in his nuptial union with the whole church.

John Paul II encourages us: “Every priest thus has the great *responsibility of developing an authentic way of relating to women as a brother*, a way of relating which does not admit of ambiguity.”^{vi} As we have previously discussed, healthy and loving boundaries must be a part of every spiritual friendship and ministerial encounter. Priests are to be proper gentlemen and models of Christian virtue. Thus in our dealings with both men and women, we keep healthy and proper boundaries, which respect the other person and our own calling.

Priesthood is lived in deep intimacy with others, but if that intimacy is not centered in Christ, it could lead to disintegration. A good rule to follow is that if you are feeling a little uncomfortable about your boundaries with someone and you have to ask, “should I be doing this?” then you probably should not. Bounce things off good priests and lay friends—you will be amazed at how wise the people of God are.

A great danger for today’s society is the objectification of women. The media portrays them, and advertising agencies use them, as objects to be looked upon, not as people to be known and appreciated. The amplification of human objectification is one of the reasons we need to take a critical stance toward pornography. The words of St. Paul serve as a reminder and guardian of the sacred space a priest enters into with women: “Treat older women as you would your mother and younger women as you would your sisters, with absolute purity” (1 Tim 5:2). This scriptural citation has served as a touchstone for my own rapport with women.

Jesus, with his naturalness, love and selfless tenderness serves as a model for each of us. In his early thought on the Theology of the Body, John Paul II wrote of the tenderness to which we are called. “Tenderness resides in an inner emotional attitude” and expresses one’s inner

attitude of genuine interior affection. There is a big difference between sensuality and tenderness. Whereas sensuality is aimed at the sexual act, tenderness (as a sentiment) is aimed simply at the other person as a sign of one's devotion or benevolence toward the other.^{vii} "Tenderness is the ability to feel with and for the whole person, to feel even the most deeply hidden spiritual tremors, and always to have in mind the true good of the person."^{viii}

Celibacy is a gift and charism of the church that needs to be protected from the winds of change in our day of hypersexualization and the epidemic of pornography, which is confusing the hearts of men and objectifying women. The priest is to model and be the first among men to show respect and awe for the gift of women in his life in a natural brotherly or fatherly way. He can thus edify and build up the church by his example and make reparation for brothers who have caused severe damage. John Paul II summarizes: "Anyone who is capable only of reacting to the sexual values connected with the person, and inherent in it, but cannot see the values of the person as such, will always go on confusing love and *eros*, will complicate his own life and that of others by letting the reality of love, its true 'relish' escape him." He continues, "The greater the feeling of responsibility for the person the more true love there is."^{ix} Christ is the model for the integration of *eros* and *agape* in his love for others. The responsibility that priests bear for the salvation of souls serves as a reminder of their need to be such men of integration at all times and in every situation "with absolute purity" (1 Tim 5:2).

In his most recent interviews, Pope Francis has been emphasizing the important role of women in the church today. In response to the questions "What should be the role of women in the church? How do we make their role more visible today?" he replied:

[It is necessary to widen the space for more incisive feminine presence in the church.] I am wary of a solution that can be reduced to a kind of "female machismo," because a woman has a different make-up than a man. But what I hear about the role of women is often inspired by an ideology of machismo. Women are asking deep questions that must be addressed. The church cannot be herself without the woman and her role. The woman is essential for the church. Mary, a woman, is more important than the bishops. I say this because we must not confuse the function with the dignity. We must therefore investigate further the role of women in the church. We have to work harder to develop a profound theology of the woman. Only by making this step will it be possible to better reflect on their function within the church. *The feminine genius is needed wherever we make important decisions.* The challenge today is this: to think about the specific place of women also in those places where the authority of the church is exercised for various areas of the church.^x [Emphasis mine.]

Lest he be misunderstood, the Holy Father clarified that he is not talking about making "women cardinals"—he stated "Women in the Church must be valued, not 'clericalized.' Whoever thinks of women as cardinals suffers a bit from clericalism."^{xi} So what is he getting at? The feminine genius must be sought out at every level of decision making in the church. We need not be afraid of this beautiful complementarity of the sexes, but rather should embrace the beautiful differentiation. To be quite honest, women are the strongest and most emotionally resilient people I know. Think of the strength that allows a mother to so selflessly serve her family regardless of the circumstances, or the strength that allows a religious sister to give herself completely and wholeheartedly to the life of the church, to Christ her spouse. I think of the Missionary of Charity Sisters with whom I have spent a great deal of time; these women are certainly the strongest people, spiritually and emotionally, that I have ever witnessed. They put me to shame!

Women also offer a distinct perspective on situations, one that I as a man might never see without their insight. Other feminine strengths include intellectual contributions, integrative thinking, analytical skills, relational acumen and organizational insight. I believe that this is what the Holy Father is speaking of; we need their insight in order for the church to grow and minister to all peoples.

I had a recent revelation when listening to a woman address a group of women. I have given many retreats to women, offered spiritual direction and have been the regular confessor of many women. However, that night I realized that this female speaker was touching the hearts of these women in a way that I could not. It was a reminder and a deeper insight that women have something very specific to offer, not only to other women, but to the whole church. Not only are their insights unique, but when it comes to relationships, women show us the way. It is the women in my life who have taught me to be a better communicator, to share my thoughts, feelings and emotions—something that does not come as naturally to us as men. That is why the book, *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus*,^{xiii} has done so well through the years. (Give it out to couples during marriage prep!).

Throughout my time as a seminarian and a priest, women I have worked with in the church have enriched my life greatly and made my own ministry more fruitful. On the national level, directors of offices at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops were among my closest collaborators. On the diocesan level, our chancellor and the secretary for administration (the number 2 and 3 jobs in our diocese) have been incredible and loving witnesses of faithfully serving Christ. On the parish level, our parish manager and the majority of the office staff were women who offered me great counsel and ministerial assistance. At the seminary, I feel greatly blessed for the presence of the women who assist us in the mission of priestly formation. Dr. Razza and Sr. Margarita are not only great professors, but as members of the formation team, they offer insight that is invaluable (and let's not forget Professor Brodersen and Dr. Martinez, as well as Dr. Froehle and our great administrative staff).

I can remember being at a rectors' meeting and asking for clarification on the *Program of Priestly Formation* (§80) regarding who could be on the formation team. A bishop who was one of the principal authors of the document clarified that the phrase, "should be priests," did not mean "must be priests." He went on to explain that, obviously, the majority of faculty would be priests, but they did not want to tie any seminary down from the possibility of including women on the team in order to benefit from their unique perspective. I have come to greatly value this point of view.

At one time in my life, I would have been afraid to have a woman direct my soul on a retreat. The first time that I was assigned a female spiritual director, I can remember the angst in my heart. However, this was simply my own hang up and an area in which God wanted to beautifully surprise me. The depth, insight and spirituality that I received on that retreat surpassed anything I had ever previously received. All of the women mentioned above are using their God-given gifts to build up the kingdom, shoulder-to-shoulder with priests and other laity. They are smart, insightful, educated, experienced colleagues whose contributions made their work effective and successful due to the "feminine genius" to which our last three pontiffs have referred. Please pray to overcome your fears and ask the Lord to heal any competitive spirit in the church. Open your heart to the beautiful collaboration of women, to their insights and to their love of our Lord and the church.

There have also been numerous religious sisters who have been great sources of inspiration and friendship. There is a great complementarity when we work together to build up the kingdom, not as adversaries, but as coworkers. As Pope Francis said:

I too have considered the indispensable contribution of women in society ... I have rejoiced in seeing many women sharing some pastoral responsibility with priests in accompanying people, families and groups, as in theological reflection, and I have expressed my hope that greater room can be made for a more capillary and incisive [meaning widespread and effective] female presence in the Church.^{xiii}

I offer one last thought, and it is on horizontal, inclusive language. When you have the chance to be inclusive in your homilies and public announcements, please do so. It can be very off-putting to women when we do not say “brothers and sisters” when given the option. I am not talking about changing the scriptural text or liturgical prayers, but rather, recognizing that we are not sensitive enough to this in our speech. It takes precious little effort to make everyone feel acknowledged and welcome.

As my first spiritual director in the seminary used to say, women bring out the best in us. I have always found this to be true and, at the same time, it serves as a reminder that I must always be conscious of keeping healthy boundaries, as previously discussed. I was once told that each of us will fall in love many times in the course of our lives, but we must always ask: Who is our first love? What is our vocation? We must always remain close to Christ and to the vocation to which he has called us.

Please always beware how easily and suddenly our fickle hearts can move from genuine *agape* to a disordered *eros* in our relationships. We need not fear this, but must use this awareness to keep ever-vigilant in our relationship with God and others. An important scripture verse for us to keep focused on is Luke 9:62: “No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God.” Brothers, once you are ordained, there is no looking back. There is great freedom in the promises that bind us!

If one approaches women as people to be respected and cared for with *agape* love, a love that recognizes their value and worth in contributing toward the body of Christ, then work and collaborative relationships will be productive and effective. Women in a priest’s life, far from being obstacles, are meant to draw him ever closer to Christ through healthy, chaste and ministerial encounters.

You will also meet women who have been incredibly hurt by the church and who are deeply wounded; be loving, gentle and patient, be Christ to them. The priest who understands the beautiful nature of women welcomes them into the prophetic mission of Christ, recognizing that it is really their baptismal right to fully participate in the mission of the New Evangelization.

Women remained faithful to Jesus unto the foot of the Cross. Mary Magdalene was the first person entrusted with the message of the Resurrection and, thus, St. Augustine calls her the “Apostle to the Apostles.” The Blessed Virgin Mary remains the archetype of discipleship for all Christians—women are at the heart of the church, in the heart of Christ, and should be close to the heart of every priest. It is important to trust Mary to lead us to Christ: *ad Iesum per Mariam*. It is a call to make one’s relationship with her personal, for Mary embodies the *agape* of Christ. Let us entrust our fears, anxieties and future relations with all people into her Immaculate Heart that our own hearts may be purified. Only then can the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus shine forth through us.

Endnotes

ⁱ John Paul II, Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday (25 March 1995).
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_25031995_priests_en.html.

ⁱⁱ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), §269.

ⁱⁱⁱ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter on Christian Love *Deus Caritas Est* (25 December 2005), §7.

^{iv} *Deus Caritas Est*, §8.

^v *Deus Caritas Est*, §10.

^{vi} John Paul II, Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday (25 March 1995), §5.

^{vii} See also: Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 202–203.

^{viii} Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 207.

^{ix} Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 130.

^x Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America*, September 30, 2013.

<http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

^{xi} Andrea Tornelli, “Papal Interview,” *La Stampa*, December 14, 2013.

^{xii} John Gray, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

^{xiii} Pope Francis, Talk to the Centro Italiano Femminile (25 January 2014).