

WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE SOCIAL ACTION OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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Abstract

This study proposes a look at the role of women in the social action of the Catholic Church from an approach to her Social Doctrine, a recognition of women founders of welfare congregations and two intellectuals socially committed to their time (Concepción Arenal and Edith Stein). Finally, we recover the concept of social conscience in the 21st century, from the gospel message and the participation of women in the Church, posed as solidarity in a care economy.

Keywords: *women, social action, Catholic Church, ethics of care, social conscience.*

Introduction

By relating the concepts of "women, social action and Church we discover that the meaning of each one of them, converges in the way of living and thinking of women who have found Someone who has taken them in and who turns them into women that welcome other people, in whom they discover the face of God.

To consider the role of women and their social action in this third decade of the 21st century is a complex issue¹, in which, as was the case at the beginning of the 20th century, it is difficult to avoid a personal position and commitment. The words of the Catholic feminist Maria de Echarri, spoken more than a hundred years ago, serve as an example:

Up to now we were easily forgiven by the feminists for taking action, because, as a rule, our actions were beneficial, and our visits to the sick, to asylums, to St. Vincent's conferences, etc., did not bother them or overshadow them but, even though there was a writer who, in a recent lecture at the conference at the Athenaeum said that "we did it all for the sake of vainglory and to get some money", they did not feel at all inclined to imitate the example of those who went into the most infectious slums in the name of Christian charity. But lo and behold, to their neutral feminist proclamations, when they are not absolutely secular, claiming improvements for women, it occurs to Catholics to answer by accepting within the banner of the Catholic Church, those improvements, at least, some of them, those admissible ones, those that are not exaggerated so that cannot be accepted. Ah, then the feminists began to be indignant, and they, who brand us as intransigent, allowed themselves to deny us almost, almost the right to act outside a radius of action that is purely beneficial! (Echarri, 1919: 32-35).

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¹ By social conscience we understand the capacity that we human beings have to perceive, recognise and understand the problems and needs of people in our community. The connotation of a Marxist echo that had its meaning in the 20th century, it is being generalised as solidarity in the 21st century.

Christian social thought has to free itself from the prejudices of political ideologies that have occurred throughout the 20th century, from a confrontational vision between capitalism and communism. At present, the dilemma between radical liberalism and Statism is overcome by the need for new proposals that assume the common good of humanity, especially in the situation of crisis and global uncertainty in which we live today, in which technological advances coexist with the impotence of governments to control the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reviewing the history of the Church we find, from its beginnings, the communion of goods in the first Christians and the figures of deaconesses at the service of the community, such as Phoebe or Saint Apollonia; the medieval saints who dedicated themselves to looking after the poor and the sick, as well as the religious congregations of women who have been founded on the vocation to educate and on the dedication to the disadvantaged, the elderly or the sick, and who have been a fundamental part of Christian life.

It was in the 19th century, after the Industrial Revolution, when the concern aroused by the ideals of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the Liberal Revolutions in Europe and America, social conscience¹ was challenged by the hardships of the working class that arose in the marginal areas of the cities. This brought about a change in mentality: from charity and beneficence to the idea of social justice and the consideration of laws as rules promulgated for the common good, guarantors of respect for human dignity.

Charity is the master route of the Social Doctrine of the Church. All the responsibilities and commitments outlined by this doctrine come from charity which, according to Jesus' teaching, is the synthesis of the entire Law (cf. Mt 22:36-40). It gives real substance to the personal relationship with God and with one's neighbour; it is not only the principle of micro-relationships, as in friendships, the family, the small group, but also of macro-relationships, such as social, economic and political relationships (Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, n. 2).

At the beginning of 2021, the exceptional nature of the health alert is extended indefinitely. In addition to the suffering caused by the loss of loved ones or by the after-effects of the disease in some cases, are added the economic crisis and its devastating consequences for many people. Entire families become part of the vulnerable population, they are at risk of social exclusion and unexpectedly find themselves on the poverty line.

The governments of the State and the Autonomous Communities establish lockdown rules and mobility restrictions, and insist on the application of prevention measures such as the use of masks, hand washing and safety distance. A large number of professionals from various sectors such as health, do their work commendably in the front line in the fight against the pandemic, while the service sector, tourism and trade suffers bankruptcies and job losses, the administration and many companies are adapting giving increasing weight to online work.

Numerous public and private institutions, military and civilian, municipalities, neighbourhood associations, media, NGOs... undertake and support social action projects. Many people collaborate voluntarily in the collection and distribution of food for soup kitchens or in the search for housing and employment through associations such as Caritas, which has seen an increase of 57% in the number of requests for assistance to people and families without resources (Paniagua, 2020).

Social and labour exclusion, food, hygiene, housing and health care needs are many of the problems left behind by the economic crisis. Some of these situations are accentuated with particular suffering to intolerable levels in vulnerable groups such as children or the elderly who live alone. Civil society is mobilizing to seek solutions from different types of institutions in our country. Rosa Coscolla and Rafael Ruiz de Gauna (2014) describe the

confluence of different social agents that collaborate in social assistance, often voluntarily and silently. From the convictions of those responsible for each body or entity, the aim is to deal with the needs of the people and also to make a commitment to social transformation and the denunciation of unjust situations.

It is possibly from the social entities of the Church that some of the closest and most immediate responses are being offered to maintain the foundations of this system that is cracking. (...) The social action of entities linked to the Church is very diverse, depending on the group or institution that promotes it, the degree of professionalism they have or the type of services and people they work with. These vary from small groups of volunteers in the parish environment (distribution of clothes, food...), to large institutions in which there are groups that are integrated. Caritas could be a well-known example. While many entities build community with very excluded groups: mentally ill, homeless, prostitution, terminal illnesses... (Coscolla & Ruiz de Gauna, 2014).

Volunteers play a key role, not only because of their dedication and effective action, but also because they establish a relationship of commitment that supports the possibilities of the other. The presence of women in social action volunteering is very significant. The data on society's involvement in the pandemic has grown significantly in the last year, and women continue to outnumber men.²



In the so-called "Welfare State", citizens should have their basic needs covered according to their fundamental rights to housing, education or health care. This model seeks a balance between the resources managed by public administrations and private initiative, which in turn receive subsidies following the principle of subsidiarity. But the question of whose responsibility it is to alleviate the limitations and shortcomings of those who suffer in a system in crisis, aggravates political and social tensions. The right to free public health care or to a quality school is, in practice, a matter whose management is hindered by the profit motive of some companies that can offer services at low costs, to the detriment of workers and the quality of the service. Controversy is rife and volunteering can even become a source of conflict when it comes into competition with workers in a sector affected by its activity.

The principle of subsidiarity³ has its most distant history in Aristotle's thought on the relationship between government and freedom. The Catholic Social Teaching (hereinafter, CST), in Pius XI's *Quadragesimo anno*, establishes according to this principle that what each person can do on their own initiative and with their own strength, should not be subtracted

² <https://www.epdata.es/datos/voluntariado-datos-estadisticas/226>.

³ <https://www.expansion.com/diccionario-juridico/principio-de-subsidiariedad.html>.

from or attributed to society and that what the lower entities can carry out and conduct in an adequate way, should not be absorbed by higher entities, because all social activity by nature is subsidiary.

Donations of inheritances and subscriptions are important for the support of social action projects, which can be sustained over time, without exempting the State from providing the necessary assistance to citizens.

It may be thought that these organisations and entities with their intervention replace and weaken the Welfare State, but in reality they seek complementarity with public resources and networking with other public, social initiative or even commercial agents (Coscolla & Ruiz de Gauna, 2014).

The entities of social action that have arisen around the Church place their emphasis on the dignity of the person and on acting from proximity. Faced with the question of what their task is and how to carry it out, civil society, the administrations and the Church itself have to reflect and collaborate on the basis of mutual recognition.

The pandemic crisis that erupted at the beginning of 2020 in the entire world, is added to chronic situations of suffering and social injustice such as loneliness, especially of the elderly, mental illness, addictions, violence, human trafficking, hunger, wars and economic development at the cost of environmental destruction... all of them are scourges to which we have not responded or paid enough attention on an ongoing basis, in a world increasingly connected by technology and at the same time, insensitive to the suffering of others.

This panorama of uncertainty and lack of hope takes place in an environment of polarised ideological and social tensions. The media, economic and political powers exert pressure and shape an ideology of moral assumptions validated in the normalisation of their use. We arrive at the approval of laws that reflect a hierarchy of values ⁴which reflect a hierarchy of values in dispute with Christian humanism.

In this context, we try to offer a look at women as protagonists in the social action of the Church, referring to different documents of the CST and reviewing the figures of outstanding women in the experience of charity, understood not as compensation for the scruples of a society that perpetuates unjust inequalities, but as a commitment of one's whole life in defence of human dignity, which the Church recognises in the love for all people, whatever their condition.

The social action of the church

Charity is not to be a means of what today is considered proselytism. Love is gratuitous; it is not practised to obtain other objectives. But this does not mean that charitable action should, so to speak, leave God and Christ aside. The whole human being is always at stake. Often the deepest root of suffering is precisely the absence of God. Whoever exercises charity in the name of the Church will never try to impose the faith of the Church on others. They are aware that love, in its purity and gratuitousness, is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and who urges us to love. The Christian knows when it is time to speak about God and when it is opportune to be silent about Him, letting only love speak. They know that God is love (1 Jn 4:8) and that he manifests himself just at the moments when he does nothing more than love (Benedict XVI, 2005).

⁴ Organic Law 3/2007, of 22 March, for the effective equality of women and men; Law 2/2016, of 29 March, on Gender Identity and Expression and Social Equality and Non-Discrimination of the Region of Madrid; Euthanasia Law passed in Congress in December 2020.

Jubany (2018) highlights several documents of the ecclesiastical Magisterium that are a guide for carrying out the Church's social action.

The first is the "Tarraconensis Provincial Council", held in Catalonia in 1995. In its chapter "Caring for the poorest and most marginalised" believers are exhorted to ensure that there is no separation between the Christian message and specific actions. It reminds all those who participate in the Eucharist that they will not do so with dignity if there is no solidarity with the poorest and if they do not share their goods.

Furthermore the Pastoral Instruction of the Spanish Episcopal Conference, "The Church, Servant of the Poor" of 2015, offers valuable reflections on the feminisation of poverty, highlighting the increase in the number of women affected by economic hardship. Some of them are even victims of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, particularly foreigners, deceived in their country of origin with false offers of work and exploited here in conditions similar to slavery. It also points out the need to increase prevention measures and legal protection, but above all, to promote better education and a culture of life that leads to the recognition and respect for the equal dignity of women.

New forms of poverty are emerging in the context of the technological society, with the overwhelming increase of addictions (to online games, pornography, the use of mobile phones and social networks), loneliness and mental illness.

The Archbishopric of Barcelona published some guidelines in 2018 and proposals for a pastoral conversion, with the title "Sortim!", "Let's go out!", in which a series of recommendations for social action were given. There were six proposals to implement: 1) to discover through the eyes of Jesus the poverty that surrounds us and the causes that provoke it; 2) to develop solidarity programmes; 3) attention to unemployment and job insecurity; 4) to intensify the work already being done for refugees and migrants; 5) to take care of experiences of fragility (illness, loneliness, marginalisation, disability); 6) to go towards a poor Church.

Among the Church's institutions dedicated to social action, Caritas is the best known. Religious orders are also present in all the fields of the so-called "Fourth World", caring for people living in poverty or marginalisation, who live in the First World and live with material and/or spiritual poverty.

St. John Chrysostom recalls this vigorously: "Not to make the poor share in one's own goods is to rob them and take away their lives. What we have are not our goods, but theirs" as the Catechism says in number 2446 (Laz. 1,6).

The Church proclaims the Gospel to the poor and the suffering

The laws of social life are illuminated by Christian revelation. The truth of man is revealed in his dignity by his vocation to communion with others, to justice and peace.

In economic and social matters, the Church's mission is different from that of the political authorities and is concerned with the ordering of the common good to the ultimate Good. It inspires just attitudes in the use of goods and in socio-economic relations, but the Catechism goes so far as to make explicit the rejection of the atheistic and totalitarian ideologies associated with communism and socialism in modern times, as well as extreme individualism and the absolute primacy of the law of the market over human labour in capitalism (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992, no. 2425). It seems impossible that social peace can be resolved in a dilemma of political ideologies.

The CST was created as an evangelical response to the plight of the workers in the 19th century after the Industrial Revolution. It has a permanent value that is articulated in response to History, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit and is rooted in an ever-living tradition. It proposes principles, criteria and guidelines for action and states that any system in which social relations are determined entirely by economic factors is contrary to human nature. Greed is the cause of many conflicts. Any practice that reduces people to a means of

profit turns money into an idol and contributes to the spread of atheism. It is necessary to promote a regulation of the economy that, on the one hand, is not completely centralised, nor does it depend solely on the free market.

The tradition of the Church recognises the very face of Jesus in the poor. The beatitudes place at the heart of the Gospel the promise of salvation to all who suffer hunger, pain, loneliness and any kind of poverty. The works of mercy (clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the imprisoned, burying the dead, sheltering the homeless, assisting the poor) are a witness to charity and a duty of justice.

In spite of the failings of many of us in the Church who live attached to material things, the Gospel is explicit: "Whoever has two coats, let him share them with those who have none" (Lk 11:41).

The Church throughout its history has worked to care for the disadvantaged. The one who gives receives much more than the one who is assisted. St Lawrence the Martyr, when the prefect of Rome demanded the riches of the Church, presented the poor of his community as his only riches. Over the past two centuries, the social advancement of people has been based on education as the engine that drives the development and empowerment of individuals, communities and countries.

From its origins, the Church has had the care of the poor as its mission. This is recounted in the Acts of the Apostles. St. Luke describes the characteristics of the first Christian communities: communication of goods, austerity and attention to the needs of each person. St. Paul also reminds us of the need to work so that no one lives at the expense of others (1 Thess 4:11-12). The poor are central to the Gospel: at the end of life we will be tested for love.

As the parable of the poor Lazarus tells, he, covered with sores, begs at the door of a rich man who feasts without attending to him. When Lazarus died, he was taken by the angels to heaven and the rich man suffered torments without being able to cross the abyss that separated them and that he himself had opened by his indifference to the suffering (Lk 16:19-31).

In this way Jesus denounced what often happens, also in these times: the poor are invisible to the vast majority.

Charity and/or solidarity?

In our days, the dialogue of Christians with many citizens, associations and institutions of all kinds, who collaborate for greater social justice and for the dignity of all people, shows that an ever greater part of the population does not know what the Church is.

Christians are faced with the need to make themselves known in environments for which, over the last decades, the Church is seen by many with prejudices, as a hierarchical, patriarchal, sexist, retrograde institution and on the margins of the progress of society, when not, suspected of being attached to old privileges, oppressive and corrupt, especially at times when the media have uncovered scandals about the abuse of minors. However, despite this distorted image of the Church, society in general has great confidence in its educational and welfare work.

The work of the Church extends to the liturgical, evangelizing, cultural, educational, and charitable spheres. The evolution of the Church's social and assistance centres has increased by 71% in the last 9 years, which means a total of 9,119 centres in operation for social assistance: hospitals, clinics, homes for the elderly, poverty alleviation centres, orphanages, day-care centres, centres for drug addicts, centres for victims of gender-based violence... (Caritas.Boletín Por tantos).

The expression to give alms, even if it is a work of mercy, is a formula that has fallen into disuse as it is tinged with a hint of inequality, which reinforces the perception of inability

and lack of autonomy of the recipient. For this reason, we more frequently use the word donation instead of alms and the term solidarity, which expresses empathy towards the person who receives the help, instead of charity.

"(...) the principle that today we call solidarity ... Leo XIII enunciated it several times under the name of "friendship"...; by Pius XI it is designated by the no less significant expression "social charity", while Paul VI, broadening the concept, in accordance with the current and multiple dimensions of the social question, spoke of "civilisation of love"¹⁹³. John Paul II highlighted how the social teaching of the Church advances in the area of reciprocity between God and man: To recognise God in each person and each person in God is the condition for authentic human development. The articulate and profound analysis of the "res novae", and especially of the great change of 1989, with the fall of the Soviet system, shows an appreciation for democracy and for the free economy, within the framework of an indispensable solidarity (Pontifical Council, 2004, no. 103).

The word solidarity is one of the most used terms in all fields. It is fashionable. The debate is whether it is better to be supportive or charitable. We can see that those who defend the goodness of solidarity do so because they understand that the relationship between the one who shows solidarity and the one who receives the solidarity action is established on a horizontal plane; while when speaking of charity, they interpret that the charitable person is placed in a position of superiority with respect to the one who receives the help, and nothing could be further from the authentic meaning of charity, because caritas is love.

In the last decades of the 20th century, the CST incorporated solidarity as a fundamental category of social morality, thanks to St John Paul II. Solidarity was created within the secular matrix of the social movements of modernity (as the secularised version of fraternity) and, therefore, with its back to the ecclesiastical moral doctrine, sometimes even against it. Gradually, however, it was taken up by the Church's Magisterium, to the point of becoming an inescapable concept of reference in Catholic social morality. John Paul II introduced solidarity among the list of Christian virtues, linked it to social justice (and both in terms of the growing interdependence between people and peoples, a key that points in the direction of the awareness of the world as a global village), and relates it to charity (Martínez, 2006).

Solidarity is a firm and persevering determination to work for the common good, which created the conviction that we are all responsible for social justice. If we refer to solidarity in these terms, we are doing nothing other than basing its definition on what it means to be charitable. There is no point in debating whether the relationship is on a horizontal or vertical plane. No charitable or solidarity action between individuals should be based on these value criteria. There is no basis for these actions other than human dignity. A dignity inherent in every man that cannot be questioned.

If for some, the term charity may suggest an idea of superiority of one over the other, it is due to a misinterpretation of the term. Charity implies loving the other unconditionally. Perhaps this way of understanding love is not the result of a secularised humanism, but of the Gospel that teaches the possibility of loving in this way in Christ. Thus, charity establishes the informative principles of solidarity. Only from love, the ultimate act of human freedom, do we understand the constant striving for the common good, which is not possible as long as there is some social, material, physical, psychological or spiritual suffering (De la Calle Maldonado, 2016).

The Witness and Teaching of the Bishop of Rome: Pope Francis

In the history of the Church, the witness of charity of Christians has followed the message of Jesus. It has been in the last two centuries when charity has evolved towards the idea of social justice and working to denounce the structural causes that provoke poverty.

Pope Francis had a motto in his pontificate that is fully identified with charity and service to the poor. In his *Evangelii Gaudium* he referred to the homeless, drug addicts, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly, migrants... the "discarded". For Francis charity cannot be understood as charity or paternalism. The poor are for us the face of Christ (Jubany, 2018).

Francis also mentioned the people who are subjected to different types of exploitation by the mafias, in a clandestine factory, in the prostitution network, in organised begging, in irregular work. He especially referred to women who suffer situations of abuse and violence, who are often less able to defend their rights. Also the unborn children, the most defenceless of all.

The great risk of today's world, with its multiple and overwhelming offer of consumption, is an individualistic sadness that springs from a comfortable and greedy heart, from the unhealthy search for superficial pleasures, from an isolated conscience (...) I invite every Christian, in whatever place and situation he finds himself, to renew right now his personal encounter with Jesus Christ or, at least, to make the decision to let himself be found by Him, to try to do so every day without rest. There is no reason for anyone to think that this invitation is not for him, because "no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord" (Francis, 2013, no. 2).

The feminine disposition

St. John Paul II uses this term for the first time in the apostolic letter "*Mulieris Dignitatem*," and in subsequent texts he has tried to clarify what it means. We could define the feminine disposition as the set of specifically feminine gifts- understanding, objectivity of judgement, compassion, tenderness, welcome and tenderness that are manifested in all peoples (Vivas, 2003). These can be a manifestation of the Spirit, a gift from God, and they do not occur only in women. The feminine disposition is the condition for a profound transformation of today's civilisation. The Pope pointed out on more than one occasion that there are systems that nourish structures of sin, of death, and that structures of life are needed. The feminine disposition would carry this fecundity that engenders life and that would make the system of death explode. It manifests itself in a series of gifts that women have, who embody them in the normality of everyday life.

One of the criticisms made of St. John Paul II after "*Mulieris Dignitatem*" was that it seemed that the feminine disposition excluded rationality in favour of compassion and sensitivity. The Polish Pope made it very clear that the feminine disposition is not a contribution exclusively for women but for all humanity. Pius XII already said that woman was the image of God and not just a companion (partner) of man. And St. John XXIII made a very good contribution by noting the incorporation of women into the public sphere as a sign of the times.

John Paul II's passion for women is certainly linked to his predilection for Mary. Let us not forget his childhood, with the absence of his mother, who died when he was a child. What the Pope says about the woman he speaks looking at Mary. His pontifical emblem itself is a Marian motto: "*Totus Tuus*". For him, Mary is the woman who perfectly embodies the feminine disposition. He sees in her "the" woman, and his feminine discourse emerges from this point of view. There are two significant statements of his. One, the one that reminds us that woman is part of the living structure of Christianity. The second is that womanhood belongs to the constitutive heritage of humanity and of the Church herself.

Women: identity and difference

Nowadays we are immersed in a current of thought that tends more and more to deny the difference between men and women, or to pose the difference from the point of

view of confrontation. We are all called to surrender, we carry it in our hearts and our bodies express it, but how do we surrender? as we are, as men and as women.

The human person can exist in only one mode: as a man or as a woman. This shows the contingency of the human being, that is to say, it cannot be everything, if it is a woman it cannot be a man and if it is a man it cannot be a woman at the same time (no matter how much the liquid culture of Post-modernity pretends the opposite and proposes sexuality as an option to choose and to build according to each one). God thought of the creation of the person as man and woman to reflect His image (which is love and communion).⁵

Sexual difference is where the *imago dei* resides, as Trinitarian analogy and openness to communion. Our sexed being indicates that we are originally made in correlation with another. The other presents himself to me as identical (in his being a person) and at the same time, because of his sexuality, radically another with the connotations that this implies at all levels. We are created within a constitutive polarity (it is not accidental). In order to be able to say "I" in a complete way I have to be able to refer to another.

The term "sex" refers to the different, the difference. A difference that does not break the unity of the nature belonging to each of the two, but always emerges within it.

The category "other" is broader than the category "other sex". But the original elemental experience of otherness is presented through sexual otherness.

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, St. John Paul II wanted to deepen the fundamental anthropological truths of man and woman: in the equal dignity and unity of the two; in the deep-rooted and profound diversity between the feminine and the masculine and in their vocation to reciprocity, complementarity, collaboration and communion (CF. N 6).

This dual unity of man and woman is based on the foundation of the dignity of every person, created in the image and likeness of God, "who created them male and female" (Gen. 1:27), avoiding both an indistinct uniformity and a static and impoverishing equality and an abysmal and conflicting difference (St. John Paul II, Letter to Women, 8).

This difference can be an opportunity to meet the other or an excuse to confront the other. It is true, we are different and sometimes it is difficult to meet. But, paradoxically, we attract each other, we need each other. It seems absurd that we seek unity and at the same time do not know the way to achieve it. More than absurd, is actually the consequence of sin, which pits us against each other in the so-called "war of the sexes".

When one knows oneself and recognises the richness of diversity, one also realises one's absolute dependence on God (one cannot be absolutely everything if it is not with another, rather if it is not with the Other). In femininity and masculinity is incorporated the filiation, the dependence of the human being on his Creator. Recognising our own limit, we open ourselves to God. Masculinity and femininity reveal the sign of the difference by which God manifests his otherness.⁶ Difference is necessary just as identity is necessary; both are dimensions of love between people. But they occur especially in male-female love. They are identical because they come from God, their body reveals it to them through which they relate to creation, but they are above creation; that loneliness that they feel opens them to transcendence and one opens to the other, because they are different from the rest of creation. They call for unity.

They are different; each one expresses that dignity and value in a different way. That difference makes them aware that they both need each other and realise that they do not

⁵ Part of this content is taken from Socla, A. *HOMBRE-MUJER. El misterio nupcial*. Pontifical Lateran University, 1998-2000.

⁶ All these references are taken from from Campbell, C.C. *Mis hermanas las santas*. Ed.Rialp, Madrid 2016.

have in themselves what they need to be happy. They are interdependent. They move towards each other to advance together towards a common horizon. Sexual difference is a call, written on our bodies, to love.

In God the masculine and the feminine find their synthesis, therefore man and woman reach their fullness by remaining in relationship with God and they must look towards Him in order to remain together and be complete.

In that sense, conjugal prayer (in which husband and wife pray aloud together) is a precious space for sharing and discovering the difference between spouses. They learn from each other to pray with the nuances of the other sex, with another sensibility, with another heart (male or female), both seeking the same thing: The fullness and a true encounter of love (with God and with each other) but each one lives it and expresses it in a different way.

Women founders and philosophers

The search for women's identity and the recognition of their dignity, equal in rights to men, in the last decades has produced a vertiginous turn in the review of women's history, in the vindication of their contributions in all the fields of knowledge, science, art and in history itself.

The appreciation of the role of women in social assistance and any other manifestation of a charitable nature has traditionally been linked to the institutions of the Church, and one can find figures of great women who have been agents of true social transformation looking at the world from the faith, with the eyes of the heart and dedicating their lives to those who suffer.

The light of faith does not lead us to forget the sufferings of the world. How many men and women of faith have received the light of suffering people! St. Francis of Assisi of the leper, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, of her poor: They have captured the mystery hidden in them. In approaching them, they have not removed all their sufferings, nor have they been able to give a full account of all the evils that afflict them. The light of faith does not dispel all our darkness, but, like a lamp, it guides our steps in the night, and this is enough for us to walk. To the man who suffers, God does not give him a reasoning that explains everything, but responds with a presence that accompanies him, with a story of good that joins every story of suffering to open in it a glimmer of light (Francis, 2013, no. 57).

Santiago Cantera (2016) makes a historical overview of the social action of the Church in which the committed presence of women is recognised, from the primitive communities, at the side of the Early Fathers, in the fraternities, hospital orders and medieval confraternities, in the service of the Beguines (women of common life without vows) or in all the religious orders, which in later centuries have followed the call to charity.

These are a sample of some women, mostly saints, who consecrated their lives to prayer and assistance to the poor:

St Elizabeth of Hungary(1207-1231) queen and benefactress of the needy, **St Catherine of Siena**(1347-1380) doctor of the Church; **St Rose of Lima**(1586-1617) first woman canonised in America, servant of Jesus in the poor, main patroness of the New World, the Philippines and the West Indies; **St Louise Marillac**(1591-1660), wife and mother, founder of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, caring for the sick, orphans, the elderly, the insane; **St Jeanne Jugan**(1792-1879), French, began her vocation as the founder of the Little Sisters of the Poor entrusted entirely to Providence, leaving her own bed to an old blind and paralysed woman, picked up by her from the street on a winter's night, begging from door to door for alms to cover her daily needs; **St Maria Micaela of the Blessed Sacrament**(1809-1865) Founder of the Adorers, Slaves of the Blessed

Sacrament and of Charity, with a contemplative dimension projected in her apostolate for the liberation of women marginalised by prostitution and other forms of social exclusion; **St Soledad Torres Acosta** (1826-1887) Founder of the Handmaids of Mary, a congregation for the poor and sick; **St Bonifacia Rodríguez de Castro**(1837-1905) nun from Charra, as a young cordwainer, promoter of workshops for the promotion of women, canonised by Benedict XVI, founder of the Congregation of the Servants of St. Joseph and chosen as patron saint of women workers, she dedicated her life to the service of working women and to the protection of young girls in distress; **St Teresa of Jesus Jornet and Ibars**(1843-1897) Catalan, a teacher who lived a long time of search in different congregations and founded the Little Sisters of the Elderly Forsaken in Barbastro, canonised by Paul VI in 1974, was proclaimed patron saint of the elderly by John Paul II; **Blessed Jeanne Marie**(1862-1916) who entered the Marian Slavery of St. Louis Marie Grignion de Monfort affirming that it is the easiest, shortest, perfect and surest way to reach union with Jesus Christ, took care of the women factory workers in Valencia, whose motto for her beatification by John Paul II in 2003 was "an event of God for the working world"; **St Nazaria Ignatia**(1889-1943 Argentina) being a Little Sister, she felt new calls from the Lord to a missionary life, dedicated to evangelising the poor and above all to work for the union and extension of the Church in America, interested in the workers' movements, the suffragette demands and incipient feminism. Her congregation received final approval on 9 June 1947 as the Crusader Missionary Sisters of the Church; **St Teresa of Calcutta**(1910-1996), benefactress of humanity, founder of the Missionaries of Charity, who, responding to the thirst of Jesus, are recognised by their sari, serving the poorest of the poor in India and throughout the world.

We now turn our gaze to two women from our most recent history: Both are seekers of truth and their lives are traversed by their commitment to reality, from thought and action, each in a different vocation.

Concepción Arenal(1820-1893)

Galician writer, journalist and prison inspector in the 19th century. A woman of intellectual and philanthropic restlessness open to many fields, she was sadly marked by the loss of her father in childhood, in painfully unjust circumstances, due to his political ideology. Concepción lived her youth in opposition to the role of a woman busy preparing herself for a marriage interested in social position.

Progressive for the conservatives, reactionary for the liberals, she entered university dressed as a man, a heterodox Catholic within the officialdom of the Church, Concepción Arenal always renounced all political militancy.

She fought from her Christian convictions for a more just society, when liberal ideals were considered in part a threat to the Church. She takes the dimension of human fraternity from Christianity. The sign of Christianity is fraternity and charity understood as empathy with the other. She was one of the forerunners of feminism and pioneer promoter of social work in Spain, she collaborated with the Institución Libre de Enseñanza. She worked tirelessly in defence of women's rights, for their access to higher education and participation in positions of responsibility.

She succeeded in improving penitential institutions by ensuring a more dignified treatment of women in prisons that could favour their social reintegration. "Condemn the crime, but pity the criminal" is one of his most quoted thoughts.

She collaborated with her friend the violinist Jesús de Monasterio in the creation of the feminine branch of the charitable societies called Conferencias de San Vicente de Paúl and wrote among many other works her Treatise on the Visitor of the Poor, Papers on the Education of the Woman of the Future, Charity, Philanthropy and Charity and the Basis for Prison Reform, which were approved by the Cortes.

Concepción was trying to put into practice what she defended in her writings. Her reflections on the reality of poverty surprised many.

The poor man, we say, is untruthful, careless, unpredictable, ungrateful. If instead of saying "the poor" we were to say "poverty" we would be more accurate and less aggressive, because the evils that are in things make us think of great means to avoid them and command tolerance.

Among her works, the Manual of the Visitor of the Poor stands out. The book opens with the question of what pain is. For this thinker, life was a school of suffering in which one must acquire strength. She empathised with the pain of others and made it her own. In her thinking she started from philosophy and then moved on to practical matters, because she wanted to have an impact on society. She is one of the first builders of what we know as civil society.

On her return to Madrid Concepción met Juana de Vega, widow of Spoz y Mina, to whom she had dedicated her essay on charity. She became her friend and protector and would help her to develop her charity projects. They would support a complete charity project in this more inclusive sense.

In 1864 she was nominated visitor of prisons in La Coruña, she had the opportunity to channel her reformist will but she did not last long in the post, which was eliminated in the summer of 1865. Concepción Arenal then published "Letters to delinquents" where she defended that most crimes are committed out of ignorance or poor education of sensitivity and that it is essential to ensure that prisoners can then return and reintegrate into society.

Well, if someone is in jail it is because they have committed a crime and so they deserve punishment. Very well, but that this punishment has an objective, which is to reintegrate the person, to return them to society in better conditions than when they entered prison. Either the prison has that objective or it serves no purpose at all.⁷

The last years of her life were rather bitter, because she felt misunderstood by the official sectors of Spanish society. She was better understood abroad, where she was appreciated like some people of the Instituto Libre de Enseñanza.

Concepción continued to work all her life to raise the cultural level of women, faithful to her belief that the education of women is as important or more important than that of men, because only by opening homes to a true education of women will it be possible to influence society and achieve true development:

"We call charity that which is nothing more than justice. To give it one name or another is not indifferent, justice obliges, charity does not" said this intellectual, in clear harmony with the CST, "To satisfy above all the demands of justice, so that what is already owed as a matter of justice is not offered as charity" (2446, AA8) and with St. Gregory the Great, in reminding us that when we give to the poor what they need, we give back to them what is theirs, we fulfil a duty of justice (Past. 3:21, in Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992, no. 2446).

Edith Stein(1891-1942)

The German philosopher and Catholic saint, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, known as Edith Stein (1891-1942) wrote, "The Lectures on Women", where she developed the gift that women possess for the care and assistance work.

Stein always fought for women to have access to the professional and cultural world because she knew that it was a wealth that society was missing and not only that, but also

⁷ RNE Documentos. Concepción Arenal, una reformista entre la ciencia y la fe.

because, "she believed that women who have not developed their capacities in knowledge and creativity throughout their lives, when they have had to continue alone due to widowhood or separation, have had many difficulties" (Ruiz-Alberdi, 2012).

For Edith Stein the First World War was, in a certain way, the discovery of women in nursing. She drew attention to the enormous courage and role that women took on in assisting the many wounded on both sides. She herself worked as a nurse during the war and when the war ended and she returned to college, she wrote:

The nations of Europe, which in the World War have fought each other to the death, have all collapsed together...and only all together can make possible a movement to lift them up. This requires the cooperation of women, both through good electoral practice and through accepting and holding public office.

This philosopher always showed Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ, as the best role model for women, who had a hard and difficult life and was able to lead a contemplative life, married and widowed. Widowhood came to her very young with all that she was going to experience in the Passion of the Lord, and she endured it alone, without the support that Joseph would have been for her. This model for women means that, in any place, situation or state, a woman can lead an interior life full of fruitfulness towards others. This characteristic of the feminine disposition is the basis to understand the presence of women in the Church, for that, Edith Stein began by explaining how the human being lives her relationship with God and for that she went to the Genesis: The original nature that manifests itself in the mission that God gives to man and woman.

The fact that the tempter approached the woman first could mean that he could find easier access to her, not because the woman would have moved more easily towards evil (they were both still free from an inclination to evil), but because what was proposed to her was of greater importance to her in itself. It must be accepted that, from the outset, her life was to be more strongly affected by that which had to do with the generation and education of her offspring (Stein, 1998).

To which she adds with great hope: "Just as temptation came first to a woman, so the proclamation of God's grace comes first to a woman, and here as there, the yes that comes from the mouth of a woman decides the destiny of all humanity" (Stein, 1998).

Edith asks herself what motherhood means for a woman, to which she answers that she is made to protect, take care of, guard, teach and nurture, but not only her family circle, but also all the people around her (Stein, 1998).

In 1930, Stein realised that women's lives were beginning to change and so she envisioned a full and dedicated life. At the Science Institute in Münster she spoke about the mission of the Catholic university:

The task of many women today is to lead a solitary life in the world. Whether they are in the profession only because they are forced to do it to earn their living, or because, for lack of anything better, they wish to fill their lives in this way, in the long run it will be a tiring struggle in which they exhaust themselves emotionally. But if in the circumstances you see the call of God who invites you to dedicate all your strength and you follow this call, then your life will become a full and fruitful woman's life; a life for love, an activity in which your strength comes to its development, a spiritual motherhood, because the bridal love of God embraces all of God's children. (Stein, 1998).

The whole change of life that was coming for women is glimpsed in the recognition that St. Paul VI (1965) made towards women at the Closing of the Second Vatican Council and the last words were:

Women, you who know how to make the truth sweet, tender and accessible, dedicate yourselves to make the spirit of this Council permeate institutions, schools, homes and everyday life (...) Women of the whole universe, Christians or non-believers, to whom life is entrusted at this grave moment in history, it is up to you to save the peace of the world.

Today is a time when the nature of the woman linked to the experience of motherhood and her vocation to donation is deeply questioned. Their incorporation with full rights into all professional fields in culture, science, art and the highest positions of political and social responsibility, offers a painful contrast with the experience of many women who see family reconciliation and the care of their own lives relegated to second place. One example: immigrant women who make great sacrifices to offer their children opportunities for progress and a decent standard of living, fleeing situations of violence and poverty. There is a cruel paradox: how a majority of women have left their young children in their home countries with their own mothers or sisters, to come to developed countries to care for other women's children and the elderly. Another example: women who feel obliged to be the best professionals, and at the same time, the best wives and mothers at home and lose their serenity in this useless desire to be superwomen.

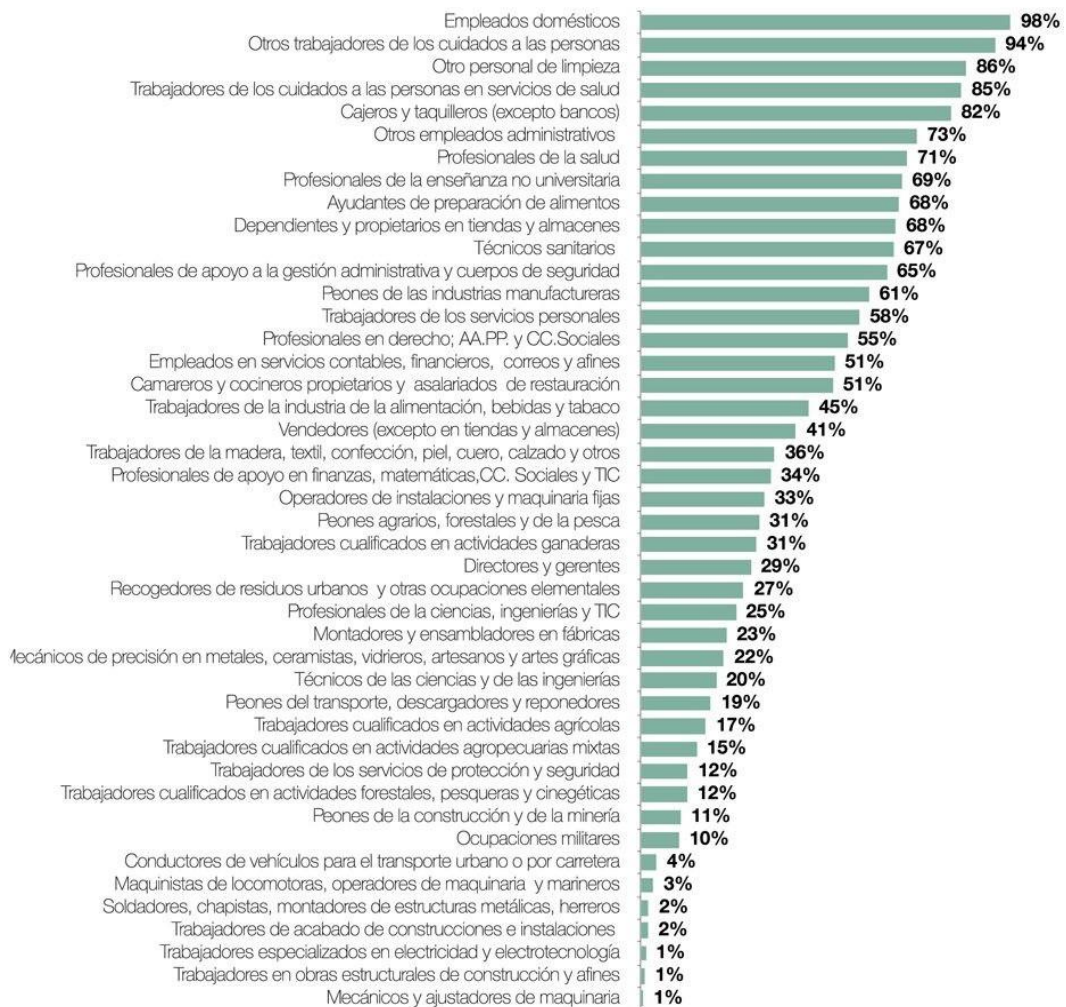
The woman of the 21st century: agent of the solidarity economy and the ethics of care

In general, the so-called ethics of care is proposed within the framework of civil society and the solidarity economy (Elzo, 2014) as an alternative to consumerism and individualistic society; it is a model that places the care of life and the importance of emotional dimensions, relationships and interest in the person at the centre of moral life.

As opposed to ethics that seek the purely formal (such as Kantism), the merely legal (such as some interpretations of the ethics of law), or that decide on the basis of individual or social benefits (such as utilitarianism), the ethics of care seeks to focus on the subject, on their relationships and affections, on their way of "imbibing" an ethical situation or problem, and on their desire to decide in the way that most favours the well-being of the other, even above abstract rules that fail to understand the emotional dimensions of each situation (Pascual, 2021).

Traditionally, women's predisposition to adopt caregiving roles has been relied upon as a natural way of acting. This may explain, in part, why the majority presence of women continues to be perpetuated in professions directly related to the care of dependent persons, domestic help, health care and child education.

Participación femenina por ocupaciones en 2018



Fuente: INFORME ANUAL DE EMPLEO CEPYME - RANDSTAD 2018 (Elaboración propia a partir de los micro-datos de la EPA y los totales de población activa)

Many voices, especially in the ranks of feminism, have criticised women's differentiated orientation towards service as reductive and promoting injustice. Women, according to these authors, do not think only in terms of affection and responsibility, nor are men reduced to making calculations based on law or universal principles.

People with functional diversity, especially women, suffer institutional violence at all levels. Many of those who are in a situation of dependency have not been able to pay social security contributions because they have been working in the care or service sector. Now, those who have families are in turn cared for by the women around them. And these other current caregivers, also women for the most part, do not receive recognition for their work, since in many cases it is not valued or, since it is done on a voluntary basis, it is not perceived as productive work, but as something that "is just the way it is, the law of life". What is not productive, the time spent caring does not count. We have assumed that things are the way they are and we have little critical spirit to change them. In turn, the most disadvantaged people, people with disabilities or caregivers themselves have little scope to unite and raise their demands (Botwin, 2017).

The claims of gender ideology defend that social roles and the attributions of ethical behaviour between men and women are the result of education and even of a discriminatory situation in which women have always been relegated to service duties and domestic needs.

Fernando Pascual points out in this way that the ethics of care cannot be ethics only for women, but that it responds to the deepest needs and demands of every person. Human beings, by their very nature, are called to exist from others and for others.

An ethical action that does not take into account the other in their value and dignity as a human being does not correspond to the true good, which we can all discover, men or women, from the heart that loves others for what they are and for what they mean to us (Pascual, 2021).

It is not a discriminatory sign to recognise that women may have a special predisposition or capacity to live in this way. It is an opportunity to propose to everyone, men and women, to think and act in a way that welcomes the other as being valuable in oneself.

Women ask for and manage micro-credits to set up small businesses in developing countries (Castro Fernández, 2003). They have also been protagonists in the foundations of religious orders that work, not only in developed countries, but especially in the missions in developing countries, dedicated to the most needy. They are committed to the so-called "economy of solidarity or economy of care for life", as opposed to the economy of monetary return.

InteRed is a non-governmental development organisation working in 16 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. It was founded in 1992 promoted by the Teresian Association, from which it takes its socio-educational perspective as a reference. Its aim is the promotion of each and every person, with special attention to the most impoverished and excluded. It relies on education as an eradicator of poverty, inequality and exclusion. It works in development projects giving priority to the education of women, with an evangelical approach of ecofeminism, global citizenship and interculturality.

The CST encourages the support and stimulation of solidarity economy organisations to respond to the distressing situations of poverty. It encourages us to denounce and to put an end to the situations of injustice that devastate the planet, our common home, which cries out because of the destruction that we human beings are inflicting on it, and also to human beings, especially women and children, who are subjected to slavery, disdain and discrimination and whose lament we want to silence. As Zervino says, they are the wounds of Jesus in today's world that cry out for:

The migration of unaccompanied children and the forced division of families; the refugees caused by wars and conflicts who live in subhuman conditions; the trafficking of people for prostitution, dishonest work, organ trafficking and renting of wombs; the victims of the arms and drug trade; women wounded, abused, discriminated against by macho cultures and also by hedonistic cultures that seek in abortion and in the reduction of the poorest peoples the solution to the lack of an adequate distribution of wealth; the families without shelter, without land, without education, without food and without work when science and technology applied to an integral ecology would allow us to live fraternally and taking care of our common Home (Zervino, in Martínez, 2019).

This commitment is what a true social conscience in people, opinion groups in networks, NGOs, political parties, communities, companies, local administrations, governments of countries and international organisations puts together a new ethics of care.

St. John Paul II in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* urges awareness of individual and collective responsibility. He points to the disconcerting realisation of our most recent period in history: Alongside the intolerable miseries of underdevelopment and the growing pockets of poverty in the so-called Fourth World, we find a kind of over-development, equally unacceptable, because, like the first, it is also contrary to the common good and to authentic happiness.

This over-development, which consists in the excessive availability of all kinds of material goods for some social categories, easily makes men slaves of "possessions" and immediate enjoyment, with no other horizon than the multiplication or continuous substitution of the objects they possess by other more perfect ones. It is the so-called civilisation of "consumption" or "consumerism" that brings with it so much "waste" or "rubbish" (John Paul II, 1988, no. 8).

The outbreak of the pandemic seems to have brought about a sudden awareness in this sense, making the technological society numbed by virtual leisure look at what really matters.

The XXVI Training Course in CST, promoted by the Episcopal Committee for Social Pastoral and the Paul VI Foundation in 2019, was an impulse for reflection and dissemination of the model of civil economy, as a paradigm for sharing experiences of solidarity economy and public policies aimed at achieving social justice within the framework of the Welfare State.

History at the present time places great expectations on the participation of women as leaders to make this compromised model of society possible. (Fuentes Alcántara, 2020).

Suffering reminds us that the service of faith to the common good is always a service of hope, looking forward, knowing that only in God, in the future that comes from the risen Jesus, can our society find solid and lasting foundations. In this sense, faith goes hand in hand with hope because, although our earthly dwelling is destroyed, we have an eternal mansion, which God has already inaugurated in Christ, in his body (cf. 2 Cor 4:16-5:5). The dynamism of faith, hope and charity (cf. 1 Thess 1:3; 1 Cor 13:13) thus enables us to integrate the concerns of all people in our journey towards that city "whose builder and maker was to be God" (Heb 11:10), because "hope does not disappoint" (Rom 5:5). In unity with faith and charity, hope projects us towards a certain future, which is situated in a perspective different from the illusory proposals of the idols of the world, but which gives a new impulse and strength to live each day. (Francis, 2013, no. 57).

Psalm 84 sings that "mercy and faithfulness meet, righteousness and peace kiss each other": While faithfulness springs from the earth, righteousness looks down from heaven. That is to say, the only and definitive justice can only be expected from God. Only in the Christian hope is complete justice promised, which reaches all those who have been treated unjustly throughout history. It is the promise of the beatitudes. (Catechesis on the Psalms of John Paul II).

Conclusions

Women have been a fundamental link in the relationship between God and humanity throughout the centuries. In Genesis this link is already manifested at the time when Eve is expecting a child and feels that she has been blessed by God (Stein, 1998) and, later on, Mary, with her divine maternity, will be the bridge to the most sublime, being the Mother of all. Sacred Scripture speaks to us of the strong woman, the one who is able to raise the family, do the housework and also to be a transmitter of peace and conciliation with those around her. The Gospel speaks to us of the group of "good women" when referring to that silent, loving and faithful female companionship to Jesus Christ.

At the Congress on "The Role of Women in the Church" organised by the Latin American Academy of Catholic Leaders (2020) when interviewing Paola Binetti, one of the participants, she said:

The contribution of women is the same in the Church as it is in society: It depends to a large extent on her individual characteristics, just like the man, and partly on her capacity to be a woman in her generative dimension, capable of including also different people, of understanding their needs in an empathic way, of having a helping relationship in which the ethics of the cure is set out, the capacity to take care of others. In religious life, women's orders have taken care of sickness and disability: in hospitals and home care.

This feminine specificity is based on the so-called feminine disposition of St. John Paul II and presenting all that women have given throughout history, founding religious orders, creating schools, associations, collaborating in parishes and doing volunteer work and social action. This work has not always been recognised, as numerous testimonies and letters of the Popes have shown.

The access of women to the world of work, in spite of the added difficulty of combining work and family, has not meant the abandonment of their vocation of service to those who suffer, to the care of the sick and to the Catholic Church.

The 21st century has shown how women have reached all spheres of society (at least in the West) since some closed doors were opened to them until the beginning of the 20th century. Taking into account this new situation, which has been achieved with the effort and sacrifice of many women, their presence in peace processes and in decision-making should be taken into account more.

On 4 February 2019 at the celebration of International Women's Day (organised by the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations), speaking about human fraternity, the president, Maria Lia Zervino said:

Women in the Church during the pontificate of Pope Francis have a special place. Many, many Catholic women want vindication. I do not think so. We have to act out of conviction. We can, because of our suitability, be at the service of the Church on all fronts and Pope Francis is right when he says that we have to be in places of decision making, because we can perfectly help in decision making in discernment, in listening, in courage... we need with the World Union of Catholic organisations, to take up this challenge of Father Francis.⁸

This can be achieved. Just as there were great women, in other times, like St. Teresa of Jesus (who was able to reform the Carmelite Order with the difficulties of that time), St Elizabeth of Hungary (who combined her reign with dedication to the poorest) or St Teresa of Calcutta (who has gone down in history for her love for the most needy and who was honoured in India with a state funeral when she died).

Today there are also great women who work in the midst of these hard times to reconcile their jobs with their family responsibilities. Others, from the religious vocation, in the cloister or in the missions, many of them making up for the lack of vocations, which supposes their untiring dedication in multiple humanitarian and assistance works or maintaining Catholic schools with few resources; and why not, remember the group of the "good women", those elderly ladies who silently accompany Jesus Christ in the parishes, collaborating in the liturgical activities, in Caritas and in the assistance to the most disadvantaged.

For all these reasons and looking at the very difficult situation that humanity is suffering, women will always be a light within the Catholic Church, to show the world the Love of God, through charity in welcoming, tenderness and care, which is the reflection of the person they have met, Someone who has said to them: Come and follow me.

⁸ This video plays the interview to Maria Lía Zervino president of of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations at International Womens' Day. <https://youtu.be/p9dAQSTtefl>.

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