



## SEÇÃO: MULHERES NO CRISTIANISMO

### Mary: the locus to speak of the feminine

*Maria: el locus para hablar de lo femenino*

*Maria: o locus para falar do feminino*

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**Abstract:** The way in which a culture understands itself and its relationship with the sacred shapes not only religious life, but also a way of being in the world. The same can be said in the opposite direction: the religious sphere can be captured in some anthropomorphism to justify a position that excludes. Taking this premise into account, we can look at the position of women in the early church, the roles they played, and how and why the relevance of their performance was minimized through misogyny that occurs in different contexts of Christianity as a historical construction. By misogyny we understand a posture that engenders forms of discourse and practice that transform women into objects. Anchored in religious discourse in order to legitimize male hegemony, misogyny established a stereotype justifying female inferiority and submission. By understanding woman in the role Mary had as a woman and mother in the history and discourse of salvation, specifically in the incarnation, we can propose a positive perspective that goes beyond history and corrects some of the distortions of historicism with regard to the role of women.

**Keywords:** Woman. Protagonist. Concealment. Mary.

**Resúmen:** La forma en que una cultura se entiende a sí misma y su relación con lo sagrado configura no sólo con la vida religiosa, sino una forma de ser y estar en el mundo. Lo mismo podría decirse en sentido contrario, el ámbito religioso también puede ser captado por el antropomorfismo para justificar algunas posiciones excluyentes. Teniendo en cuenta esta premisa, entendemos que la misoginia presente en diferentes contextos del cristianismo fue una construcción histórica que se ancló en los discursos religiosos para legitimar una hegemonía cultural masculina que instauró una visión estereotipada que justificaba la inferioridad y el sometimiento femenino. Por misoginia entendemos una postura que engendra discursos, afirmaciones y prácticas que terminan transformando a la mujer en un ser genérico con determinadas características. Ante ello, el presente artículo, propone investigar la posición de la mujer en la iglesia primitiva, los roles que desempeñaba, cómo y por qué se minimizaba la relevancia de su desempeño. Desde la comprensión del significado del papel de María como mujer y madre en la historia de la salvación, proponemos una mirada positiva al papel de la mujer.

**Palabras clave:** Mujer. Protagonismo. Ocultación. María.

**Resumo:** A forma como uma cultura compreende a si e sua relação com o sagrado molda não apenas a vida religiosa, mas também um modo de ser e estar no mundo. O mesmo pode ser dito na direção oposta: a esfera religiosa pode ser cooptada pelo antropomorfismo para justificar posições excludentes. Tomando em consideração tal premissa, compreendemos que a misoginia presente em diferentes contextos do Cristianismo foi uma construção histórica que se ancorou em discursos religiosos com a finalidade de legitimar uma hegemonia cultural masculina. Por misoginia, entendemos posturas que engendram discursos e práticas que transformam a mulher em objeto, justificando posturas de inferioridade e submissão. Diante disso, o presente artigo se propõe a investigar o papel que as mesmas desempenharam na Igreja primitiva e como deu-se o seu ocultamento. Propomos, a partir da compreensão do significado de Maria, como mulher e na história da salvação, um olhar positivo para a referida temática.

**Palavras-chave:** Mulher. Protagonismo. Ocultação. Maria.



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## Introduction

*"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."  
(Gal 3: 28)*

If Christianity indeed posed an alternative – an option of inclusion and the egalitarian – to ancient Greco-Roman culture and empire, how shall we understand misogynistic and exclusionary attitudes in Christian history itself? First of all it is necessary not to idealize but to understand that human processes are ambiguous; then it is important to recognize that Christianity was not left unscathed by the cultural circumstances surrounding it at different points, which affected the responses it made during its history (SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, 1995, p. 81). Yet both the Old Testament and the New Testament in the Holy Scriptures show that women sometimes played prominent roles. So does the record of some behaviors and identifications emerging in the early church, even in patristic writings that, by the very name, concerns "the fathers". The aim here is to demonstrate that woman played a prominent role in Holy Scripture and in the early church, yet a question that arises in this regard is to what degree those roles were concealed for cultural reasons. At the same time, some insights from the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus, invite a better understanding of the figure and role of women based on the significance of the incarnation of the Word of God.

We find that misogyny is also represented in some biblical and patristic texts. In writings of Paul the Apostle and in some writings by Tertullian (Latin) and John Chrysostom (Greek) in particular, the association of original sin with sexual sin reinforced a Neoplatonic and Hellenistic idea of the priority of the soul over the body in an exaggerated form that asserted abhorrence of the body. Such an idea reached its apex as a projection on the female body seen as a place of pleasure and temptation.

Thus, in the writings of the Apostle Paul we find this statement: "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord, because the husband is the head

of the wife as also Christ is the head of the church. But as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (Eph 5:22). Unfortunately, Paul's analogy reflects a complex hierarchical world view that was taken as an ideological position, perpetuated by men in power, and accepted by those they dominate. In this manner it has presented a behavioral pattern that seems to work all by itself to establish the inferior condition of women without regard to the historical sediment in the idea. Furthermore, this ideological application was codified in a system of reference points that has had strong repercussions to this day.

Some biblical texts thus served to produce a distortion, a rule or canon of interpretation, that made them correspond to certain strange models, and then countless other biblical texts were used to support these positions in a point of view that acquired a particular degree of timelessness in the wider historical context (SCHÜSSLER-FIORENZA, 1995, p. 89). The articulation of this kind of exegesis functioned to obscure or conceal the fact that the expression of beliefs is itself situated in specific times, places, and historical periods. Threading a clear path through such material can be like walking through a minefield. A cautious approach is therefore necessary in order not to succumb routinely to the temptation to think in polarized terms of good and evil, male and female – and to fall merely into another historicism.

As well, working out such a path and answering the question of historical misogyny embedded in Christianity itself is not so easy because, along with looking for a resource that supports equality among human beings, it is necessary to articulate difference. The determination of difference is still pending, in part because the reasoning of science has not been able to resolve it or propositions of gender complementarity.

Yet we can say clearly that while going beyond such difficulties is a challenge at all times, breaking with discriminatory bonds and practices is also a divine mandate, a response that those who listen to the voice of God express, the key examples being Jesus himself and Mary.

## 1 Women and Jesus

First, let us focus on the positive attitude of Jesus towards women recorded in the Gospel and recognize the need to involve women in church life and structure. Pope John Paul II provides a picture in his writing about the Scriptural narrative of creation that helps develop a new understanding. He expressly stated that:

Each woman therefore is the only creature on earth whom God willed for its own sake. Each woman from the beginning inherits as a woman the dignity of personhood. Jesus of Nazareth confirms this dignity, recalls it, renews it, and makes it a part of the Gospel and of the Redemption for which he is sent into the world (MD. 13).

The New Testament does not exactly contain a theology of women, but the spontaneous expressions of Jesus make the cultural limits of his time flexible accepting men and women on an equal bases (TEPEDINO, 1990, p. 69). In the text of the Gospel it is possible to recognize the significant presence of many women who were among Jesus' early followers, who also accompanied him as he journeyed with the Apostles through the towns and villages, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God. For instance, the Gospel names Joanna wife of Cuza (MD. 13).

When Jesus was arrested, women accompanied him to the foot of the cross and stood firm, even when nearly all his disciples fled. Women were also the first witnesses of his resurrection, the main witness being Mary Magdalene. Hence, she came to be called "the apostle of the Apostles". As John Paul II observes, Mary Magdalene was the first eyewitness of the Risen One, and for this reason she was also first to bear witness to him before the Apostles. This event crowns all that has been said previously about Christ entrusting divine truths to women as well as men (MD. 16).

The strength of this testimony about her in the Gospel actually led to forming a tradition making it possible to suggest that historically Mary Magdalene was a prophetic visionary and leader within a sector of the early Christian movement after the death of Jesus. While some details of these gospel stories can be questioned, they reflect

the prominent historical roles women played in Jesus' ministry as disciples.

Directly or indirectly, overtly or subtly, the hegemony of male power has, however, impacted all levels of society at different times. It has made invisible through such a conception of the world and language. Such introjected values silenced the voices of countless women (veritable ghetto). Jesus, while a Palestinian Jewish man of his time whose race, gender, and divinity gave him privileges and authority, was also a figure rejected by those with established authority religious and secular alike. Yet a curious incident occurs when a gentile woman, a Canaanite, teaches Jesus that the ministry of God is not limited to a restricted group (Mark 7: 24-30). To Jewish, the word Canaanite smacked of all that hostile, all that they were supposed to steer. That even Jesus learned something through this woman. This text is full of a multifaceted sense of relationship, and it records a complex dialogue of domination and resistance. We may wonder how such an account, the story of the encounter between a foreign woman and Jesus, can illuminate our access to the role of women in Jesus' time. But this text portrays a Canaanite woman who has crossed the barriers of gender, sexuality, and nationality, and the story records a social critique that transcends social norms and conventions about the roles to be played. It was a kind of hinge that sunk into the door of history wide open. The assertive dialogue of Jesus shows him using courage, urgency, and necessity to transform the barriers of gender and race. This is emerged from Mark. Where do we need to be opened into God's values of inclusion? The miracle of this story is the overcoming of all distances between her and Jesus, to which the healing offers proof.

## 2 Paul and misogyny

*"The women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak".*  
(1 Cor 14:34)

The Apostle Paul is one of the most emblematic figures of Christianity. His letters and some attri-

buted to him undoubtedly influenced all Christian thought. His ideas impacted history through his actions and his teachings. Yet portions of his letters are controversial to twenty-first century sensibilities in texts such as this one, begging the question whether he was misogynistic:

Also, that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman [be silent] with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor (1 Tim 2: 9-15).

It is not surprising that many women see in Pauline's texts the main cause for an overly androcentric view of Christianity (SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, 1995). Preach and theologian can get into trouble, such a claim could be a blood-warning and the case of considerable theological problem. The model implemented in this theological framework maintained a power structure, and the female body continued to build rules and norms on it through history for the faithful to follow and to act upon, as if these precepts were to be understood as universal. According to theologian Elisabeth Schüller Fiorenza (1995, p. 81) this vision is reflected in discriminatory practices insofar as equality is claimed with respect to structures and ecclesiastical office in a long sexist vision and the cry for equality and freedom within the Church.

Here is another such text:

But I want you to know that Christ is the head of the male man, and a husband the head of his wife, and God the head of Christ. Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered brings shame upon his head. But any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled brings shame upon her head, for it is one and the same thing as if she had had her head shaved (1 Cor 11: 3-6).

This passage has been a stumbling block. In fact, it seemed such a male chauvinistic abuse of text. Elisabeth Schüller Fiorenza (1995, p.81) sees the question of the oppressive role of the discursivity and, at the same time, the need to

make a historical approximation of the texts, in view of a reconstruction of the collective memory regarding the situation of women in Christianity.

For centuries, Christian authors have tried to make equality and subordination compatible simultaneously by stating that equality refers to spiritual goods and that subordination persists in temporal matters, which leads to fragility in the argument itself.

In this text, Paul makes a complex hierarchical analogy in which women occupy an inferior position. Additionally, women are admonished to observe a strict dress code while praying or prophesying, and the only dress code applied to men has to do with covering their heads, shaming them as if they are women. Second, the statements reinforce the inferiority that was due to woman's creation after man in the biblical narrative of Genesis. Her nature derives from that of man who is created in the image of God, and she is created out of man's rib. Despite the conciliatory tone of the closing lines of this passage, it is impossible to undo the damage done by Paul's words in the first part.

To answer the question whether Paul was misogynistic, we believe that the Apostle had an androcentric world view, but was not a misogynist because women exercised a leadership role in the primitive faith communities he addresses, as he himself acknowledges. The role women play as leaders of nascent community is demonstrable.

### 3 Women in primitive communities

After the death of Jesus, women continued to play prominent roles in the early community (TEPEDINO, 1990. p. 124). Perhaps the most prominent example is Luke's statement that "All these continued together in prayer along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus" (Acts 1:14), although what correlates to leadership is a bit murky because of the concealment that accompanied statements about their roles in the adverse cultural circumstances at the time. According to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1994, p. 130) there was a very strong experience of equality. Paul's letters offer some interesting

information. In the Letter to the Romans, the author greets the deaconess Phoebe as well as Priscilla, who together with her husband Aquila risked their lives to save him. He also mentions Mary, Junia, and the sister of Nereus, who worked and traveled as missionaries (Rom 16:1-15). There is clear evidence of active female apostleship in the early works of spreading the Christian message, and they played vital positive roles within Christian narrative.

Paul's letters also offer some important insight into the inner working of early Christian churches, a word that means "gatherings" (lit. "assemblies"). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1995) trace the meaning *Ekklesia* to the word *to*, to summon forth, call invite, indicating all those called by the Lord to form his Body, the gathering on earth. In fact, the original of *Ekklesia* is not church, but "public assembly". The translation process that transformed *Ekklesia*/ assembly into *Kyriake*/ church indicate historical development that privileged the manorial/ hierarchical form of the church.

These groups did not own church buildings but met in homes, no doubt due in part to the fact that Christianity was not legal in the Roman world of their day and in part because of the enormous expenses for fledgling communities. Yet we see women taking on leadership roles in house churches. Paul speaks of such women who were leaders – Apphia (Philemon 1:1), who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea as a deaconess ( ), Tryphena and Tryphosa (Rom 16:1-12) as well as Priscilla, who travelled and ministered with him (Acts 18:8). This practice is confirmed by other texts that also mention women who ran churches in their home, such as Lydia of Thyatira, the dyer of purples (Act 16:15), and Nymph of Laodicea (Col 4:15). It is noteworthy that Lydia evidently had some economic independence.

Women held positions and played significant roles in groups. Brazilian theologian Ana Maria Tepedino highlights the role of women as a model of discipleship (TEPEDINO, 1990, p. 87). These positions are further remarkable because they are not strictly women's roles. They were apostles and prophets in the early church. The New Testament

contains various references to female prophets, women who were respected for their apparent ability to speak for God, or to know God's will, or to proclaim accurately what was otherwise unknowable by any normal means, such as the future. Prophetesses were mentioned in general by Paul (1 Cor 11:5). Luke also mentioned some specific female prophets such as Ana and the four daughters of Philip of Caesarea (Acts 21:9). Furthermore, Luke attributed prophetic characteristic to Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, and to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The internal structure of the early church and its position in society also contributed to the autonomy and influence of women in pre-Constantinian Christianity. In the first centuries, there was a Ministry of Widows and Deaconesses, who carried out their service in leadership animating communities through administration of the sacraments and the teaching of the word. According to historian Ute Eisen (2000, p. 48) the positions of widow and deaconess were held by women throughout the first five centuries of the church. Yet recent epigraphic and literary research has also given significant credence to the thought that women's religious roles were far more numerous and their authority far greater than originally believed.

During the first century, Christians were a group unconcerned with political matters and known for their indifference to positions of power. This low level of political ambition helped to slow down the process of corruption among church leaders. Furthermore, the early church lacked a hierarchical structure, which allowed community participation and equality in church administration to grow. The local churches of the first apostolic diaspora were the first to grant women such a leading role; in this sense they are in the revolutionary line of the Jesus whom they followed by going against currents in society that legitimized discrimination of the female sex.

#### 4 Patristic writings and the construction of a stereotypical view

The second through sixth centuries associated

with patristic thought offer profound insights into the unfolding gender relations envisioned in early western and eastern Christianity.<sup>2</sup> We point to the misogynistic incorporation of women in the first normative developments of an ecclesiastical system.

Against a world background of Roman imperial tribute to a panoply of gods and goddesses and cultural Neoplatonism, the primitive church initially had to face not only persecution bringing about the deaths of many martyrs, but also numerous philosophical and social differences called "heresies or deviations of understanding", especially from Gnostics and Arianism who proposed variations of religious belief and practice. These heresies cut off a given group or separated groups of believers from the rule of faith throughout one global household, as it were, of the church. As well, the fourth century was deeply influenced and even determined by political contours arising from the "Constantinian turn" when Emperor Constantine gave liberty to the Christian cult. After that, the relationship between Christians and the Roman Empire progressively changed in a drastic manner. As the political and administrative disintegration of the empire proceeded through several centuries and became visible to the naked eye, the Roman Empire collapsed in the West in 476 A.D. for reasons of internal corruption and external invasions from the North, and in 1453 A. D. in the East with the fall of Constantinople. As social structures crumbled, the church initially suffered greater instability, but the amalgamation of church and state also placed more power, at least temporally, in the hands of the clergy who began exercising the tasks of government and of the head of state (MACMULLEN, 1984). Faced with numerous controversies, the church systemati-

cally assumed more centralized and centralizing positions, and the role of women was pushed to the periphery as clerical roles began to dominate.

Nowhere in Christian literature are such tendencies more evident than in some patristic exhortations, particularly those of Tertullian in the Latin West and John Chrysostom in the Greek East. Some patristic writers recalled the ancient days of Greece and Rome in which women were under the strict control of their fathers and husbands (GARDNER, 1986). In a kind of nostalgia for a supposed social order, people attributed physical and mental weakness to women and assigned them little more than the status of property instead of personhood. They were to accomplish only household chores such as spinning, cooking, and raising children in positions akin to that of slaves. The context shows how this problem manifested itself rhetorically in ethics and politics.

Emblematic of this period are some statements of Tertullian identifying women as the personification of evil.<sup>3</sup> This association was followed by an iconic definition of the causes of sin. *She* brought sin into mankind and forced Christ to make the choice to die in his cause as he sought to remedy the situation.

Tertullian states outright as if speaking to women personally:

You are the devil's door: you are the one who unsealed that (forbidden) tree: you are the first defector of divine law: you are the one who persuaded him [man] that the devil was not brave enough to attack. You so easily destroyed the image of God, man. Due to your desertion – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die (BLOCK, 1995, p. 57).

According to him, it is the woman's fault that the man was seduced, and in this she broke the living image of the divinity in man and condem-

<sup>2</sup> According to the Jesuit theologian Paulo César Barros, the relatively broad period identified by patristic theology can be classified into two parts, that of apostolic writers and ecclesiastical writers and that of "church fathers" but several phases. Apostolic writers from the first into the third century include Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna while apologists include Justin, Martyr and Philosopher, Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. Mature patristic thought made its mark in the East through Basil, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzus, while in the West, the end of the fourth century and beginning of the fifth saw the emergence of Ambrose, Augustin, and Jerome, and then, in the sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great (BARROS, 2009, p. 5-10).

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian was born in Carthage, in the year 155 A.D. and there he exercised his profession of lawyer when, in 193 AD he converted to Christianity, starting also to exercise the activity of catechist in the church. His intelligence as a superior rhetorician in appealing to the cruel and persecuting Roman Empire for the Christian right to religious freedom before is duly noted. But becoming discouraged by the sinfulness of Christians, Tertullian himself later fell prey to the heresy of Montanism.

ned human beings to ruin (DUNN, 2005, p. 8). The serpent knew that she was the weakest link and chose her accordingly.

Here we see one of the main sources of that underlie the negative projection of women in the church – the fear linked to the human struggle to control the body and sexual instincts: "The distrust of women in the writings of the early Church Fathers is at least partly attributable to a refusal and to setting up a barrier against the constant presence of the body" (BLOCH, 1995, p. 39). This belief led to fear of sexuality. The female body personified in Eve perdured in a male theological imagination as the figure of an ancient enemy, one that persists as cursed, that was a destroyer rather than the destroyed.

The woman can be the one who provokes to sin because of the chains that affect the man in his own sins, in which he will perpetrate what attracts him. Montanist ethics led Tertullian to believe in the absolute necessity of abstinence and to conclude that women were sexually dangerous. In addition to calling women "the devil's door", he ordered them to bow their heads to their husbands, spend time at home "spinning wool", and to dress in "the silk of modesty, the linen of holiness, and the purple of chastity". As can be seen in these remarks, the woman's identification with evil has its roots in the perception of the body as inferior to the soul as well as the identification of nudity with shame, and of passion as the enemy of contemplation. These are concepts present in Hellenistic philosophical dualism.

Along with misogyny, then, came the idea of controlling the body and sexual pessimism. According to him, human life had a virginal origin in the Garden of Eden but had plunged into the abyss after the "Fall" with the institution of so-called sexual mores. In commenting on Paul's declaration pointed out that "it is good for a man not to marry" (1 Cor 7:1), his real desire was for everyone to abstain from marriage because it had gradually risen out of carnal concerns and desires. The practice of celibacy began to develop during the third century although it persisted unpopular until the fourth century when the rise of

monasticism gave it an appropriate channel and expression. In primarily economic and political reforms of the eleventh century over lay investiture of religious authorities, however, clerical celibacy was also adopted as a universal norm in the western church.

Another eloquent early writer, John Chrysostom (1985, p. 231) reads the stories of creation and the Fall narrated in the first three chapters of Genesis in contrast to the first chapter in which the first human beings were only men who enjoyed the blessing of being the image of God. On this basis Chrysostom asks what authority means. "What is like this?" "What does authority mean?" According to the author of Genesis, he says, only men possess this quality like that of God in heaven. Then man on earth has no superior and ruler over him but has authority over all beings including woman. She, on the other hand, is called "the glory of man" by Paul (1 Cor 11) because she is under man's authority.

Such a perspective was further adapted to send out a message of female inferiority. The natural hierarchy was disturbed by the first sin when the body (Eve) did not obey its head (Adam); rather, he was seduced by the body and submitted to it. Genesis 1 – 3, read with the help of 1 Corinthians 11, thus conveys the notion that sexual hierarchy was inherent in creation as the nature of things. Chrysostom argues that female subordination may be attributed to this nature, but not merely this. In his exegesis (2013, p. 6) Chrysostom thus provides a theme of female inferiority and submission, which then governs the interpretation of the creation and "fall" stories: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And it was not Adam who was seduced, but the woman who, being seduced, fell into transgression". The male gender had greater honor. Man was shaped first by God.

Elsewhere Chrysostom deals with primacy by saying that man was not created for woman, but woman for man (1 Cor 11: 9). He refers to the curse in Genesis 3 when God says to Eve that her desire "will be for her husband, but he will rule over you" (Gen 3:16). Chrysostom understood this

to mean that the wife is subject to her husband, but later the idea was extrapolated to women being subject to men in general. His statement, "this had not been told her before", indicated his belief that such subjection was also a consequence of the "fall". In other words, Chrysostom does not argue that this hierarchical arrangement was strictly based on the created order. He explains it explicitly by reasoning those women were now subordinate to men because Eve had misused equality with Adam.

### 5 Rethinking the foundations for Christian gender equality

Such texts as these leave us with the task of rethinking the foundation for Christian gender equality in face of the reality that sexual difference reveals a fundamental aspect of human life. The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* by Pope John Paul II, already cited at the beginning of this article, is a reflection on the biblical anthropology present in the man/woman relationship as in which one can see an unfolding of a physical-practical-spiritual reality. On John Paul II's intellectual horizon guided by life experience, the conviction clearly emerges that the human being is realized in a double modality of male and female. According to the Pontiff (2021, p. 23), the fall has a particular effect on our capacity to understand the original goodness of the human body and the loving relationship of mutuality for which God created humankind as male and female. Thus, sexuality is an inextricable part of the theological dimension, not separate from it.

The reason that the human being is like God is God's choice in creating us in his image and likeness to be person-communion-gift. John Paul expresses the thought that the person's call to love is reflected in the body, which is materially capable of expressing love in two different ways, male and female. The "other" thus placed within us is an "another I", yet not an extension of me: "From the very beginning they appear as a 'unity of two', and this signifies that the original solicitude is overcome, the solicitude in which man does not find a helper fit for him" (MD. 6).

Thus, man and woman together constitute the image of God in creation, but the divine aspect of this image is in unity-in-difference. This is a fundamental relationality that amounts to a trinitarian love between God and humanity. The relational opening in two complementary directions of the human person is therefore a key reciprocal complementarity that corrects the imbalance in the interpretation that holds only the woman to be a complement. Both the woman and the man are, as it were, complements to God, and this is the foundation of the deep meaning of sexuality. For this reason, sex is constitutive of the person and not only its attribute, and the sexual difference is an original reality that cannot be dispensed with, which participates in the absolute value and dignity of the person. This "other" is a sacrament, a visible sign of grace given by God, an invitation: "to say that man is created in the image and likeness of this God also means that man is called to exist 'for' others, to become a gift" (MD. 7).

That the Adam of paradise did not find company until someone appeared before his eyes who was "flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone" marks a level of equality that can never be lost sight of (Genesis 2: 18). John Paul II leaves no room for ambiguity: "only the equality – resulting from the dignity – of both – as person, can give the reciprocal relationship the character of an authentic *communio personarum*" (MD. 10).

Once such a foundation for thinking about gender equality in the creation narrative as such is established, we can take another step and can try to approach the biblical story of human origins through the interpretative lens of the incarnation and suggest what might constitute a redemptive narrative.

### 6 Mary a proposal for feminine reconciliation

Mary's "yes" points to God and reminds us of the divine mystery of the incarnation. As the Apostle Paul says: "In the fulness of time, God sent his son, born of a woman" (Galatians 4: 40). The account of the Annunciation in the Gospel highlights the relationship between the trinitarian revelation of

God (Father, Son, and overshadowing Spirit) and the woman, which takes place in a dialogical way. The dialogical here reveals a relational character that guarantees recognition, alterity, and freedom for both parties (MD. 13).

In the incarnation God recreates the world through the conception of Christ in Mary's womb, and the church becomes the focus of a new creation in which goodness is symbolically restored as an anticipation of the renewal of all creation at the end of time. With her *fiat*, Mary becomes the authentic subject of union with God being realized in the mystery of the incarnation of the Word who is of one substance with the Father: "God from God, light from light, true god of true God". Not only is this man made in the image and likeness of God as Adam was, but this Man is also God. All of God's actions in human history always respect the free will of the human "I". And such was the case with the Annunciation at Nazareth (MD 4). This is significant because Mary as a redeemed woman lives a deep alliance with God and, consequently, as a mother, becomes an active participant in her own redemption. Mary is God-bearer. Her unconditional adherence to God marks the theological place to think about power relations:

Virginity and motherhood co-exist in her: they do not mutually exclude each other or place limits on each other. Indeed, the person of the Mother of God helps everyone - especially women- to see how these two dimensions, these two paths in the vocation of women as person explain and complete each other (MD. 17).

Thus, Mary's virginity speaks of a singularity that is not simply restricted to ascetic practices of sexual abstinence, but presents a free and conscious response to a project that transcends human history. This sentence is extremely important for changing the way in which certain historicisms have qualified and subordinated woman. The project that transcends history is the fact that "The Word become flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1: 14). Christ is born through non-gene-

rative paternity and generative motherhood in a way that interrupts religious genealogies of the patriarchal heritage and restores to the maternal body its place of significance. That is, through this "yes" of Mary, it is possible to reaffirm a conciliatory vision that identifies other elements of a theological narrative, those that do not disregard sexual difference within a redemptive vision but integrate it.

This locus between the divine Father and human mother is a reality full of creativity that gives rise to an elation that unifies, that overcomes dualisms and reconciles various human dimensions. "And so this new motherhood of Mary generate by faith, is the fruit of the new love which came to definitive maturity at the foot of the Cross, through her sharing in the redemptive love her Son" (RM, n. 23). Her loving hospitality, offering her body to be God's home. By her faith, she brings Christ's love and salvation into this world. The motherhood of Mary does not exclude the Mother of Jesus from community of the redeemed. Mary belongs, in a unique way, to the people of God, because of her participation in the history of salvation; she generated and continues to generate Jesus (BRUSTOLIN, 2017, p. 85). As the Mother of God<sup>4</sup>, Mary becomes co-redeemer of men and women in the mystery of Christ<sup>5</sup>; as the Blessed Virgin, she becomes a model of being human. Virginity and motherhood recall all these relationships. This reconciliation of opposites without loss of distinction touches the depths of women's partnership through the ages.

### Final consideration

*"Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord".*  
(Luke 1: 42-45)

Talking about Mary's virginity and motherhood, we do not intend to sacralize or hide the problems that concern women's lives, such as patriarchy, domestic violence, and the outright killing

<sup>4</sup> It was in Ephesus at the Ecumenical Council of 431 A.D that Mary was declared *Theotokos*, has been stated by the Second Vatican Council in Chapter VIII of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*.

<sup>5</sup> The Council of Ephesus was preserving the divine of Christ and not just establish the veneration of Mary.

of women. If femininity is merely a projection of masculinity, there will be no true theology of relationality. Enforced feminine silence, or the concealment of women, registers a deeply violent category in human experience. Since the feminine struggle has been silenced or ignored so often historically and socially, it is imperative to review the socio-historical representations and practices that have led to such imbalance (STRÖER, 1998, p.106).

Our aim in this article was simply to demonstrate that misogyny occurs also in representation and interpretation of some biblical texts. We start from the assumption that some patristic writers associated original sin with sexual sin and thus reinforced a Greek idea that the body needs to be abhorred. Such an idea reached its apex in a projection on the female body seen as a place of pleasure and temptation. However, our effort to address this problem also consists in affirming that in the incarnation, God became a body in Mary's body. Mary as such is the "new Eve", word and flesh reunited (MD 10-11). And this inaugurates an era of human freedom. In its God has made a new covenant that restores communion between God and humanity in which the oppressive structures of dualism are torn down. God rescued the sacredness of the woman's body and made woman the protagonist of a story of redemption.

By the way, it is also a patristic writer who first made this association of Mary as the "new Eve" and Christ as the "new Adam", following the genealogy of Christ given in Luke's Gospel, namely the second-century Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, whom Pope Francis just proclaimed as a doctor of the church, "the doctor of unity". In this we may also see throughout the history of faith some efforts to express the gift of God that are not caught in the snares of various historicisms but articulate what God desires for us through, with, and in Christ.

### List of abbreviations

- MD- Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*.  
RM- Enciclical *Redemptoris Mater*.

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