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A Meditative Dimension of Woman's Genius

SUMMARY. A term “woman’s genius” was used for the first time by John Paul II during the sermon to textile workers in Łódź (Poland) in 1987. Although this expression was adopted in the apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (15 VIII 1988) only twice, the Pope provided an extensive explanation of it. This is woman’s special and inherent sensibility towards a human being, in whom she sees a person, and towards God. Because “Christ’s way of acting, the Gospel of His words and deeds, is a consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women” (n. 15). They who are close to Him discover themselves in their person dignity. A woman, and what is more a “sinful woman”, becomes a “disciple” of His. Christ speaks to women about the things of God, and they understand them; there is a true resonance of mind and heart, a response of faith. The Lord expresses appreciation and admiration for this distinctly “feminine” response – a meditative dimension of woman’s genius indeed.

In the same way Mother of Jesus “treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2:19). This meditative dimension of feminine sensitivity to the person of God and man is fully revealed in Her.

KEY WORDS: woman, woman’s genius, meditation, spirituality, John Paul II.

Introduction

The sign of our times is “a widespread need for spirituality, which is revealed to a large extent as a new hunger for prayer,” notes Saint John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (n. 33).

If today there is talk of an increased interest in the spiritual life, and especially in prayer and meditation, it should be noted that there has never been a shortage of praying and meditating women in the various religious communities, also in the Catholic Church. Although, as statistics show, there is little formal employment of women in the Catholic pastoral care, their role outside the legal-organizational structures of the Church is enormous, especially when it comes to a deeper spiritual life, which is manifested mainly in prayer and meditation.

Given the temporal and spatial prevalence of this phenomenon, it is possible to put forward a thesis about the meditative character of a female spirituality, that is, that one of the specific characteristics of this spiritual-religious personality is the natural ability to abide in God in a meditative way. Such a statement is grounded, among other factors, in the analysis of the Apostolic Letter of St. John Paul II *Mulieris dignitatem* on the dignity and vocation of the woman, issued on August 15, 1988 on the occasion of the Marian Year.

1. Christian meditation

The “need for spirituality”, mentioned above, is often satisfied by the practice of meditation, which has become very fashionable in recent decades, also in Christian communities. Attempts are being made to implement the doctrines and practices of Far Eastern provenance to Christian prayer in its broadest sense. The letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on certain aspects of Christian Meditation *Orationis formas* (October 15, 1989) points out the dangers of this kind of syncretism.

One of the reasons for this phenomenon, apart from the fascination with what is “exotic,” is the confusion of concepts. It is necessary to distinguish between meditation in general, as a manifestation of the basic, anthropogenic spirituality of man, that is, the capacity for autotranscendence¹ inscribed in human nature, and its concrete denominational manifestations and corresponding techniques. Meditation, as an affective and cognitive function, is a property of every human being. It is a feature of the human nature, and therefore everyone is in some degree disposed to it. Personalistic phenomenology (e. g. Max Scheller, Karol Wojtyła / John Paul II) sees two dynamisms at the basis of human activity: experiencing and acting. While external activity (e. g. professional work, social activity) refers to the dynamism of action, meditation is based on the dynamism of experience. It is the subject’s consent to be influenced by the object of meditation, personal and non-personal. Thus, meditation is, in the full sense of the word, a spiritual experience characterized by receptivity. Thanks to it, under the influence of the object, the cognitive, aesthetic, affective, ethical and other potentialities inherent in the subject are actualized².

The dynamics of this innate meditative dynamism can be described and examined in three fundamental dimensions: cognitive, axiological-affective and acting. They constitute what is usually described as an attitude in psychology and educational

¹ Cf. M. Chmielewski, “Homo spiritualis. Zagadnienie duchowości antropogenicznej”, in: *Człowiek – duchowość – wychowanie. Impulsy myśli o. Anselma Grūna*, ed. A. Fidelus, J. Michalski (Warszawa, 2020), 50–61.

² Cf. K. Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn* (Kraków, 1985), 84–91; A. Szostek, *Autotranscendencja podstawą duchowości w ujęciu kard. Karola Wojtyły – Jana Pawła II*, in: *Jan Paweł II – Mistrz duchowy* (Homo meditans, 27), ed. M. Chmielewski (Lublin, 2006), 37–41.

studies. Meditation, therefore, as a special form of religious experience, presupposes cognition and at the same time leads towards it. Then, the one who meditates recognizes the object of his experience as a factor organizing his hierarchy of values and as a centre of motivation. And finally, meditation results in specific behaviours, such as: concentration, silent anticipation, relaxation of the whole body, etc.

In Far Eastern cultures, this innate mechanism of meditation is so directed that, according to *Orationis formas*, it takes the form of immersion in the impersonal atmosphere of divinity, a "shapeless abyss without a face." It is not infrequently focused on techniques "which can create a kind of rut, imprisoning the person praying in a spiritual privatism which is incapable of a free openness to the transcendental God." (No. 3). In the Christian view, however, "the essential element of authentic Christian prayer is the meeting of two freedoms, the infinite freedom of God with the finite freedom of man, which He has created and to which he refers." (ibid.).

The quoted document clearly states that "The meditation of the Christian in prayer seeks to grasp the depths of the divine in the salvific works of God in Christ, the Incarnate Word, and in the gift of his Spirit. These divine depths are always revealed to him through the human-earthly dimension" (No. 11). This means that Christian prayer, of which meditation is one of the forms, is always defined by the structure of the Christian faith, as aptly expressed by the ancient theologian Prosper of Aquitaine in the formula: *lex orandi lex credendi*, that is, "as you believe, so you pray" (cf. CCC 1124). Because of the personal nature of the Christian faith, prayer and meditation always take the form of a personal, intimate dialogue/meeting between man and God. This is what the masters of the spiritual life have called them since antiquity (cf. CCC 2558–2559).

Woman, because of her mental and affective predispositions, called by St. John Paul II "a woman's genius," more easily enters into personal relationships, and thus almost spontaneously makes in herself real the dynamism of experience, becoming susceptible to any form of meditation, especially religious.

2. "Woman's genius"

St. John Paul II in the aforementioned letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, which for the first time in the history of the Church is entirely devoted to women, refers to this innate sensitivity of woman to human beings. The Pope invites women to reflect together on the "feminine genius." This term, although it appears only twice and in the conclusion of the document, is the hermeneutical key to comprehending its content. Looking from this angle, it is also easier to understand the common phenomenon of the meditative presence of women in the life of the Church³.

³ Cf. M. A. Macciocchi, *Le donne secondo Wojtyla. Ventinove chavi di lettura della «Mulieris dignitatem»* (Milano, 1992), 26–36, 53–58.

St. John Paul II understands the “feminine genius” as an innate, special sensitivity to the person, which is made possible only by love. “The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way (...) a woman is strong because of her awareness of this entrusting, strong because of the fact that God ‘entrusts the human being to her,’ always and in every way, even in the situations of social discrimination in which she may find herself” (MD 30).

This is seen in particular in her reference to man. According to the second description of creation (cf. Gen 2:18–25) woman was given to man as a “help suitable for him”. In the Pope’s opinion this means that “the woman must ‘help’ the man – and in his turn he must help her – first of all by the very fact of their ‘being human persons’” (MD 7). And this “being human persons” consists in finding one’s identity in the selfless gift of oneself, which constitutes the very essence of true love (cf. GS 24). So the “humanization” of man by woman makes in him active the capability to love because “woman can only hand herself by giving love to others” (MD 30).

This help provided by the woman to the man to become human has symbolic meaning, because it concerns not only an individual man, a chosen one, but every man who is entrusted to the “feminine genius.” Furthermore, this assistance also applies to the first experience of the Mystery of God who is Love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8. 16). It is this “genius” that makes “woman the one in whom the order of love in the created world of persons takes first root”. This order of love, on the other hand, belongs to intra-Trinitary life, and therefore the unity of the two, woman and man, forms, in the visible world of creation, the special conditions for “God’s love to be poured into the hearts” of people (Rom 5:5; cf. MD 29). It can be said, then, that the “genius” of the woman is, by its very nature, thoroughly Christian. As the Gospel shows, a woman’s natural, innate sensitivity to the person is also revealed towards Christ and the message of salvation brought by Him⁴.

3. “Authentic resonance of mind and heart”

In his letter *Mulieris dignitatem* St. John Paul II took as a starting point for reflection on the dignity and vocation of women the words of the Second Vatican Council that “Christ fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear” (GS 22; cf. MD 2). He referred this truth to the woman who, in direct contact with Christ, recovers her dignity lost through sin. The Saviour’s attitude to women is “marked by great clarity and depth” (MD 12). In all of his teaching and conduct, there is nothing that would be a sign of discrimination against a woman so common in his time. On the contrary, what He says and does always expresses the due respect for the woman, and therefore this attitude of his is “a clear ‘innovation’ with respect to the prevailing custom at that time” (MD 13).

⁴ Cf. D. del Rio, “Un’esaltazione del genio femminile”, in: Giovanni Paolo II, *La dignità della donna. Testo integrale dell’omonima Lettera apostolica con i commenti*, ed. M. Ubaldi (Roma, 1988), 34–36.

As the Pope points out, “in the eyes of his contemporaries Christ became a promotor of women’s true dignity and of the vocation corresponding to this dignity” (MD 12)⁵.

According to the Pope, what restores a woman’s sense of dignity and the importance of her vocation is the experience of love. Christ, who knows the human interior (cf. Lk 16:15; Acts 1:24), responded with this attitude towards women to their deepest need for fulfilment in love, because “women are called ‘from the beginning’ to be loved and to love” (MD 20). Therefore, as John Paul II goes on to write, “A woman’s dignity is closely connected with the love which she receives by the very reason of her femininity; it is likewise connected with the love which she gives in return” (MD 30). The experience of Christ’s love frees a woman from the egoism that is the legacy of sin and opens her to the other “you”: Divine and human. At the same time, this experience enables her to reciprocate the love of God, which is expressed above all in a living faith, sometimes stronger than fear, as evidenced by the presence of women under the Cross at the climax of salvation history (cf. MD 15).

Thanks to this liberating ability imparted by Christ, women become capable of accepting the faith. “From the beginning of Christ’s mission, women show to him and to his mystery a special sensitivity which is characteristic of their femininity” (MD 16). This is confirmed by the fact that women are first to come to the grave. Of these, Mary Magdalene, called “Apostle of the Apostles,” deserves to be mentioned. (MD 16). In the women encountered by Christ, the willingness to accept the revealed truth is realized with all their inherent spontaneity, and therefore, as the Pope points out, “Christ speaks to women about the things of God, and they understand them; there is a true resonance of mind and heart, a response of faith” (MD 15).

The expression used in this sentence: “authentic resonance of mind and heart, a response of faith” unambiguously defines the meditative attitude of a woman towards the mystery of the Incarnate Word – Jesus Christ. This is a particular definition of Christian meditation. It indicates the faith as the basis of the personal relationship with Christ, in which the woman involves her intellect, learns the contents of the truth revealed to her, and at the same time moves her rich volitional-active sphere, which gives dynamics to her entire personality, usually referred to in the Bible as the “heart.” The “response of faith” given to God in this way makes the woman a true “disciple of Christ” and even a “prophet,” as was the case with a woman in Samaria who met Christ at the well and who “once taught, proclaims Christ to the inhabitants of Samaria, so that they too receive him with faith (cf. Jn 4:39–42)” (MD 15)⁶.

In the Bible there are many such examples of the meditative attitude of women who are able to receive the message of the Gospel with a living faith permeated with love. In this context saint John Paul II mentions, among others, the sisters of Lazarus: Mary and Martha, writing: “Mary ‘listened to the teaching’ of Jesus: when he pays

⁵ G. Pollano, *Donna riflesso di Cristo. Come valorizzare il meglio della donna a partire dalla “Mulieris dignitatem”* (Torino, 2008).

⁶ P. Riccisindoni, “Femminismo e Chiesa cattolica”, *Femininum ingenium* 1 (2016), 139–170.

them a visit, he calls Mary's behaviour 'the good portion' in contrast to Martha's pre-occupation with domestic matters (cf. Lk 10:38–42). On another occasion – after the death of Lazarus – Martha is the one who talks to Christ, and the conversation concerns the most profound truths of revelation and faith" (MD 15). Each, in his own way, according to his personality and his functions, shows towards him "an authentic resonance of mind and heart," her unique response of faith.

The Pope notes that Christ expresses his acknowledgement and admiration for this specifically feminine response, as was the case with the Canaan woman (cf. Matt 15:28) or even gives as an example the living faith of a woman, permeated with love.

4. Mary – the Woman of meditation

Mary is an unrivalled example of "feminine genius". In particular, the Evangelist John, in his description of the wedding in Cana in Galilee, shows her sensitivity to human being and his needs, including those of daily life (cf. Jn 2:1–12). Above all, however, because of her vocation to the role of Mother of the Lord, she is sensitive to everything that is of God. She is the Woman of meditation⁷.

St. Luke testifies twice about her meditative attitude towards salvific events, writing that Mary "kept all these matters and pondered them in her heart" (cf. Lk 2:19.51). Also the words of the song "Magnificat" put in her mouth (Lk 1:46–56), which are a paraphrase of the numerous Old Testament texts, and especially of the words of Anna of 1 Sm 2:1–10, allow us to believe that the Virgin of Nazareth knew the Scriptures and often meditated on them, since she so aptly referred them to herself and her place in the plan of salvation. We are amazed by her response to the Annunciation of the Angel, "by which, as St. John Paul II writes, God himself 'attempts to calm people's hearts?' It is not just a matter here of God's words revealed through the Prophets; rather with this response 'the Word is truly made flesh' (cf. Jn 1:14). Hence Mary attains a union with God that (...) exceeds the expectations of all Israel" (MD 3).

So, it can be said that Mary crosses the threshold of meditation, based on the realization of the dynamism of sensation, and enters the sphere of contemplation, in which it is no longer man who, through the effort of self-transcendence, tries in some way to embrace God, but God imparts Himself to man. At the moment of the Annunciation, this self-impartment of God crossed the ontological barrier, becoming the Man in her womb (cf. Lk 1:35).

In this sense, it is fully justified to speak of the mystical experience that the Mother of God enjoyed, obviously not in the sense of the supernatural phenomena with which

⁷ Cf. K. Parzych, "Maryja – osoba spełniona jako kobieta", *Salvatoris Mater* 8 (2006), n. 1–2, 191–206; A. Gąsior, "Maryja jako wzór kobiety: dziewicy, matki i wdowy", *Salvatoris Mater* 17 (2015), n. 1–4, 238–252.

mysticism is most often identified, but of the direct union with God in himself, both in the “bottom of the heart” and in the virgin womb. Mary, as a woman, was disposed towards such a mystical experience by the unique privilege of the Immaculate Conception, which is a reflection of what a man in Paradise was supposed to be like before he rebelled and sinned, and what he will be in the glory of the Resurrection. One can only guess that these salvific contents were the subject of meditation and pondering by the Mother of the Lord⁸.

Conclusion

Analyzing the Pope's thought in *Mulieris dignitatem*, it is not difficult to notice that woman's naturally given sensitivity to what is transcendent and immanent and revealed in a meditative attitude of openness to God and man, becomes inscribed into the history of salvation, so that in such a perspective one can better understand the “feminine genius.”

The present renaissance of interest in meditation is caused, among other things, by the sense of spiritual-moral and biological danger that threatens man because of the products of his own intelligence (cf. RH 15). In the context of such a threat to man, John Paul II in this document emphasizes the role of women in society and the Church. He writes that

in our own time, the successes of science and technology make it possible to attain material well-being to a degree hitherto unknown. While this favours some, it pushes others to the edges of society. In this way, unilateral progress can also lead to a gradual loss of sensitivity for man, that is, for what is essentially human. In this sense, our time in particular awaits the manifestation of that ‘genius’ which belongs to women, and which can ensure sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance: because they are human! - and because ‘the greatest of these is love’ (1 Cor 13:13) (MD 30).

Therefore, the role of a woman in “saving” the modern man and the world and her responsibility for this mission is beyond dispute. In a situation of widespread expectation “for the manifestation of this ‘genius of the woman,’” it seems totally incomprehensible and senseless that the feminist movements are seeking the emancipation of women, which consists in taking on “masculine” tasks and “masculine” lifestyles to achieve any social position⁹. At the same time, in the face of the growing threats to man, on the one hand, and the interest in meditation, on the other hand, it is necessary

⁸ C. Rossi Espagnet, “Densità antropologica della figura di Maria nella *Mulieris dignitatem*”, *Theotokos* 21 (2013), 49–65.

⁹ Zob. A. R. Ch. Castillo, “Análisis de la carta papal *Mulieris Dignitatem* a partir de la perspectiva de la teología feminista”, *Revista Espiga* 10 (2011), n. 21, 57–69.

that the contemporary Christian woman rediscovers her “genius,” this particular sensitization to the other “self” which, in the meditative experience of God in Christ, becomes at the same time capable of saving man in his dignity and subjectivity. Then will be fulfilled what John Paul II wrote at the very beginning of this Letter: “The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at his moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling” (MD 1).

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MEDITATYVUSIS MOTERS GENIJUS MATMUO

S a n t r a u k a

Terminą „moters genijus“ pirmą kartą pavartojo Jonas Paulius II pamoksle, sakytame tekstilės pramonės darbininkams Lodzėje, Lenkijoje, 1987 metais. Nors šis pasakymas tik du kartus pavartotas apaštališkajame laiške *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988 08 15), popiežius jį nuodugnai paaiškino. Tai ypatingas moters jautrumas žmogui – moteris jį mato kaip asmenį – ir Dievui. Laiške *Mulieris Dignitatem* teigiama: „Kristaus veikimo būdas, Jo veiksmų ir žodžių Evangelija yra nuolatinis protestas prieš visa, kas įžeidžia moters orumą“ (15). Moterys, esančios arti Kristaus, atranda savo asmens orumą. Moteris, netgi „nuodėminga moteris“, tampa Jo „mokine“. Kristus moterims kalba apie Dievo dalykus, ir jos Jį supranta. Vyksta tikrasis proto ir širdies atskambis, tikėjimo atliepas. Viešpats yra dėkingas ir susižavėjęs šiuo išskirtinai „moterišku“ atoliepiu – iš tiesų meditatyviu moters genijaus matmeniu.

Ir Jėzaus Motina „dėmėjosi visus šiuos dalykus ir svarstė juos savo širdyje“ (Lk 2, 19). Joje pilnatviškai apsiereiškė šis meditatyvusis moteriško jautrumo Dievo asmeniui ir žmogui matmuo.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: moteris, moters genijus, meditacija, dvasingumas, Jonas Paulius II.

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