

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 16, 2013 at 11:40am

Pope Francis struggles with women's role

by Robert McClory

NCR Today

Pope Francis seems to be walking a tightrope whenever the subject of women is discussed. He wants and needs women to be deeply involved in every aspect of church life. But right now, he can only go so far. In his recent talk following a three-day conference marking the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Francis declared that the role of women in the church easily slips "from service to servitude" -- that is, slavery.

He doesn't choose to expand on this but goes on to discuss John Paul's idea in the letter that God has given women a "special entrusting," which, says Pope Francis, seems to mean women's potential for maternity. In other words, women's unique specialness is their ability to have babies. But, he adds, agreeing with John Paul, this is not simply a biological matter but carries a wealth of implications "for the woman herself, for her way of being, for the way ... we lend respect to human life in general."

In an effort to shift or lift the discussion to another level, the pope warns of "two dangers" when speaking about women -- two extreme opposites that destroy women and her vocation. "The first," he said, "is to reduce maternity to a social role, to a task, albeit noble, but which in fact sets the woman aside with her potential and does not value her fully in the building of community. This is both in the civil sphere and in the ecclesial sphere."

"The other danger," he said, "[is] in the opposite direction, that of promoting a type of emancipation which, in order to occupy spaces taken away from the masculine, abandons the feminine with the precious traits that characterize it."

I admit having a problem understanding this "other danger." Is he saying that just as there is a feminine sphere that men cannot enter, so there are certain "spaces" or spheres that women may not aspire to without taking something away from the masculine and thereby losing their femininity? Perhaps it's the

translation; maybe it's me; maybe the pope said too much. Pope Francis gives no examples of such "spaces."

Some may argue that the pope is subtly referring to the priesthood. Remember that *Mulieris Dignitatem* was a controversial document in which John Paul defended the all-male Catholic priesthood. Yet Pope Francis wraps up his remarks saying, "From here, we must restart that work of deepening and of promoting [women], for which I have already hoped many times. Even in the church, it is important to ask oneself: What presence does the woman have?"

This pope is walking the tightrope carefully, debating within himself, seeking some way to empower women fully in the Roman Catholic church of the 21st century without creating a potentially catastrophic reaction in some quarters.

Advertisement

Source URL (retrieved on 08/20/2017 - 12:34): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-francis-struggles-womens-role>

Links:

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>