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# Gender Stereotypes and Prejudices

Prejudices were first termed by Lippmann, who called a stereotype “a picture in our heads,” a picture that an individual forms of himself and of others. Typical of a stereotype is that it is based on unverified facts and messages about an event, person, object, etc. “*In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.*”<sup>1</sup> For Lippmann, prejudices are emotionally charged negative stereotypes. It holds that both prejudices and stereotypes can be either negative or positive. Typically, negative prejudices are ascribed by a “superior group” to other groups, whereas positive prejudices are only ascribed to members of a “superior group”. Due to the interests of a “superior group” prejudices are turned into an object of plain and open ideology. The prejudices that are advantageous to this group are taken for the truth.

Men have as members of the “superior group” formed numerous prejudices about women’s inferiority throughout history, substantiating them by gender stereotypes. However, the ‘anomalies’ are not only ascribed negative prejudices by members of the “superior group,” but also by members of the very group that these prejudices refer to. Studies of gender differences, for instance, have shown that both sexes ascribe to women characteristics such as tenderness, tactfulness, and considerateness, while men are seen as independent, objective, active, logical, and having both leadership abilities and ambition.

Already in the introduction I indicated that stereotypes and prejudices lead to discrimination and consequently to violence. We should keep in mind that one determinate group may not necessarily be discriminated against by other groups, but may well be discriminating ‘against itself’ due to the recalcitrance of the prejudices. The expression that “*it is easier to split the atom than to break a prejudice*”<sup>2</sup> is a nice illustration of how deeply certain prejudices are rooted in people and society.

Prejudices can thus be found everywhere; we all create, restore or preserve them, and we are all exposed to them. The only immunity against prejudices is critical

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<sup>1</sup> W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, NuVision Publications, 2007, 50.

Having an important function in the evaluation of individuals as representatives of individual groups, stereotypes have often been the subject of psychological studies, from Lippmann and Allport, when inaccuracy and defence function represented the major part of the gender stereotype definition, to the present, when researchers consider stereotypes to be an integral part of information processing. (See: A. Avsec, *Razlike med spoloma v vrednostnih ocenah spolno stereotipnih osebnostnih lastnosti*, in: *Anthropos* 34 (2002) 4-6, 20.)

<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. Nastran-Ule, *Temelji socialne psihologije*, op. cit., 189.

thinking and willingness to judge and face them, seeing that their irrational, non-objective nature makes them difficult to pin down and consequently hard to refute.

### **Gender stereotypes, types and their influence on “gender”**

In the diversity and variety of gender stereotypes it is possible to distinguish various types of gender stereotypes. The main and most rough discrimination criteria are those of quality and contents. Aside from discriminating gender stereotypes by quality into positive and negative, it is also possible to classify or distinguish them according to their contents. Deaux and Lawis have established that the contents of gender stereotypes refer to: appearance, behavioural roles, personal traits and occupational roles. The masculine forms of these components are more characteristic of men, the feminine ones of women - though not exclusively. The authors have found that familiarity with one component of the gender stereotype implies the existence of other components in accordance with gender stereotypes, with appearance having the greatest influence of all.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Ashmore and Del Boca analysed the contents of gender stereotypes and identified three categories of characteristics: the **defining** (primary sexual characteristics), the **identifying** (secondary sexual characteristics – appearance) and the **ascribed** (personality traits). Moving from the defining attributes to the ascribed, the overlapping between a stereotypical woman and stereotypical man increases.<sup>4</sup> The most powerful component of gender stereotypes, however, refers to personality traits. Also, in today’s increasingly “media-defined” society, which is perhaps already obsessed with the body and appearance, identifying gender stereotypes should not be overlooked either.

Gender stereotypes are thus a phenomenon by means of which we form judgements of ourselves and others. Gender and other stereotypes allow us to have a slightly better opinion of ourselves and a slightly worse opinion of others, or vice versa; either way, stereotypes always successfully cloud our real image of ourselves and others. In a very simplified way we thus evaluate people according to their biological gender.

In descriptions of feminine traits attributes, such as tender, emotional, warm, considerate, and talkative., still prevail, whereas in descriptions of masculine traits the most frequently mentioned attributes are rational, influential, dominant, cold, and brave.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. K. Deaux and L. L. Lewis, *Structure of Gender Stereotypes: Interrelationships among Components and Gender Label*, in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 46 (1984), 991-1004.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. R. D. Ashmore and F. K. Del Boca, *Sex Stereotypes and Implicit Personality Theory. Toward a Cognitive-Social Psychological Conception*, in: *Sex Roles* 5 (1979), 219-248.

Gender stereotypes originate in the social context or social reality surrounding an individual. Stereotypes colour the incoming information and exceedingly counterfeit them by creating so called social injustice. Recalling the differences between the sexes, it can be concluded that gender stereotypes create an unreal and unfair representation of men and women. It goes without saying, in fact, that not all men are brave, self-sufficient, independent, etc., and that not all women are tender, sensitive, shy, etc. Studies from the field of personality psychology have shown that people do not just make stereotypical judgments about other people, be it children or adults, but frequently about themselves as well.

### **Gender stereotypes about masculine and feminine personality traits**

Sensitivity, ambition, accuracy, diligence ... Which of these traits could be considered as typically masculine? And which more characteristically feminine? With regard to this problem it should be underlined that prejudices and stereotypes in connection to this topic are socially undesirable and that when we consciously think about this our standpoints are those of equality. But when our attention is turned elsewhere, which is practically all the time, the totality of our information about the world forms and guides our perception and action automatically without us realising it. In each individual this general information about the world also contains all “old” gender stereotypes as implicit knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Although none of the above listed personality components is exclusively characteristic of one gender, the masculine forms are more typical of men and the feminine forms of women. The ecclesiastical document *On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World* also speaks about this: “It is appropriate however to recall that the feminine values mentioned here are above all human values: the human condition of man and woman created in the image of God is one and indivisible. It is only because women are more immediately attuned to these values that they are the reminder and the privileged sign of such values. But, in the final analysis, every human being, man or woman, is destined to be ‘for the other.’ In this perspective, that which is called ‘femininity’ is more than simply an attribute of the female sex...Therefore, the promotion of women within society must be understood and desired as a humanization accomplished through those values, rediscovered thanks to women.”<sup>6</sup>

The document thus, with man and woman’s “likeness to God.” completes the narrowness of the belief that feminine values are only a reflection of femininity or a feminine

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. F. L. Geis, *Self-Fulfilling Prophecies: A Psychological View of Gender*, in: A. E. Beall and R. J. Sternberg (ed.), *The Psychology of Gender*, Guildford Press, New York 1993, 30.

<sup>6</sup> *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*, retrieved from: source cited.

trait, reaching in this sense beyond the stereotypical images of femininity and masculinity; in fact, by defining “the feminine values” as “above all human values” it emphasises the ethical claim for a “humanisation” of the world in the sense of ethical feminisation.

Nevertheless, gender stereotypes about masculine and feminine personality traits are still very much present in the everyday world. Personality traits more characteristically masculine can in terms of contents be denoted as “agency” traits or traits referring to action and thus be related to power.<sup>7</sup> The “agency” dimension comprises controlling tendencies (e.g., aggressiveness, ambition, dominance, efficiency, leadership behaviour) and independence from other people (independence, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, individualism). Some additional “agency” attributes refer to personal efficiency (e.g., self-confidence, feeling of superiority, decisiveness) and aspects of personal style (e.g., straightforwardness, adventurousness, perseverance).

Personality traits more characteristically feminine can be in terms of contents to which they refer defined as “communions.”<sup>8</sup> The “communion” dimension primarily refers to the concern for the well-being of others (devotion, complete dedication to others, desire to appease, willingness to help, kindness, compassion, love of children). Some of the typically feminine traits refer to personal sensitivity and emotional expressivity as well as aspects of personal style (e.g., tender, soft-spoken).<sup>9</sup>

## **Stereotypical Religion-Determined Pattern of Femininity and Masculinity**

In the endeavours for better interpersonal relations and a “revival” of Christ’s revolutionary contribution to gender equality, which marked humanity in a unique and universal way, recognising the harmful nature of the strict stereotypically-defined gender polarity represents an imperative of the Christian commandment of love. Negative stereotypical gender definitions of the woman as “an imperfect man,” “devil’s temptress,”

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<sup>7</sup> Andreja Avsec has conducted a study in Slovenia among young adults of 19 years of age on average, by means of the translated international questionnaire BSRI, which includes stereotypical traits of men and women in the US of that time (in 1974). The results of the study indicate that the most typical traits of an average man were: masculinity, competitiveness, power, pugnacity, arrogance, courage, determination, feeling of superiority. (See: A. Avsec, *Stereotipi o moških in ženskih osebnostnih lastnostih*, in: *Psihološka obzorja* 11 (2002) 2, 26)

<sup>8</sup> According to the results of the study by A. Avsec, the most marked traits in an average woman appeared to be: femininity, tenderness, emotionality, warmth, care, curiosity, compassion, kindness (See: A. Avsec, *Stereotipi o moških in ženskih osebnostnih lastnostih*, op. cit., 29)

<sup>9</sup> Cf. D. Bakan, *The Duality of Human Existence. An Essay on Psychology and Religion*, Rand McNally, Chicago 1966, 44.

unchaste adulteress and sinner, inferior servant or “forth-bringing uterus” have aggravated the position of women throughout history. At the same time, men have been frequently burdened by numerous notions of male domination and imperious superiority. Many gender stereotypes and prejudices have left a strong impact on the social sphere as well the Catholic Church and Christianity. Given the close interaction of culture and religion, that is, the society and the Catholic Church, it is understandable that the gender stereotypes and prejudices present in the society transferred into the life of the Catholic Church and vice versa.

With regard to the origin of gender stereotypes and prejudices, a single answer, among experts, does not exist. Some argue the thesis that religions are the key that opened the door to patriarchal mentality in culture, letting in numerous gender stereotypes and leading to the polarization of gender roles. Others presume it was society that provided “the fundamental and main training ground for the development of prejudices and gender stereotypes.”<sup>10</sup>

The belief that the world in which we live was created primarily according to the male principle is today an outmoded myth trying its utmost to survive. Despite the fact that even the Church itself strives more and more towards gender equality, it is still possible to perceive among its “ranks” the presence of numerous prejudices and gender stereotypes that are trying to live on. Prejudices against women have been taken as a truth both by men and women since the beginning of times, while tradition, society and religion helped keep them alive. It is no wonder, therefore, that many people unknowingly yet “efficiently” spread gender-typified forms of prejudices. We say that old habits die hard; the same is true of gender stereotypes - once they are formed, they are very difficult to get rid of. Throughout history, in fact, negative representations of women have been piling up and have created an image that does not suit today’s women. Or, better, in the course of history, the exclusively unilateral interpretations of Biblical texts and accentuation of the wrong elements of determinate Christian truths have allowed certain negative stereotypical views of gender roles to form, especially stereotypes about women.

The emphasising of the following Biblical text, for instance: “*And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man*” (Gen 2:22), led to extremely patriarchal patterns of women’s roles. The woman was for this reason marked as a second-class being, made from man and as such completely obedient and subordinate to him. This prejudice was further consolidated by Aristotle’s idea that “the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities” and that “we should regard the

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<sup>10</sup> Since the issue of the “origin” of stereotypical gender-related representations, images and prejudices is very closely connected to that of patriarchal ideology and authority, they need to be treated jointly.

female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.”<sup>11</sup> In relation to this, Thomas Aquinas proclaimed the woman to be “*hommo manque* – an imperfect man.” The negative connotation of the woman’s position was further strengthened by the representation of woman as a “temptress,” which had in the history of Christianity a crucial influence on the views and oppression of women. For this reason, the disdain for women was especially present in the ascetic lives of monks. All carnal things in fact had the seal of the Kingdom of Darkness. St. Augustine, for instance, connected original sin to the sex drive, and together with St. Ambrose placed evil-bearing Eve in opposition to Mary, the bearer of life and salvation. St. Augustine respected Mary as the Mother of God, his own mother St. Monica, and Mary Magdalene, who announced the resurrection to the apostles, but all other women were to him a symbol of weakness and inclination to sin.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the accentuation of the unattainable ideal of the Virgin Mary only underlined Eve’s lack of chastity and the sinful nature of “average” women. The more patriarchal society and the Church became, the more stress was laid on the “weak nature” of women. Sentences taken out of context, such as “She should be submissive!” and “Wives, be in subjection to your own husbands!” strengthened the patriarchal perspective of male supremacy and female subordination.

Excessive emphasis on the exclusively familiar role of women, of woman as a mother, substantiated and justified the “division of labour myth” and kept the woman in the private, domestic sphere. The stress on the importance of her ability to give birth made many feminists accuse the Church of “confining and reducing women to the merely reproductive role.”<sup>13</sup>

Throughout history, each period separately “borrowed from Christianity” what suited it most. The image of women was marked by the negative power of prejudices and second-class rank, which was reflected in the unimportance and, in places, utter absence of the female element in the Bible as well as in the life of the Church. On the other hand, the image of Mary set before women an ideal that reminded them of their power and the noble female nature branded with “carnality and weakness.”

Feminist theology, feminist hermeneutics to be precise, put into question the negative interpretations of Genesis and passages referring to women elsewhere in the Bible. Once women began studying female Biblical characters professionally and put the female experience into the focus of Biblical accounts, the prejudices and gender stereotypes began

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<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, in: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Vintage Books, New York 1989, xix.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. I. Riedel-Spangenberg, *Christentum*, in: A. Lissner, R. Süßmuth, K. Walter, *Frauenlexikon*, Herder, Friburg-Basel-Wien 1988, 145.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. M. Jogan, *Družbena konstrukcija hierarhije med spoloma*, FDV, Ljubljana 1990, 82-83.

dissolving. More and more women are now trying to revive and restore the concept and importance of the women's share in Christian history, as they are aware that Christianity, through its example of respect for gender equality can contribute considerably to the formation of a better co-existence in today's world. Numerous women in Christianity are waking up, experiencing a transformation and looking for the new image that would free them of all patriarchal forms of entrapment in prejudices and stereotypical gender representations that have long threatened and oppressed women and their potential. By painting a different picture of femininity, dissolving the prejudices and tearing down stereotypical representations, women are liberating themselves and growing into free subjects, proud of their gender identity. In this sense we can say that social gender is retreating before "theological gender," which is an expression of men and women's likeness to God, and which in its transcendence surpasses the merely biological and social conditionality of the sexes.

While women are slowly freeing themselves of the gender stereotypes and prejudices of which they were prisoners for so long, men within the Church are facing the consequences of these changes. While the fortresses of prejudices are slowly tumbling down and a new concept of femininity is rising, a new image of masculinity is forming as well. In fact, one of the results of women's liberation is also men's liberation from the rigid hold of patriarchal stereotypes and prejudices. The patriarchally tinted religious image of the man as a superior master is gradually losing its force and effect; in the light of the Christian ethos of gender equality it appears as a "half-demolished wall" that does not comport with the newly constructed building. Women and men are once again confronted with the imperative of service, but this time in the spirit of equality. Some may take these changes as an alarm against the newly formed situation. Since the transformation of the view of the other sex in the spirit of equality entails radical changes, it is necessary for both women and men to first of all face the transformation in themselves. For the majority of people, regardless of their sex, however, this appears to be too difficult a task; so they prefer going back to the old, seemingly safer and tested patterns, escalating them for even greater safety to the extreme point of fundamentalism.

The changing of the old, traditional stereotyped views of gender roles is thus a new challenge that nowadays the whole global society, and therefore the Church, must meet. The Christian call for equality in diversity of the "children of God" invites us to recognise and abandon those prejudices which harm interpersonal relations and our views of the other. In the process of transformation of traditional gender-related stereotypes, Pope John Paul II speaks about the path that women had to cover to reach their liberation: "*Unfortunately, we are heirs*

*to a history which has conditioned us to a remarkable extent. In every time and place, this conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women. Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity. Certainly it is no easy task to assign the blame for this, considering the many kinds of cultural conditioning which down the centuries have shaped ways of thinking and acting. And if objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this I am truly sorry.”*<sup>14</sup> The Pope also appealed to the whole Church to transform this regret *"into a renewed commitment of fidelity to the Gospel vision. When it comes to setting women free from every kind of exploitation and domination, the Gospel contains an ever relevant message which goes back to the attitude of Jesus Christ himself. Transcending the established norms of his own culture, Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance and tenderness. In this way he honoured the dignity which women have always possessed according to God's plan and in his love. As we look to Christ at the end of this Second Millennium, it is natural to ask ourselves: how much of his message has been heard and acted upon?”*<sup>15</sup>

Nowadays, with the global culture facing radical changes concerning the conception of gender as a biological, social and psychological category, as well as a transformation of gender roles and representations occurring in the ethos of gender equality and in the light of likeness to God and fundamental human dignity, the feminisation of culture has become an all-cultural phenomenon. The traditional views of woman as subordinate to man, once representing the major European stereotype or prejudice hindering womankind in their private as well as public lives, are retreating against new concepts of the woman and her identity in light of the feminisation of the world. The vision and image interpreted and understood through the eyes of “machismo,” chauvinism and sexism is, at least in theory, slowly becoming a sign of the past and its errors. Therewith, femininity and masculinity are taking a much more complete shape, breaking free of the partial, strictly polarised traditional stereotypical definition. Women and femininity have found themselves in a unique moment in history, marked by a high appreciation of the body, corporeality and at the same time of the

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<sup>14</sup> Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women, retrieved from: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_29061995\\_women\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women_en.html), January 24, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women, source cited.

humanity and likeness to God in both sexes. Our era is that of “images,” imagination. A corporeality expressing concreteness has become the central element of society, lending a new meaning to sexuality or the concrete, corporeal expressiveness of man and woman.

The body is thus of fundamental importance in the determination and formation of an individual’s identity. Women and men are standing at a turning point in terms of flexibility and definition of their roles and concepts. In the process of globalisation, women and men are more and more intensely faced with numerous media and social influences, which at times inflict on them images of corporeality as well as “new definitions” of masculinity and femininity. Due to the mass of influences forcing on him various images and notions, man is befogged or blinded by the search for the “ideal representation, corporeality and image.”<sup>16</sup> At the same time, he is blinded by many stereotypical gender-related images which hinder his freedom of expressivity. The weight of stereotypes and prejudices thus represents a burden for the modern man, who is looking for and re-creating both his image and his attitude towards the other. Although much has changed with regard to prejudices that in the past used to define and restrict women and men in their activities even more severely, it is possible even today -- although women receive the same kind of education as men and have, at least theoretically, equal opportunities in employment and participation in the public sphere of life -- to recognise a covert influence on interpersonal relations and the views of masculinity and femininity.

Though the Church and society have in theory already accepted the equality of men and women, the harmful and influential nature of traditional stereotypes and prejudices is growing increasingly evident in ever more frequent manifestations.<sup>17</sup> The changes in the image of woman in the secular world are consequently modifying her image in religion as well; the more vehemently women are stepping from behind the scenes of passivity onto a stage of activity, the more their religious image changes. With many women striving for an active integration in the dialogue and life of the Church, past prejudices that influenced the conception of gender equality and diversity are revealing themselves.

In the past the difference between the sexes was an element exploited for proving and justifying men’s superiority over women, and allowed the development of numerous gender stereotypes and prejudices, which presented this difference in the form of hierarchical classification or distribution of power. The prejudices emphasised the diversity, seeing in it and promoting with it gender inequality. This is in conflict with the fundamental Christian

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. L. Borriello, E. Caruana and M. Tiraboschi, *La donna: Memoria e attualità, Una lettura secondo, l'antropologia, la teologia e la bioetica*, Vol. VI, Libreria editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 1999, 63-65.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. L. Borriello, E. Caruana and M. Tiraboschi, *La donna: Memoria e attualità, Donna ed esperienza di Dio nei solchi della storia*, Vol. II 2, Libreria editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2000, 105.

teaching, or Jesus' example, which stresses the importance of the equality of the sexes, which are equal in their likeness to God, yet different from one another. The prejudices used the different potential of the sexes as a sort of springboard for justifying male supremacy and elevation to the detriment of gender equality. Currently, the Church and society are being confronted again with the fundamental evangelical message of living according to the principle of love and a markedly egalitarian inspiration of gender equality on the one hand, as well as the strong imperative for gender equality in the light of human dignity expressed in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)*, on the other.

## Gender Equality and the Bible

The Biblical accounts of the Creation and Fall in the Book of Genesis 1-3 are in terms of the position of women and gender hierarchy the most important writings of the Old Testament. The Biblical representation of the creation of the first human couple is based on two different sources, the Priestly source (dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) and the Yahwist source (from the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C.). Each gave origin to a different tradition, still the subject of eternal controversy among Christian theologians. “*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them*” (Gen 1:27). This passage, of later date, does not indicate any supremacy of either gender; both are equal and “created in God's image” at the same time. Thus, the image of God is not reserved for the male gender only. Unlike Gen 1:27, the older, Gen 2:22 version, indicated subordination to the man, since the woman was created later “from the rib” of the man. “*And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man*” (Gen 2:22). These conflicting accounts are united in the Christian tradition. In the past, the Gen 2:22 account prevailed, as it better coincided with the ancient world in which Christianity developed and was pervaded by a patriarchal mindset.<sup>18</sup>

The New Testament also reveals two views or traditions in complete contradiction. This is especially evident in the works attributed to the Apostle Paul, which reflect the viewpoint and influence of contemporary secular society, including as well as confirming the patriarchal values and consequently woman's subordination and inferiority, characteristic of the society of the time in which Paul lived and by which he was “in part” defined.<sup>19</sup> Let us examine a few examples:

First example: “*But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn: but if it be a shame for a woman to be shorn or*

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. C. Drury, *Christianity*, in: *Women in Religion*, Printer, London 1994, 32-34. These two texts of the Old Testament were also dealt with by Pope John Paul II in his *Mulieris dignitatem*. Taking into account and analysing the two texts the Pope concludes: “*The biblical text provides sufficient bases for recognizing the essential equality of man and woman from the point of view of their humanity. From the very beginning, both are persons, unlike the other living beings in the world about them. The woman is another ‘I’ in a common humanity. From the very beginning they appear as a ‘unity of the two’ /.../ In this way new light is also thrown on man's image and likeness to God, spoken of in the Book of Genesis. The fact that man ‘created as man and woman’ is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a ‘unity of the two’ in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God /.../*” (see: John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women*, op. cit., 12-13).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. G. A. Arbuckle, op. cit., 69.

*shaven, let her be covered. For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man. For the man is not of the woman: but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels” (1 Cor 11:5-10).*

Second example: *“Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church” (1 Cor 14:34-35).*

The notes of the exegetes contain an explanation concerning these two passages, saying: *“With his injunctions to the women to keep silent and not learn during public worship assembly, Paul does not pronounce an all time truth, but judges in the framework of his own notions and values of the patriarchal cultural climate, much like with his prescripts that women should keep their heads covered in churches and that it is inappropriate for them to wear short hair. (cf. 11.6). Taking into account 11.5, it is highly probable that he himself did not take the prohibition in a general sense.”*<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, informed by a feminist exegesis, sees Paul’s words as a preventive measure with which he wished to protect the Christian community from “outside harm.” In her opinion, Paul’s restrictions of women’s freedom and equality resulted from missionary inclinations, by which they allegedly tried to “satisfy” the current Roman social norm which forbade women to speak in public. Paul’s intent was not, therefore, to impair or oppose the spiritual freedom and charismatic social endeavours of Christian women. One of the assumptions also maintains that Paul’s restrictions only related to married women and widows. In any case, Schüssler sees in this the influence of the contemporary secular culture, which was unfavourable to women.<sup>21</sup>

Third example: *“Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word. That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.” (Eph 5:22-28).*

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<sup>20</sup> *Sveto pismo, Slovenski standardni prevod*, Svetopisemska družba Slovenije, Ljubljana 1996, 1717, note 34-35.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, Crossroad, New York 1983, 234-235.

This Biblical passage in particular, bearing the imprint of the patriarchal society of that time, served to subsequent generations as a basis for stereotypes on the “natural” subordination and submission of the wife to her husband. I would like to point out an argument here which nevertheless speaks in favour of women, but was in the past unfortunately often missed or overlooked: despite displaying traces of patriarchal stance, this passage expresses a strong imperative of unselfish love. A love which as an allegory of Christ’s love towards the Church, in addition to the “physical, secular” love reflects above all the unselfish love of one who is willing to give their own life for the beloved person, in this case the wife. This allegory reminds and teaches us of what the bond and love between a husband and a wife should be like; it indicates unconditional love that should represent the foundation and framework of the husband-and-wife relationship. But instead of this aspect, the most frequently emphasised part was “*Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord*” (Eph 5:22), which helped strengthen the patriarchal authority of men over women. Because of that the essence of the idea contained in lines Eph 5:23-28 was disregarded. In fact, the passage -- when interpreted and taken as a whole -- expressed for Paul’s times an extremely advanced view, as it did not place women in the subordinate position of “servants” in the negative sense of the word, but through the perspective of the contemporary mindset emphasised respect over domination, love over power and supremacy.

These three passages from the Bible manifest the cultural imprint on certain of Paul’s works, which display traces of the contemporary patriarchal mindset and represent one of the two traditions that can be found in Paul’s works. In addition to the tradition supporting patriarchal androcentrism there is also the tradition that bears witness to and supports gender equality, as is evident from the following passages:

First example: “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.*” (Gal 3:28). This passage represents not only the core of Paul’s theology, but also the basic guideline of the early Christian missions.<sup>22</sup>

Second example: “*I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also. Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the*

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, op. cit., 199.

*churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Salute my well-beloved Epaphroditus, who is the first fruits of Achaia unto Christ. Greet Mary, who bestowed much labour on us.”* (Rom 16:1-6).

These two passages are in complete contrast with the previous three. The double-edged nature of Paul’s view of gender hierarchy and women’s leadership was also observed by Schüssler, who said: *“Paul’s impact on women’s leadership is double-edged. On the one hand he affirms Christian equality and freedom. He opens up a new independent lifestyle for women by encouraging them to remain free of the bondage of marriage. On the other hand, he subordinates women’s behaviour in marriage and in the worship assembly to the interest of Christian mission.”*<sup>23</sup> According to Schüssler, it was this very duality that enabled later generations to transplant the patriarchal hierarchy into the “new Christian community.” The reconstructions of the history of the first Christian communities in fact reveal on the one hand the process of gradual “decline” of the patriarchal attitude, defeated by the Christian spirit of equality and solidarity<sup>24</sup>, while on the other, they point at a Christianity gradually assuming an increasingly patriarchal character, “enticed and conquered” by the patriarchal authorities.<sup>25</sup> In this context, taking into account the opinions of various historians, the feminist theologian M. E. Hunt wonders: *“How could Catholicism in the first centuries have changed from a religious tradition in which women originally had their place, to a religious tradition in which they were segregated, then practically shut off, and nowadays finally gained a considerable pastoral and intellectual influence?”*<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the Biblical texts it is possible to observe the duality of tradition. Both in the texts of the Old and New Testament two views coexist: the patriarchal and that of gender equality. In the past, the Church frequently preferred using the patriarchal Biblical texts to establish and maintain the patriarchal system, while disregarding the texts testifying to the equality of the two genders. But nevertheless, the spirit of equality and love, characteristic of God’s word and the gospel, was not drowned out.

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<sup>23</sup> E. Schüssler Fiorenza, op. cit., 236.

<sup>24</sup> The first Christian communities in the pre-Pauline era and at the time of Apostle Paul were in fact characterised by a typical spirit of equality and mutual solidarity. The position of women in this period is supposed to have been almost in everything equal to the position enjoyed by the men. In the first Christian churches women thus administered the Holy Communion, preached God’s word, held various managing functions and did missionary work. Women thus contributed considerably to the establishment of the early Church. (See: G. A. Arbuckle, op. cit., 70.) H. Küng also underlines the spirit of equality, which was a characteristic, “recognisable” sign of the first Christian Churches. (See H. Küng, *Women in Christianity*, Continuum, New York 2001, 3.)

<sup>25</sup> Cf. E. Schüssler Fiorenza, op. cit., 80.

<sup>26</sup> M. E. Hunt, “*Wir Frauen sind Kirche*”, in: *Concilium* 35 (1999) 3, 366.

It was precisely this spirit of equality and solidarity that persuaded women to join Jesus as the first *non-Jews*.

## **“Catholic Feminism” and the Transformation of Stereotypical Gender-Related Images**

Numerous scientific findings and hypotheses underline just how erroneous and unjustifiable many gender-related stereotypes and prejudices are. Owing to the development of the category of gender as a biological, psychological and social phenomenon many stereotypes and prejudices are doomed to ruin. On the other hand, a merely rational and empirical argumentation and definition of the sexes does not offer a complete answer to the question of gender. Different extremes stressing exclusively the biological dependency and definition of gender on the one hand, and theories detecting in the phenomenon of gender just a social category that is completely subordinated to and dependent on social influences on the other, only unilaterally define the meaning of gender. In the opinion of Janne Haaland Matlary, the Christian anthropology of the sexes represents the best answer, as it provides a much more integral concept of gender. *“This Christian anthropology of the sexes,”* says the author, *“is far more profound than the simple biological reductionism advanced by some or the social constructivism asserted by many.”*<sup>27</sup> The Christian anthropology of gender emphasises the equality of man and woman in human dignity and personhood, while pointing out that the differences between them surpasses the merely biological aspect.

The viewpoint and meaning of the Christian anthropology of gender is also underlined in the document ‘On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,’ which states that: *“[The] equal dignity [of men and women] as persons is realized as physical, psychological and ontological complementarity, giving rise to a harmonious relationship of ‘uni-duality,’ which only sin and ‘the structures of sin’ inscribed in culture render potentially conflictual. The biblical vision of the human suggests that problems related to sexual difference, whether on the public or private level, should be addressed by a relational approach and not by competition or retaliation.”*<sup>28</sup> In this sense, the Christian

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<sup>27</sup> J. Haaland Matlary, *Men and women in family, society and politics*, retrieved from: <http://www.catholicculture.org/library/view.cfm?recnum=6309&longdesc> , January 24, 2008.

<sup>28</sup> *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*, retrieved from:

anthropology of gender exceeds and unites the two extremes. In the opinion of Janne Haaland Matlary, the analyses and views presented and advocated in this document, concerning biological determinism - in the past a much too praised and exalted doctrine - can be considered to a large extent as “something novel and promising.” To her mind, the document to a certain degree surpasses the biologically determined prejudices that equate and define women and their social role with their reproductive role. It also surpasses the social definition of gender roles which has strayed to the extreme of emphasising the sameness of the sexes. Christian anthropology maintains that the two sexes complement each other, not only in a biological sense, “but in the totality of life.” The complementarity of the sexes derives its fundamental meaning from the image of Jesus’ unconditional “self-giving and service to others.”

Janne Haaland Matlary sees the main defect of biological determinism and social constructivism in the disregard for the element of gender difference in light of the complementarity of the sexes. Instead of this ideal, which sets unselfish service to others as the imperative of mutual respect and represents the basis for gender complementarity, it was the aspiration for power and supremacy that often triumphed in the past. This advanced and spread the prejudices and gender stereotypes that served as the tool for establishment and preservation of power relations. Janne Haaland Matlary sees in *Catholic feminism*<sup>29</sup> a positive chance for a re-establishment of interpersonal relations in the light of complementarity and equality of the sexes. Catholic feminism allegedly encourages the woman in her endeavours in public life while at the same time helping her find a solution to bridge the gap between her career and domestic commitments.

The latter is currently, in fact, a burning question. Many women are confronted with the question of how to combine family life with a professional career. Not infrequently, they are forced to choose between having a family or a career. With the stereotypical gender-related images retreating before new images, the newly emerging situations offer new possibilities. A growing number of men are taking up an active role in family life and the division of roles within the family is changing. Catholic feminism thus sees the solution in evaluating and underlining anew the importance of the family, which should be the fundamental “field” of activity and efforts. In a world looking for new, more efficient modes

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[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20040731\\_collaboration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html), January 24, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> The author uses the term “Catholic feminism” to mark or illustrate the fundamental difference between a type of feminism based on the difference between the sexes in the light of their complementarity and equality, which she termed “Catholic feminism”, and secular feminism, which underlines a total equality of the sexes and impugns the difference between the sexes.

of existence, the family should not lose its priority. Catholic feminism also underlines the fact that in order to succeed in professional and public life, women have often been forced to “adopt” the so called male principles of action. By striving for a re-evaluation of “the genius of women,” Catholic feminism is looking for the possibilities for the woman to be accepted and successful on her own, female terms, without having to “masculinise” herself to achieve that. By acknowledging that her femininity is anything but “merely motherhood,” it frees the woman from the bonds of past prejudices and stereotypes. In the process, unlike the secular feminism of the 1970s, which opposed the concept of family and subordination of the woman as a mother and housewife, Catholic feminism places emphasis on the importance of the woman’s liberation from prejudices that used to confine her to the “household area,” while re-evaluating the importance of the family and healthy family relations, thereby “restoring the value” of the family.

Through the perspective of secular feminism, which stresses the equality of the sexes, “family and children are an obstacle to women’s self-fulfilment.” Such a feminism is looking “through the lens of power,” with the man still taken as the norm that the woman is supposedly trying to meet by adopting male principles of action. A male model is established for the woman. Underlying this model of feminism is the premise that the woman, in order to become successful and incisive, has to masculinise herself. The logic of such feminism is the logic of power or predominance of power.

Contrary to the type of feminism described, Catholic feminism brings to the fore other types of principles, the first and foremost being serving others. This principle is the basis for all activities and efforts. In the light of service to the other, everything acquires a new meaning, and hierarchy turns into cooperation. “A capacity for the other,” which is according to the document ‘On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World’, “a fundamental [value] linked to women’s actual lives”<sup>30</sup>, has precedence over serving one’s own selfish interests. The second principle derives from the premise that man and woman are equal in their personhood and are thereby in parity, but the difference between them, which surpasses those suggested by biological determinism, is essential.

The role of the family and the importance of both sexes are re-evaluated in the light of mutual cooperation. The family as the fundamental unit of society claims precedence over society and politics. The fundamental difference between Catholic feminism and secular feminism, which emphasises the sameness of the sexes, is that the fundamental guide of

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<sup>30</sup> *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*, retrieved from: source cited.

Catholic feminism is the principle of service to others, while the fundamental driving force in secular (equality) feminism is the struggle for power. Following the guide of Catholic feminism--“to be for the other”--both men and women fulfil their calling in the world.<sup>31</sup>

Anthropological, biological and psychological characteristics of a sex cannot be separated from its theological dimension. Since the very beginning, the human being has been characterised by his relationship to others in all the unity of his body and soul. Being immersed in a culture, in a symbolic world, man possesses values permeated by a (determinate) spirit. This spirit entirely shapes him as well as his relationships with others. For this reason this relationship is always good and distorted at the same time. It is good, originally good, as God defined it at the moment of creation. But it is also changeable due to the disharmony that emerged between God and man because of sin. This distortion matches neither the original plan that God created with man and woman nor the truth about the relationship between the sexes. Hence it follows that this good but impaired relationship is in need of recovery.<sup>32</sup> On the path to such a recovery that we are now walking down, man and woman are, due to numerous persevering prejudices and stereotypical views, for the present very far from “paradise.” We are faced with numerous obstacles obstructing our way to liberation. The numerous prejudices latently working in the background of the patriarchal struggle for power are the obstacles preventing women from working and living in peace in the Church and in society.

The Pope John Paul II: also points out the numerous obstructions preventing women around the world from fully participating in social, political and economic lives. He also underscores the importance of the new image of women, which is going to contribute considerably to a better, more humane and ethical world in the future thanks to her positive “femininity”: *“Certainly, much remains to be done to prevent discrimination against those who have chosen to be wives and mothers. As far as personal rights are concerned, there is an urgent need to achieve real equality in every area: equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancements, equality of spouses with regard to family rights and the recognition of everything that is part of the rights and duties of citizens in a democratic state. This is a matter of justice but also of necessity. Women will increasingly play a part in the solution of the serious problems of the future: leisure time, the quality of life, migration, social services...In all these areas a greater presence of women in*

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. J. Haaland Matlary, *Men and women in family, society and politics, Commentary: 'Catholic feminism' vs 'equality feminism'*, in: *L'osservatore romano* (January 12, 2005), 6-7.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Kongregacija za verski nauk, *Pismo o sodelovanju moških in žensk v Cerкви in svetu*, CD 107, Družina, Ljubljana 2004.

*society will prove most valuable, for it will help to manifest the contradictions present when society is organized solely according to the criteria of efficiency and productivity, and it will force systems to be redesigned in a way which favours the processes of humanization which mark the 'civilization of love'.*<sup>33</sup>

In “the genius of women” it is thus possible to detect traces of a call for a new image of woman, who is slowly freeing herself of the prejudices and stereotypes impairing her fundamental dignity. The concern of feminist theologians that the expressions indicating the Church’s willingness to establish equality between men and women, such as “equal in diversity” or “equal, but complementary” are “*just a cellophane wrapper over the real inequality of the sexes*”<sup>34</sup>, is understandable. For this reason it is perhaps worth mentioning that the Pope John Paul II. opposes the demands for men and women to be entirely dependent on the roles prescribed by the society and the time in which they live. He invites all women and men to critically assess such roles and following the example of Jesus rise “above” these culturally conditioned and time-dependent prejudices and roles which have through history, especially for women, represented an obstacle for a full integration into the social or public life.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, source cited.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. J. Holm, *Introduction: Raising the Issues*, in: M. Franzmann, *Women in Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, XII.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Pope John Paul II, in: M. A. Gledon, *CEDAW and Women's Unfinished Journey*, in: *L'osservatore romano* (January 5, 2005), 4.