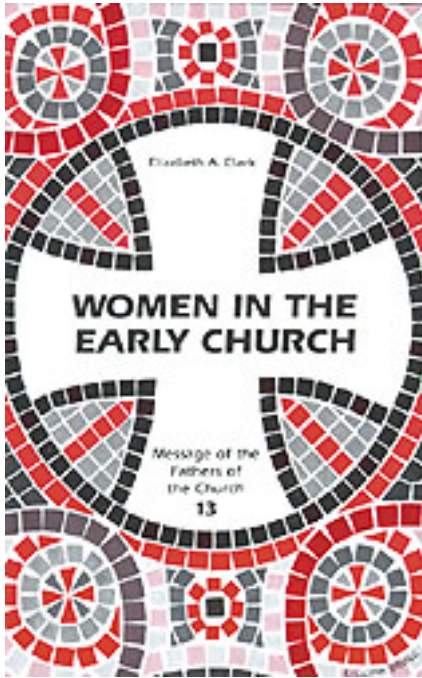


Women in the Early Church



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In conformity with what Jesus himself said of the woman who anointed his head shortly before the Passion: "Truly, I say to you, wherever this Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (Mt 26:13; Mk 14:9), their testimony cannot be forgotten.

The Lord wants these Gospel witnesses, these figures who have made a contribution so that faith in him would grow, to be known, and their memory kept alive in the Church. We can historically distinguish the role of the first women in early Christianity, during Jesus' earthly life and in the events of the first Christian generation.

Jesus, as we know, certainly chose from among his disciples 12 men as Fathers of the new Israel and appointed them "to be with him, and to be sent out to preach" (Mk 3:14-15).

This fact is obvious; but, in addition to the Twelve, pillars of the Church and fathers of the new People

of God, many women were also chosen to number among the disciples. I can only mention very briefly those who followed Jesus himself, beginning with the Prophetess Anna (cf. Lk 2:36-38), to the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 4:1-39), the Syro-Phoenician woman (cf. Mk 7:24-30), the woman with the haemorrhage (cf. Mt 9:20-22) and the sinful woman whose sins were forgiven (cf. Lk 7:36-50).

I will not even refer to the protagonists of some of his effective parables, for example, the housewife who made bread (cf. Mt 13:33), the woman who lost the drachma (cf. Lk 15:8-10), the widow who pestered the judge (cf. Lk 18:1-8). More important for our topic are the women who played an active role in the context of Jesus' mission.

In the first place, we think spontaneously of the Virgin Mary, who with her faith and maternal labours collaborated in a unique way in our Redemption to the point that Elizabeth proclaimed her "Blessed... among women" (Lk 1:42), adding: "Blessed is she who believed..." (Lk 1:45).

Having become a disciple of her Son, Mary manifested total trust in him at Cana (cf. Jn 2:5), and followed him to the foot of the Cross where she received from him a maternal mission for all his disciples of all times, represented by John (cf. Jn 19:25-27).

Then there are various women with roles of responsibility who gravitated in their different capacities around the figure of Jesus. The women who followed Jesus to assist him with their own means, some of whose names Luke has passed down to us, are an eloquent example: Mary of Magdala, Joanna, Susanna and "many others" (cf. Lk 8:2-3).

The Gospels then tell us that the women, unlike the Twelve, did not abandon Jesus in the hour of his Passion (cf. Mt 27:56, 61; Mk 15:40). Among them, Mary Magdalene stands out in particular. Not only was she present at the Passion, but she was also the first witness and herald of the Risen One (cf. Jn 20:1, 11-18).

It was precisely to Mary Magdalene that St. Thomas Aquinas reserved the special title, "Apostle of the Apostles" (*apostolorum apostola*), dedicating to her this beautiful comment: "Just as a woman had announced the words of death to the first man, so also a woman was the first to announce to the Apostles the words of life" (*Super Ioannem*, ed. Cai, § 2519).

Nor was the female presence in the sphere of the primitive Church in any way secondary. We will not insist on the four unnamed daughters of Philip the "Deacon" who lived at Caesarea; they were all endowed with the "gift of prophecy", as St Luke tells us, that is, the faculty of intervening publicly under the action of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 21:9). The brevity of information does not permit more precise deductions.

St. Paul tells us about women

It is rather to St. Paul that we are indebted for a more ample documentation on the dignity and ecclesial role of women. He begins with the fundamental principle according to which for the baptized: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28), that is, all are united in the same basic dignity, although each with specific functions (cf. I Cor 12:27:30).

The Apostle accepts as normal the fact that a woman can "prophecy" in the Christian community (I Cor 11:5), that is, speak openly under the influence of the Spirit, as long as it is for the edification of the community and done in a dignified manner.

Thus, the following well-known exhortation: "Women should keep silence in the Churches" (I Cor 14:34) is instead to be considered relative. Let us leave to the exegetes the consequent, much discussed problem of the relationship between the first phrase — women can prophecy in Churches — and the other — they are not permitted to speak; that is, the relationship between these two apparently contradictory instructions. This is not for discussion here.

Last Wednesday we already came across the figure of Prisca or Priscilla, Aquila's wife, who surprisingly is mentioned before her husband in two cases (cf. Acts 18:18; Rom 16:3): In any case, both are explicitly described by Paul as his *sun-ergoús*, "collaborators" (Rom 16:3).

There are several other important points that cannot be ignored. It should be noted, for example, that Paul's short Letter to Philemon is actually also addressed to a woman called "Apphia" (cf. PhIm 2). The Latin and Syriac translations of the Greek text add to this name "Apphia", the appellative "soror carissima" (ibid.), and it must be said that she must have held an important position in the community at Colossae. In any case, she is the only woman mentioned by Paul among those to whom he addressed a Letter.

Elsewhere, the Apostle mentions a certain "Phoebe", described as "a deaconess of the Church at Cenchreae", the port town east of Corinth (Rom 16:1-2). Although at that time the title had not yet acquired a specific ministerial value of a hierarchical kind, it expresses a true and proper exercise of responsibility on the part of this woman for this Christian community. Paul recommends that she be received cordially and assisted "in whatever she may require". Then he adds: "for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well".

In the same epistolary context the Apostle outlines with delicate touches the names of other women: a certain Mary, then Tryphaena, Tryphosa and "the beloved" Persis, as well as Julia, of whom he writes openly that they have "worked hard among you" or "worked hard in the Lord" (Rom 16:6, 12a, 12b, 15), thereby emphasizing their strong ecclesial commitment.



Furthermore, in the Church at Philippi two women were to distinguish themselves, Euodia and Syntyche (cf. Phil 4:2). Paul's entreaty to mutual agreement suggests that these two women played an important role in that community.

In short, without the generous contribution of many women, the history of Christianity would have developed very differently.

This is why, as my venerable and dear Predecessor John Paul II wrote in his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*: "The Church gives thanks for each and every woman.... The Church gives thanks for all the manifestations of the feminine 'genius' which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations; she gives thanks for all the charisms which the Holy Spirit distributes to women in the history of the People of God, for all the victories which she owes to their faith, hope and charity: she gives thanks for all the fruits of feminine holiness" (n. 31).

As we can see, the praise refers to women in the course of the Church's history and was expressed on behalf of the entire Ecclesial Community. Let us also join in this appreciation, thanking the Lord because he leads his Church, generation after generation, availing himself equally of men and women who are able to make their faith and Baptism fruitful for the good of the entire Ecclesial Body and for the greater glory of God.

Delivered at the General Audience on Wednesday, 14 February [2007], in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall, the Holy Father concluded his series of Catecheses on the Apostles of the Church with the following Commentary on women at the service of the Gospel.

Pope Benedict XVI - L'Osservatore Romano