

The Church and Women's Rights: time for a fresh perspective?

I was in Los Angeles just a few weeks ago on All Saints Day and I was lucky enough to attend Mass at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels.

The Cathedral, opened just six years ago, is truly a symbol of the Church in the twenty first century.

It was packed and the congregation, men and women, girls and boys, reflected the modern day multicultural Church.

As someone whose roots are obviously Northern Europe, I was very much in the minority.

And very much in keeping with the reality of the church today, I saw all around me the Cathedral's magnificent tapestries by John Nava which depicted the community of the saints throughout the ages.

What was, however, striking - and different was how each panel depicted men and women together from across the centuries and across the races as equals in the sight of God. Now, of course, in the churches built before this new century there are always statues of Mary and indeed women saints.

But nowhere before have I seen depicted on such a scale and with such beauty that wonderful passage that St Paul wrote to the Galatians:

"There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus."

And it is why, in the 21st century, those Nava tapestries still stand out that is the underlying theme of my talk today on the Church, Human rights and women.

I do so with a great deal of humility. I feel very under qualified to be giving this lecture in this magnificent place of learning here in a Pontifical University in Rome.

I am certainly not a theologian, nor someone whose vocation is the religious way of life.

But my faith has been very important to me all my life. I am, too a lawyer specializing in human rights.

I hope I can bring to this talk my experience as well as a mother of four and my professional and personal commitment to women's equality.

I have also been privileged over the last decade or so to travel far more and see much more than I might have done just as a lawyer because I was also the wife of the British Prime Minister.

It has given me the chance, for example, to see some of the wonderful work being done by the Church in some of the most disadvantaged communities and countries.

It has, however, also strengthened my view that the Church's message can be distorted in the eyes of others by cultural attitudes which linger in the Church long after they have changed in the wider society.

I believe this is particularly true at times on attitudes to women. And I want to argue that the Church can never be too vigilant in assuring that ingrained attitudes to women and women's rights do not get in the way of the fundamental message of the dignity and equality of all before God which lies at the heart of our Faith.

Attitudes which simply do not reflect the reality of the life in the Church lived by the majority of the laity.

And attitudes, too, which struggle to harmonise a commitment to the fundamental equality of women and a theology which still tends to describe women primarily in terms of our biology or reproductive function.

I want to look at this stance within the context of human rights in general and to stress that the Church was, by no means, alone in being slow to extend the idea of equality to women.

“Women’s rights are human rights” has become a modern cliché. But the human rights dialogue did not even include women at first.

It was not simply by accident that Tom Paine’s seminal work is called “The Rights of Man” or that Rousseau left out half the population when he talked about “man is born free man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains”,

These men were visionaries but, like us, they were also prisoners of their time.

So we should not be surprised that both these declarations did not encompass *universal* human rights.

The American Declaration of Independence can well claim to be one of the first and most important human rights documents but whatever it said, the reality was America was a country in which slavery on a vast scale flourished.

And women were also excluded from the protection and safeguards of human rights at the time.

There were some, of course, making the case for recognition of the equal rights of women.

Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Olympe de Gouges’ *The Declaration of the Rights of Woman* were both remarkably published in the early 1790s. But they were very much lone and courageous voices.

Nevertheless, the idea that certain rights were so basic that they had a universal character had taken root.

And over the next century and half, they were reflected increasingly in national laws and international agreements which were extended to all, whatever their nationality, race, gender or background.

But the great sea change came, of course, when a shocked international community tried to put in place structures and rules which would prevent any repeat of the horrors of the Holocaust and the Second World War.

It was significant that the fledging United Nations tasked a woman, the inimitable Eleanor Roosevelt, to head a Commission to draw up a Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Universal Declaration, signed in Paris sixty years ago this week, was a remarkable document, a beacon of hope in a divided and traumatized world.

Rightly described as “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations”, it sets out the rights we all have simply because of our dignity and worth as human beings.

It the voice of the moral conscience of the world. It commits every country to work towards a time when everyone should live free from want and fear and have the freedoms and opportunity to achieve their full potential.

We all know, of course, that these ambitions have not been realized. In too many countries, we have seen these rights breached and often ignored wholesale.

Despite the protections offered and signed up to by countries, millions of people still live in fear and want, denied even their most basic human rights.

But I don't believe this should lead us to dismiss the Declaration as a failure or worthless.

Rather it should make us redouble our efforts to put this invaluable and landmark commitment to human dignity and social justice into practice.

So over the last 250 years, we have seen a welcome acceptance that each and every one of us has rights simply because of our own intrinsic worth.

It would be nice to say that the Church was in the forefront of this long journey. But this has not always been the case.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen was rejected by Pius VI.

This, I think, had far less to do with its content than the knowledge that it came out of a revolutionary movement which was challenging authority and certainly had the Church within its sights.

Historical empathy is very important here. The Church's justification for the rejection of these human rights at that time was part historical, part theological and part fear of the unknown.

It was not until the end of the 19th Century, that the Church under Leo XIII began to move away from this hostility.

He accepted that the Church should be an advocate of the social and economic rights of the person.

In the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, rights entered the discourse for the first time, especially when talking about the family, work, marriage and equal participation.

Leo XIII stated that "Rights indeed, by whomsoever possessed, must be religiously protected."

Nevertheless the Church still did not unequivocally embrace the secular ideas of human rights.

The Vatican, for example, surprisingly made no comment on the signing of the Universal Declaration.

It was not until Pope John XXIII, who was the Papal Nuncio in Paris at the time the Declaration was signed in the same city, that the Church started to embrace wholeheartedly the language of human rights.

The publication of *Pacem in Terris* on Maundy Thursday in 1963 was a watershed for the Church.

It was the closest thing we have to the Church's own declaration on human rights - a stark change to previous Papal attitudes.

Pope John XXIII's commitment to human rights was enthusiastically carried forward by Pope John Paul II.

In his Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace on 1 January 1998, he specifically endorsed the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

He said: **"Fifty years ago, after a war characterized by the denial for certain peoples of the right even to exist, the General Assembly of the United Nations promulgated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.**

That was a solemn act, arrived at after the sad experience of war, and motivated by the desire formally to recognize that the, same rights belong to every individual and to all peoples. ... That document must be observed integrally in both its spirit and its letter."

This built on his Address to the UN three years earlier when he had emphasised the natural law and fundamental moral status of human rights.

He said:

"It is a matter for serious concern that some people today deny the universality of human rights, just as they deny that there is a human nature shared by everyone.

To be sure, there is no single model for organizing the politics and economics of human freedom; different cultures and different historical experiences give rise to different institutional forms of public life in a free and responsible society.

But it is one thing to affirm a legitimate plurality of 'forms of freedom' and another to deny any universality or intelligibility to the nature of man or to the human experience."

This does not mean, of course, that there is no difference or debate on how the secular world and the Church see human rights.

The Declaration – although drafted with the help of experts from a wide variety of religions – was a secular document. My friend Francesca Klug has described it as documenting "Values for a Godless Age"

It may have appropriated the language of Faith but it deliberately dispensed with its religious roots.

Human rights are ground in the assumption, which Article 1 of the Universal Declaration articulates: that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."

So the Universal Declaration shares with religious faith a fundamental belief in the inherent dignity of the human person.

As Ronald Dworkin has said *"we almost all accept...that human life in all its forms is sacred.... For some of us, this is a matter of religious faith; for others, of secular but deep philosophical belief."*

The difference, of course, is that for the secular humanist, this belief is simply accepted as a universal truth or to use Hans Kelsen's term, a grundnorm which forms the underlying basis for the entire system of human rights.

For those of us of faith, the dignity of each of us rests on our "likeness to God". I believe this added religious dimension is important and takes the values of human rights beyond mere pragmatism or what Conor Gearty recently described as .the promotion of community

John Finnis has argued that 'the revelation that we are all made in God's image' is necessary to ensure the full protection of human rights.

He has said that **"Without those revelatory insights ... into our nature and potential destiny, people – even people who understand human consciousness and character with the immense penetration of a Plato – gravitate towards some version of views that treat dignity as variable,**

waxing and waning, predictable of us at some time after the start of one's existence as a human being, perhaps at or perhaps quite a time after one's birth, and ceasing in 'terminal' debility or disability."

It was for the same reason that in his lecture at the University of Regensburg in 2006, Pope Benedict XVI warned against: "the subjective 'conscience' becom[ing] the sole arbiter of what is ethical. In this way ... ethics and religion lose their power to create a community and become a completely personal matter."

So we can rejoice, as we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Church now speaks in harmony with this foundational text of our time but with a stronger, separate dimension of faith.

The fact that, for Catholics, this commitment to human rights is rooted in God, does mean that it has its own identity and, reasoning.

It is a commitment we see lived out in a mission of justice across the world as the Church reaches out to the poor, the marginalised and the voiceless.

So the powerful message of human rights is not something which the Church has just signed up to in theory but, more importantly, puts into practice every day in every community. .

The Church and Women

The journey from distrust to acceptance to warm embrace that we have seen see in the attitude of the Church to the modern human rights movement is mirrored in its stance to women's rights.

It is a journey, I would argue, which takes us back to the teachings of Jesus himself.

He never distinguished between the worth of men and women but from the beginning of his ministry embraced all men and women alike.

Chapter eight of Luke's Gospel, describes 'the women accompanying Jesus' during his Ministry.

Luke identified Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna 'and many others' who – along with the Twelve – accompanied Jesus as he 'preach[ed] and proclaim[ed] the good news of the Kingdom of God.'

Indeed Jesus went further and stood out against the culture of the day by embracing not just respectable women but women who were outcasts in their society.

In John's Gospel, for example, we are told of Jesus' defense of the adulterous woman.

"The scribes and Pharisees brought a woman along who had been caught committing adultery; and making her stand there in the middle they said to Jesus, 'Master, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, and in the Law Moses has ordered us to stone women of this kind. What have you got to say?'"

There is no hiding the audacity of Jesus' reply that men – even men in positions of religious authority – are in no position to stand in judgment of women.

And at the end of his ministry, according to St John's Gospel, it was his mother Mary, her sister also called Mary and Mary Magdalene, together the beloved disciple John who were with him at the foot of the Cross.

After the Resurrection the first person he appeared to was Mary Magdalene who then ran back and brought the Good News to Peter and John and then to the rest of the disciples.

Despite this firm guidance and divine example, the Church could not always escape the constraints of the prevailing culture of its time – a culture right up until the later years of the last century in which women were seen, in many ways, as inferior to men.

Yet even in the ancient world, it was through the efforts of the Church that cultural practices damaging to women –polygamy, casting off one’s wife, and forced marriage - gave way to the ideals of monogamy, indissolubility, and marriage based on consent.

And, throughout the Church’s history, the ideal of “neither male nor female” has set by St Paul has never quite disappeared. Despite the prevailing culture there has always been a place for women to find their own identity in the Church.

We find it in the presence of women in some forms of pastoral responsibility in the early church.

We see it again in the development of women’s religious houses, which by freeing women from identification solely with child-bearing and enabling them to make a spiritual, intellectual and charitable contribution to society, were striking in the way they did not conform to prevailing cultural norms.

The power of the Abbess and the esteem in which some women were held as spiritual guides in the medieval period also highlights this.

We can see, too, in the struggles of those like Mary Ward, Angela Merici and Louise de Marillac that some women in the Church succeeded in their fight to find a public and socially active place for women.

Their legacy was continued in the nineteenth century with women such as Rose-Phillipine Duchesne, and others in religious congregations who did so much to further the education of girls.

Thousands of women in the 19th and 20th centuries left everything behind to work across the world in education, in healthcare and in caring for the marginalized and the outcasts of society.

Let us not forget either the example of Edith Stein who died in Auschwitz or that Mother Teresa of Calcutta was one of the most admired person in the Church in the twentieth century.

But we also have to accept that these women were very much the exception to the rule and that in return for leadership roles they had to turn away from having children. As a result the Church, like the rest of our society, did not accept the equality of every woman in practice.

I have to stress here that, by equality, we do not mean men and women are the same.

We do mean they are equal in worth and that they should have equal opportunity to achieve their own individual ambitions.

This was recognized by the Vatican in its letter “On the Collaboration of Men and Women” in 2004 which proclaims that men and women are both different and equal.

It reflects the views that women should be helped to seek out outcomes that are not identical to those sought by men but which reflect the differences in need and aspirations between the sexes.

Equality does not mean that everyone has to be the same.

Indeed, it is the very different qualities that women bring to challenges which makes it so vital we tackle discrimination between the genders if we are to meet our ambitions for the world.

There is plenty of evidence, for example, that women are more adept at collaboration than men which is as important in business and peace processes as it is in family life.

Just as this diversity between and within sexes enriches human life and strengthens our civil societies, so too, I believe, would it strengthen the Church if we see more women in leadership roles within it.

Pope John Paul II recognised in his encyclical letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, the role of Joanna and others in the early Church.

He also appointed Mary Ann Glendon in 2004 as head of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and made her the highest ranking woman in the Church.

And of course, Sister Helen, is the only woman Dean at this University.

There seems to be no reason why this appointment should be exceptional and no reason why half of all Curia posts should not be filled by women.

If that seems an impossible dream when there are still five men to every one woman in the Parliaments across the world, the lesson from politics is also that determination can deliver progress – and that progress can, in turn, deliver a change in attitudes and welcome changes in policies.

We now have many more women MPs and ministers in the UK than a couple of decades ago, thanks to decisions taken by political parties including I am proud to say by the Labour party which my husband led.

This increase in representation has led in Britain, as it has elsewhere in the world to a greater focus on education, childcare and work/life balance as well as more specific issues such as equal pay, and sexual violence.

In Rwanda, the high number of women in Parliament is helping push forward the difficult task of national reconciliation.

In Chile and Liberia and the Philippines women Presidents are taking forward the agenda. In Spain, half the Cabinet are now women.

My hope is that the 21st century will be the century where women finally come to their own.

If we heard and saw more women in the senior echelons of the Church we would also see the different priorities of women gaining a platform in the Church – and I think that would be for the benefit of everyone.

The church makes it clear that men and women are not the same as must not be treated as the same.

Twenty years ago, in the Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II reflected that:

“In our times the question of ‘women’s rights’ has taken on new significance in the broad context of the rights of the human person. The biblical and evangelical message sheds light on this cause ... by safeguarding the truth about the ... dignity and vocation that result from the specific diversity and personal originality of man and woman.”

But while it is absolutely right that we must protect and value our differences, we also cannot let them be used to diminish the essential equality before God between men and women.

In his Apostolic Letter, John Paul II was concerned that “the rightful opposition of women to what is expressed in the biblical words ‘He shall rule over you’ (Gen 3:16) must not under any condition lead to the ‘masculinization’ of women.

In the name of liberation from male ‘domination’, women must not appropriate to themselves male characteristics contrary to their own feminine ‘originality’.”

He then elaborated on the features of women that make up what he called our ‘essential richness’.

He said: “In the biblical description, the words of the first man at the sight of the woman who had been created are words of admiration and enchantment, words which fill the whole history of man on earth.”

However, these words alone cannot describe the *whole* essence of what it means to be woman on earth.

Women cannot be defined solely through the eyes of man, even if he is appreciative or supportive.

The differences between men and women are indeed what makes life more interesting but that does not mean that that one Y chromosome should undermine the essential common humanity which every man and every woman share.

Because there is a danger here if we continue to go down this track. Throughout history, we have seen in different cultures how this romanticized view of the differences between men and women is, too often, used to justify the harsh reality of unequal treatment which disproportionately favours men and a view of the world which sees barriers put in the way of women.

As I have said, this is not the message I take out of the New Testament.

It is clear that the way Jesus related to women indicates that he did not expect the main role of women to be to enchant or be subjects of admiration for men.

Matthew's Gospel describes, for example, his interaction with the Canaanite woman whose daughter he eventually healed.

He first tries to brush off the woman when she asks him to intervene with a brusque "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to little dogs."

But the woman was no shrinking violet. Matthew's describes her reply as a retort as she says: "Ah yes, Lord; but even little dogs eat the scraps that fall from their masters' table."

Jesus was not all dismayed by her outspokenness but replied instead: "Woman, you have great faith. Let your desire be granted."

Scripture reveals that to be a woman of faith is to be a woman confident and assertive of herself, and her female desires and perspectives.

By drawing on the example of the confident women who have found their rightful place in the church in earlier times, women today can shape their role in the church and help interpret its fundamental truths in a way speaks with relevance to the modern world.

What John Paul II wanted to see in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the twentieth anniversary of which we also celebrate this year, was that the full human potential of women should be released, for their benefit and for that of the whole of society.

For that to happen, along with access to property and to education, the Church has also rightly recognized the need for couples to exercise their fertility responsibly.

We know better than ever before now, thanks to modern science, that life begins at conception with the contribution of both man and woman.

I know that for myself, not least through the wonderful surprise of becoming a mother again for the fourth time at the age of 45

The Church rightly makes a clear distinction between controlling fertility and terminating a life once conception has occurred.

I experienced that myself when I refused to have an amniocentesis test which was regarded as automatic for an elderly mother such as myself when I found myself pregnant with my fourth child.

Two years later I was more than conscious of a life lost when I miscarried a second late pregnancy.

The Church's current teaching on responsible parenthood is summed up in Article 3 of *The Charter of the Rights of the Family*,

It says "The spouses have the inalienable right to found a family and to decide on the spacing of births and the number of children to be born, taking into full consideration their duties towards themselves, their children already born, the family and society, in a just hierarchy of values and in

accordance with the objective moral order which excludes recourse to contraception, sterilization and abortion.

And while I am on record as having had difficulties with accepting the current teaching on responsible parenthood, I do recognize that much of what Paul VI predicted could happen in *Humanae Vitae* as a result of the wide and indiscriminate use of abortion has been borne out particularly in relation to baby girls as the birth ratios of boys to girls in some countries testify.

What those lost girls demonstrate is that across the world we lack widely held sense that the contribution of women is important to society in its own right.

The situation of too many women in the developing world shows that we are still so far away from women being regarded as of equal worth to men. Here, the overwhelming problems are economic, education and health-related.

The British Independent newspaper, commenting on the 1994 UN Population Conference in Cairo singled out the Catholic Church for praise.

It persuasively argued that by being one of the leading providers of education to girls across the developing world, the Church was making a powerful contribution to improving the lives of women, to lifting them out of poverty and enabling them to reduce levels of childbirth which can be dangerous to their health.

History teaches us that improving the general economic situation and women's educational levels gives them more power in society and helps them to exercise more responsible fertility.

We are all on a journey here.

Just as there has been a journey from hostility to acceptance in relation to the Church's teachings on human rights. I think we will see the Church continue to develop and refine some of its teachings regarding the specific issues which arise from women's rights, always on the basis of an ever-deeper entering in to the witness and teaching of Christ and into his love for humanity.

Those who predicted the death of religion have been disappointed.

In the 21st Century, faith for many hundreds of millions of people remains an integral part of what it is to be human.

And the Church has a critical role to play in discussions about what true equality must mean.