

WOMEN

SCRIPTURE

*Now as they went on their way, he entered a village; and a woman named Martha received him into her house.³⁹ And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted with much serving; and she went to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. **(Luke 10:38-41)***

Luke 8:1-3, Gal. 3:28

OPENING PRAYER

O Holy Spirit inflame the hearts of women of the Archdiocese by your light, to be women of the Word to serve the world and to uphold the dignity of women; grant us in the same Spirit to discern the right thing to do in every situation and to enjoy doing it. May you enlighten us so that we may never waver in our faith and work as one body in Christ for the greater glory of the Kingdom of God the Father. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the unique and vital role of women in the church, the Body of Christ. The well-being of the church depends on men and women empowered to attain their full potential as true followers of Jesus Christ.

In spite of man and woman being created in the image and likeness of God, women have been discriminated against right to the present day. The Constitution of India assures human rights, gender equality and freedom. It grants equal rights to women and empowers the State to adopt positive steps in favour of women. While overall access to education and women's participation and leadership in political, social, economic and religious spheres has increased, the poor and marginalized women continue to suffer most from poverty, inadequate access to health and literacy. The social, cultural and religious norms that continue to favour the male persist, and this prevents women from fully enjoying their rights. Indicators of this are all around us: the sex ratio, (940 women :1000 men), literacy rates (65.46% women literates against 82.14% men), women generally earn less for the same work done. Atrocities and violence against women from female foeticide, trafficking and rape to domestic violence and dowry deaths exist even today.

In the Church, while women have contributed in all spheres, especially education and health their potentials are yet to be sufficiently tapped in the administrative and executive roles as well as theological, liturgical, pastoral and missionary apostolates of the Church. *(Gender Policy of the Catholic Church in India, CBCI 2010)*

It is vital to reflect on the growing violence and crisis of values we are confronted with today. Materialistic values are determining increasingly what it means for women to "progress" and "grow". It is significant that on October 10-11, 2013 a Vatican conference was organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity, on the subject "God entrusts the human being to women" to discuss the role of women in working towards restoring dignity of the human person.

PART 1: TEACHINGS OF THE CHURCH

Women and men are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26). Christ's call for discipleship was inclusive of both men and women.

“In all of Jesus’ teachings, as well as in his behavior we can find nothing which reflects the discrimination against women in His day. On the contrary His words and works always express the honour and respect due to women.” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 1988).

In a culture where women were seen in relation to men, Christ not only liberated them from oppressive traditions but upheld their dignity (Samaritan woman Jn 4:7-42, woman caught in adultery Jn 8:3-11) At his death and burial it is women who bear testimony and it is to women that Christ first appeared after His resurrection.

The early Church remained faithful to this call to ministry reflected in St Paul’s principle of equality in baptism: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, no male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal3:28)

The present Church through her teachings and interventions has revealed her commitment to the cause of empowerment of women. Through documents including *Pacem in Terris* 1963, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, *Mulieris Dignitatem* 1988, various Papal letters to men and women of the church, and the documents of the Synod of Bishops, the Catholic Church has reiterated the need to promote the dignity and equality of women in Church and Society.

The Church recognizes the changing role of women in the Vatican II and Post Vatican II teachings with the increased participation of women in the work force and professions outside of the home. It considers the growing awareness of women as a “sign of the times”, and the process of women’s liberation as “substantially positive”

(John Paul II, Letter to Women, 1995, Art. No. 6)

The Church is committed to protecting and promoting the equality and dignity of woman, her vital role in the family, church and society at large. The roles appropriate to women in the ministry of the Church correspond to their specific nature and complementary relation to men. What follows is a brief outline of the Vatican II and Post Vatican II teachings of the Church.

Men and women are both seen as **human persons of equal dignity**; both are entrusted to be responsible stewards of the earth, “called to work in a relationship of equality towards attainment of universal good” (*Pope John XXIII in Pacem in Terris*). Within the family, men and women are co-creators. Gender equality, in modern terminology, is therefore a concern for both women and men.

Pope John XXIII observed “...since women are becoming more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments but demand rights befitting a human person both in **domestic and public life**” (*Pacem in Terris*, 41).

The Second Vatican Council on various occasions swept aside the many layers of patriarchal dominance of the church to come face to face with the egalitarian message of Jesus. It condemns any form of discrimination on the basis of sex, race, colour, social condition language or religion. (*Gaudium et Spes-Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World*, 29.) The Council further speaks of the new social relationship between men and women (GS 3) and notes that “while they have not yet won it, women claim for themselves an equity with men before the law and in fact...”(GS 9). It further states that as women are now engaged in all spheres of activity it is vital to promote “proper and necessary participation of women in cultural life.” (GS 60).

Similarly it encourages women's involvement in various sectors of the **Church's apostolate** (*Apostolicam actuositatem: Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*,59).

The Second Vatican Council also stresses on the fact that the whole Body of Christ, the Church, achieves "full growth in dependence on the full functioning of each part" (cfr. Eph.4:16). (*Apostolicam actuositatem* 59) However, women in India continue to require upliftment to reach their full potential, leading the church to specially focus on development of women as part of the Body of Christ.

Unique nature of women: The Church teachings point to the nature of women as being unique and divinely established and Church highlights the positive contributions of women through the centuries. Affirmation made about women in Vatican II texts (*Gaudium et Spes*) state "The church is proud to have glorified and liberated women, and in the course of centuries, in diversity of characters, to have brought into relief her basic equality with men."

Official teachings address the place of women in the family. Vatican II idealized the family as a school of deeper humanity. "The active presence of the father is very important for their training; the mother too has a central role in the home for the children". This role must be "safeguarded without underrating woman's legitimate social advancement."(*Gaudium et Spes*,52). Church wants to protect the dignity of the woman; her role in the home and at the same time recognizing the right to work outside the home.

Call to unity and witness: At the same time there is a call for all members to be united (cfr. Eph 4:14) and active witnesses "through the vigour of their Christian spirit, a leaven in the world (GS 59).

Post Vatican II Teachings:

- ❖ In 1971, the Synodal document highlighted concern for women's participation in the household of the church "We also urge that women should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and likewise in the Church (*Justice in the World*, 2).
- ❖ Pope John Paul II in his appeal to ecclesial communities, States and international institutions urged everyone to make every effort to ensure that women regain full respect for their dignity and role; to make effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion of women, concentrating on all areas of women's life; to examine the past with courage, to work in a convincing manner so that the widest possible space be opened to women in the economy, politics and in the life of the church (*John Paul II, Letter to Women*, 6).
- ❖ **The Church reiterates the universality of Christian call to evangelization.** "The work of evangelization belongs to every Christian regardless of sex, age or condition. By virtue of their baptism, Christians are not only called and enabled to possess faith but also to radiate and transmit it" (*Role of Women in Evangelization from the Pastoral Commission of the Vatican Congregation on the Evangelization of Peoples*,20, 1975).

The same document then spells out two groups of parish activities in which feminine qualities will be useful, the first called administrative, the second directly pastoral. (25). This is again reflected in a later document by Pope Paul VI: "Her specific feminine nature, her unique qualities as a woman and

her appropriateness for serving in auxiliary and nurturing ministerial roles”
(*Pope Paul VI Women/Balancing Rights and Duties, Jan 1976*).

Some specific areas of involvement cited include traditional occupations of women missionaries in hospitals, schools and welfare services. Areas suggested for expansion of women's ministry are catechetical work, active home visiting, contribution to retreats and spirituality sessions, counseling, the teaching of religion "including theology when one has the necessary qualifications," and activity in the social communications media. (*Role of Women in Evangelisation,23*).

❖ **Complementary role of men and women:**

The complementary role of men and women is emphasized by Pope Paul VI, so that men and women bring “their proper riches and dynamism to the building of the world not leveled and uniform but harmonious and unified, according to the design of the Creator...renewed and reconciled.” (*Church and Society: Disciples and Co Workers,8*).

❖ **Image and Likeness of God:**

The Church's foundational message is that women and men are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26). This concept is celebrated in the Apostolic letter of Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* on Dignity of Women, (MD), which situates women's rights issues within the larger context of the rights of the **human person** (MD 6,7,10).

John Paul II points out that being in the image and likeness of God means not only that each of them individually is like God. It also means that man and woman, created as a "unity of the two" to become one 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, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life

In the "unity of the two", man and woman are called from the beginning not only to exist "side by side" or "together", but they are also called to exist mutually "one for the other".(*Apostolic letter, Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity & Vocation of Women,7. 1988*)

The Church also points out that men and women are restored in Christ, restored from the Fall: “For all of you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ... there is neither male nor female”, writes Saint Paul to the Galatians (3:27-28). The Apostle Paul does not say that the distinction between man and woman has been erased. He means rather that in Christ the rivalry, enmity and violence which disfigured the relationship between men and women can be overcome and have been overcome. (*Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World from Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (2004).*)

This is echoed by Pope Francis who points to the leaven of the transforming nature of Christ: “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:20). The Christian sees with the eyes of Jesus (*Lumen Fidei, 2013*). The document also highlights (22) the importance of life lived in the church not boastfully but each “according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Rom 12:3) in union with others in the Body of Christ. And in the Body of Christ they become united to God the Father.

And in today's competitive world the concept of women's empowerment is often reduced to achieving power, it is a helpful reminder that **Christ is the model, Christ the Servant leader.**



Divine call:

Women too, for their part, are urged to follow the path of conversion and recognize the unique values and great capacity for loving others which their femininity bears. Women have an irreplaceable role in all aspects of family and social life involving human relationships and caring for others. Here what John Paul II has termed *the genius of women* becomes very clear. (*Letter to Women, 1995*). It is in the family that members acquire basic values and teachings, learn to love as they are loved and learn to know the face of God. Whenever these fundamental experiences are lacking, society as a whole suffers violence.

Pope Francis points out that the main role of women is to communicate God's love. It should be noted that on October 10-11, 2013, a Vatican conference titled "God entrusts the human being to women" was held (based on Pope John Paul II document *Mulieris Dignitatem*) and that focuses on the role of women working towards restoring dignity of human persons.

In 1995, the **Synod of Bishops** took a decision to include women in the decision making process of the Church (Bishops Synod 1995).

In January 2013, the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI) pointed to the need for attitudinal change to adequate representation and participation, treating the girl child on par with boys by giving equal opportunities and awareness against domestic violence and abortion. (CCBI Conference on January 25, 2013 at Velankani)

CBCI in its mission and vision statements seeks to deepen among women and men a sense of their dignity as human beings created in the image and likeness of God. (Gen 1: 26-27). It calls for an action plan to foster and promote respect for human dignity and promote the rights of women in the home, church and society. Priests and religious are advised to reflect this attitude in their homilies, home visits and collaborations with women religious in the mission of the Church.

In areas of education and health care, the Church has made significant policy decisions vis a vis women. The Health Policy of the Catholic Church of India also clearly admits that women should be given special consideration in the matter of health. In the Education Policy of the Church in India enunciated at the 27th CBCI General Body meeting in the year 2006, it was stated that special preference should be shown for girl students particularly those from the marginalized sector. (*cfr. Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India, CBCI 2010*)



Mother Mary our Model:

Blessed Virgin Mary is the woman whose heart is in accord with the heart of God. She is "blessed among women" (cf. *Lk 1:42*). She is chosen to reveal to men and women the way of love.

Mary is a mirror placed before the Church, in which the Church is invited to recognize her own identity as well as the dispositions of the heart, the attitudes and the actions, which God expects from her. (*Letter to the*

PART 2: LIGHT AND SHADOW SITUATION

2.1 Light Situation:

- ❖ Women are active in all areas of parish work; there are more women than men involved in preparation of the liturgy, teaching in Sunday School, conducting rosaries, novenas, celebration of women's and girl child day, choir, SCC (BCC), church decoration, representation in Pastoral Council and finance committee.
- ❖ Women are actually involved in women cells/mahila samities in many Parishes. They take leadership roles in social development.
- ❖ Women religious play a vital role in providing leadership in various schools and institutions run by them. A large number of women religious involve themselves in the work of evangelization. Women religious work in the most remote areas of the Archdiocese for the upliftment of the poor and marginalized of the society.
- ❖ The role of women, as homemakers in our families, in bringing up the children in Christian faith is commendable.
- ❖ Many women are generous in contributing to the Parish and the workplace with their talents and God-given qualities.
- ❖ Some of our women are involved in Diocesan, Regional and National bodies.
- ❖ Women's participation in Small Christian Communities has brought about greater unity among diverse linguistic groups.
- ❖ Women have played a significant role in bring back the lost sheep to the fold (Church).

2.2 Shadow Situation

- ❖ Weaknesses are highlighted when appropriate leaders or resource persons are either not available or not identified for specific programs. Lack of motivation and systematic need based planning of programs for women have resulted in disinterest and poor participation and attendance at women's meetings and programs.
- ❖ Many a time, women are not included in the process of decision-making bodies in the Church.
- ❖ Women organizations suffer from moral and financial support from the Church.
- ❖ Young women seeking opportunities for higher education do not get the necessary financial assistance.
- ❖ Many women suffer from being deserted by their husbands; do not find support either from their family or society or the Catholic community.
- ❖ Some children from our less fortunate families are caught in the web of child labour and sometimes bonded labour.

- ❖ Less fortunate families are at times tend to discourage the girl-child from pursuing their studies.
- ❖ Some girls from less fortunate families are given in early marriage.
- ❖ There is an increase in mixed-marriages in our community, resulting in the loss of their faith.
- ❖ Some of our girls and women fall prey to the allurements by young men from other communities.
- ❖ The need to survive has led some of our women to activities that demean their own dignity and the sacredness of their bodies.
- ❖ Sexual abuse, trafficking, etc. not well known to the Christian community is on the rise.
- ❖ There is a sense of lack of respect experienced by women, not only in the context of their families but also in the Church. There is a lack of equal opportunities for women.

Part 3: SETTING GOALS

- ❖ To build a value based Christian community of empowered women from all strata of the Parish who respond constructively to all issues or concerns related to upholding the dignity and rights of women.

PART 4: ACTION PLAN

- ❖ Conduct awareness programs on the role of women and men in society to boys and girls, men and women with a view to bring about an attitudinal change with regard to women, as equal to men.
- ❖ Ensure at least 30% representation and participation of women in the parish Pastoral Council and other decision making bodies in the church..
- ❖ Develop a women's cell in each parish within 1 year with guidelines from the Women's Commission
- ❖ Women's cell in each parish to conduct one program based on identified local needs.
- ❖ Women and child literacy drives for women and the girl child in each parish by women's cell.
- ❖ Women's Commission to organize need based animation and training programs - 4 each year; one in each deanery
- ❖ Conduct spiritual exercises like retreats, reflections, Catechism/Christian values in each parish, three each year

PART 5: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is there a women's cell in the Parish and what are the objectives/what does it do for the women of the Parish?
2. What are the key issues and problems faced by women in the Parish?
3. Can you suggest some concrete plans for resolving problems faced by women in your Parish?
4. What are the resources in the Parish that can be tapped to meet the needs of women and the girl child (human and other)?
5. Does the Parish and/or women's cell have any contacts with other Christian and non-church social organizations? What has been the nature of the relationship in the past?
6. What is the percentage of girl drop outs in the local parish school and what are the possible causes? What can be or has been done to remedy this
7. Any incidence of early marriage and is dowry practiced?
8. How can you build a gender sensitive parish? What are the ways by which we can sensitize men on women and gender issues?

- 1 What are problems faced by women in mixed marriages and how have these been resolved. What further needs to be done?
- 2 What are programs held (*in the last 1 year?*) to meet the physical and spiritual needs of women in the Parish?
- 3 Have there been any programs on the Church teachings regarding women in the Parish? Is there awareness regarding the Church's teachings among parishioners?

CONCLUSION

Over many centuries, the cause of women has been neglected in all civilizations, countries and even in the Church. As we notice in recent times, there is a growing awareness of the dignity of women on their equality with men in all spheres of life. In keeping with this trend, the Church has become very sensitive to the gender issues and has taken many steps to set right the maladies of the past. The teachings of the Church, over the years, on many occasions, amply demonstrate this attitudinal change. However, we have miles to go to achieve the empowerment of women in our society, particularly in the Church. It is hoped that the efforts made by the Women's Commission of the Archdiocese of Calcutta will bear abundant fruit in this sensitive area of concern.

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Mary, our model, bless us and give us the grace to be empowered like you to grow in humility, simplicity, obedience, care, concern and service to others. Help us to build our lives on the Word of God. Make us instruments of light spreading joy, hope, love and peace among all.

Heavenly Father you created woman in your own image and likeness with all her feminine dignity for your glory. You created her to be an equal partner to man so that together they can continue your creative work on earth. We pray that the dignity and role of women, are acknowledged and celebrated in the Church and society. Amen.

ANNEXURES

Study and resource materials for further reference by the animators

1. Gender Policy of the Catholic Church in India, CBCI, 2010
2. *Pacem in Terres* 1963, Pope John XXIII
3. Vatican 11 documents
 - a) *Gaudium et Spes*-Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World
 - b) *Apostolicam actuositatem*: Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People
4. *Church and Society: Disciples and Co Workers* Pope Paul VI).
5. Role of Women in Evangelization from the Pastoral Commission of the Vatican Congregation on the Evangelization of Peoples, 1975
6. Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World, *Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, 2004
7. *Pope John Paul II, Apostolic letter, Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity & Vocation of Women*, 1988
8. Pope John Paul II, Letter to Women, 1995