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The world needs a woman's gifts

Article by the Prelate of Opus Dei on the occasion of International Women's Day

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International Women's Day (March 8) points to the past, with its unfinished efforts to overcome discrimination against women, and looks to the future, encouraging us to contemplate the benefits of having women fully integrated into every sector of society.

The first step must be to recognize the equal dignity of men and women. From the very beginning of Sacred Scripture, in the words of Genesis, we see that God created man and woman as two ways of being a person, two expressions of a shared humanity. A woman is the image of God, neither more nor less than a man, and both are called to identification with Jesus Christ, perfect God and perfect man.

These essential truths of our Christian faith enable us to grasp the harm that is caused by ill-treatment of any human being, whether man or woman. Mistreatment sometimes involves violence, other times more subtle methods. Women's bodies are brutally commercialized, presenting women as *things* rather than *persons*. They are informed, in a friendly but insidious way, that pregnancy is incompatible with continued employment. It would not be hard to

find many other examples showing the need to continue opposing discrimination.

In Genesis, we also discover a second fundamental point: diversity. In the family, for example, the father and mother carry out different roles, equally necessary but not interchangeable. Their responsibility is the same, but their way of contributing differs.

We often hear that one of the family's most acute problems today is a crisis of fatherhood. A man must neither see himself as a "second mother," nor neglect his responsibilities at home. Rather he has to learn how to be a father. Something similar can be said about society as a whole, where each must find one's proper place. The man has the right to develop as a man; the woman, as a woman—without ever giving rise to mimicries that produce a crisis of identity,

psychological complexes and social problems of great consequence.

The principle of equality can be exaggerated and lose its equilibrium, when one confuses equality (of dignity, of rights, and of opportunity) with a dissolving of diversity. If woman becomes too similar to man, or man to woman, the two become disoriented and forget how to relate to one another. But the difference between them can also be exaggerated—and, in fact, has often been exaggerated—when one uses this diversity as grounds for justifying discrimination.

We can consider here the Christian virtue of charity, which Benedict XVI has chosen to place at the beginning and center of his pontificate. Charity helps to harmonize equality and diversity and invites one to a shared effort, for it orders one's relationship with God and with other men and

women. Charity in the Church fosters communion, respect, understanding, openness to diversity, mutual assistance, and service.

In the first words of Genesis we also read that God, in his goodness, entrusted the world to men and women. We have received the joint mission of caring for the world and enabling it to make progress. This challenging project helps to put the question of the relationship between the sexes in its proper place. We are not confronting a narrow and problematic scenario, but rather an open and positive one. With equal responsibility, with contributions suited to each one's talents, we have to work together for a better society. Masculine and feminine qualities are mutually needed to carry out this joint task. For the common good—common to all, both men and women—can be achieved only through a joint effort. Thus discrimination

against women is not only an offense against her person; it also harms men, and is a serious problem for the world.

A true desire to care for the world and help it progress requires abandoning any Manichean outlook and eagerness for conflict. What is needed is an attitude of dialogue, cooperation, consideration, and sensitivity. Men have to make greater demands on themselves: striving to listen, to understand, to be patient, to pay attention to persons. And women also need to strive to understand, to practice patience, to undertake constructive dialogue, and employ their rich intuition.

In his *Letter to Women*, Pope John Paul II pointed out that the contribution of women is indispensable for “the growth of a culture which unites reason and feeling,” as well as for “the

establishment of economic and political structures ever more worthy of humanity.” A woman’s gifts, with her innate aptitude for understanding and caring for others, must bear fruit in the family and in all of society.

St. Josemaría Escrivá used to note that, “in God’s eyes, no occupation is in itself great or small. Everything acquires the value of the Love with which it is carried out.” When we discover that what is important is the person, discriminations of every sort will find their days numbered. Christian faith can be a true leaven for cultural change in this area if women and men of faith learn how to incarnate their faith in their daily lives.

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