

November 1964

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### Recommended Citation

Taylor, Fred M. (1964) "Womanhood: Its Individuality and Diversity," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 31: No. 4, Article 12.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol31/iss4/12>

# WOMANHOOD

## Its Individuality and Diversity\*

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Women possess innumerable qualities and to speak on any one of them is not an easy task. For what quality prompts a woman not to reveal her age but to relate secrets she has just sworn not to repeat to anyone. What illusive quality guides a woman to listen to symphonic music, or to engage in a game of bridge, and discuss at the same time the school performance of her children, or a bargain in apples at the market. What is it that permits a woman to say the rosary while driving in downtown traffic, and to run a red light and pick up a ticket on the fourth joyful mystery.

In order to accord womanhood full meaning it is necessary to realize that womanhood means one thing to one person and something quite different to another. The key words are individuality and diversity. For they allow us to cherish the womanhood of the biblical past and the ecumenical present; to value the woman who bears and rears children, and the one having no children of her own; to defend the woman who runs for Congress and the one opposed to any woman running for the presidency; to support

the woman who insists on privileges befitting any human being and competes on her own score with the man in business, labor and the Peace Corps; and above all to honor the woman in a religious vocation. Thus it is necessary not only to respect the biological and cultural aspects of womanhood but also to understand its diversity—for there are as many variations and meanings of womanhood as there are women. Well, almost as many.

Womanhood has one enviable quality—the quality to adjust and change, thus to endure. It allows women to break with the old and to stress the new, to overlook the imperfections of husbands and to work more patiently at unexciting tasks. George Bernard Shaw, a man of brainy opinions, said, "Changeable women . . . are more endurable than monotonous ones, however unpleasant some of their changes may be."<sup>8</sup> Shaw also regarded women ". . . as having more good sense, more sanity, more love, less fear and hate, and more possibilities for good than men."<sup>8</sup> Indeed women tend to withstand much better than men, and with less mental breakdowns, not only the severe emotional shocks of daily life but also the rigors of war-time sieges and bombardments.<sup>9</sup>

But in areas of the Middle East and East today, as well as in Palestine two thousand years ago, the myth of male superiority continues to prevail—no

\* Presented before the Thirteenth Regional Conference of the National Laywomen's Retreat Movement, Shamrock-Hilton Hotel, Houston, Texas, April 3, 1964.

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man dares to speak with a woman in public, not even his own wife. In the United States men without a shred of chivalry dare to remain seated at Sunday Mass, and unscrupulously to pursue seats in public conveyances, in order to allow women to stand. But perhaps our attitudes are not unlike those of men, who, at the time of Christ, prayed regularly, "I thank thee, Lord, that thou has not created me a woman,"<sup>9</sup> or in the 13th century of St. Bonaventure, who wrote in his *Rules for Novices*, ". . . shun the society of woman as you would a snake . . . and if any woman speaks to you cut her off quickly as possible."<sup>9</sup>

These statements are not altogether ridiculous because not too long ago no woman could vote. Nor could she hold office. Indeed most women were thought unfit for any occupation and profession. But today, women, in the single state and as wives and mothers, own not only much of the nation's wealth but constitute approximately forty per cent of the labor force.<sup>13</sup> The number of married women working, or ready at 40 to start new careers after rearing children, is continuing to increase.<sup>11</sup> But there is concern, perhaps even fear, that too many doors outside the traditional triangle of kitchen, cradle, and church have been opened to women. But I suspect there is concern only when there is no respect for the individuality and diversity of womanhood; and that there is fear when men and women alike are strangers to their own identities and capacities, perhaps even their own society.

Identity is a term used with great ease. What it means is this: it is being conscious of oneself as a person. It is being in gear, or in tune, with one's capacities, abilities, and feelings. It is knowing what one feels

about oneself and what one feels toward others. Thus, if a woman feels well toward herself, and respects and loves herself, she is capable of living with the questions asked of modern womanhood, and not being afraid to grow in knowledge, grace, and beauty. In whatever she does she is capable of expressing her most enviable and unique quality—her femininity,<sup>7</sup> the kind of feminine identity that with the grace of God allows a woman to be given not to suspicion and distrust of herself and her sex, or of the motives of others, but to sanctity, responsibility, and womanly pride.

Woman's femininity is eternal. It is no impediment to freedom of thought and conscience. Nor is it any obstacle to a woman standing upon her own initiative in the world of literature and art, of industry and welfare, and of business and the professions. For human beings should be judged not by their sex, nor by the financial and social subjugation of one sex over the other—and this does not mean the neutralization of the sexes—but by their qualities as human beings in accordance with the richness of their own personalities and with their own individual actions, ideas and achievements.<sup>13</sup> Pope John, in his great and wise encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, wrote, ". . . women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons."<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless you and I are still leery of any woman who is not the servant of the species and is not marrying and having children. In fact we may claim with all the authority of *Genesis* that the only places for

women are in marriage, begetting children, and the nearest altar society. But our claims, however, respectful, are groundless, for they are superficial and do not get individually to the heart of the matter. They deny women natural and important prerogatives—how to be oneself and how to use one's right to individual development and fulfillment. They deny women one of their greatest attributes—to think and to know—and perhaps even their feminine intuition, the ability that suspiciously resembles the capacity to reason. They deny women the individual privilege to acquire for themselves the virtues of chastity and celibacy; and they discriminate against women who decide in creative ways outside marriage and family to achieve satisfaction and love in service to others, not in bringing new lives into the world but in bringing new worlds into the lives of the young and old.

Marriage, however, has become a kind of social idolatry—all persons must either marry or be out of the running entirely. But marriage is not an end in itself; it is not based on love of social conformity, nor on love of ice cream cones and pink telephones. Nor is marriage any guarantee of happiness. Why expect persons to be happily married when they are not individually happy? Nevertheless it is impressed on women from a very early age that their life's purpose will come only with marriage and children. But social and material forces, indeed religious pressures—from first communion to graduation—stress that "woman exists for man"<sup>9</sup> and that woman "is not equal, but inferior, to man."<sup>9</sup> Such pressures, however, as the sociologic song hit implies, would have women "all come out the same"<sup>1</sup> and thereby serve in part to explain the constant tug of war between a woman's mission to cultivate indivi-

duality and self-identity and society's expectations that exhort the unmarried to marry and "raise a family in boxes made of ticky tacky."<sup>1</sup>

Today's woman has in abundance what her grandmother didn't have. But a woman out of tune with what she has and with her identity is restless and confused—she is happy neither with herself nor with what she has. The signs of conflict are all too easy to recognize—discontent, despair, and hostility. Blame is put on routine and regularity. Schools, maids, and the automated food market create, it is said, a life not of ease but of *Zerrissenheit* — "torn - to - pieces - hood"<sup>10</sup> and bring about one of the worst fears of all, the fear of loneliness and not being needed. This, of course, is controversial. Absence of loneliness and not being needed depends on being able to react to difficulties and conflicts quite beyond the problems of chauffeuring car-pools, of scheduling medical appointments, and so on. But the answer is not in going back to baking bread, to sewing clothes, and to teaching children. Nor is it in continuing to accept second-class citizenship in the home, the parish, and the community. It is not in reducing womanhood to perpetual adolescence. Nor is the answer at the expense of endangering a marriage, dislocating the home, and pouring into the streets unloved, undisciplined children uncertain of their own femininity and masculinity. Nor is the answer in rejecting femininity and aping masculinity in dress and manner. It is in increasing one's femininity and expressing it in ways which are real for all to see and notice; it is in realizing that in one's vocation one has made a choice, and that one must build toward one's own happiness; it is in contributing something of oneself and committing oneself to a per-

sonal creative activity<sup>10</sup> — whether cutting cookies and performing household chores, or writing, teaching, sculpturing, and so on. The answer also is in something more profound—it has to do with losing oneself in periods of spiritual solitude and there finding one's creative spirit and how to use it responsibly and sensibly.

But a woman out of gear with herself, or frustrated in her attempts at communication with her husband, or her chosen vocation, may be quite bored and peevish. She may rebel not openly at her husband but at the innocent restrictions imposed upon her by her offspring. But she may be perplexed and quarrelsome only over her own dullness and inactions. She is a stranger to herself—to her own needs and to the needs of those around her. But in the confusion of her own dull leisure she devotes more and more time to children's superficial needs, yet provides them less and less motherly love and affection. For in the care of children it is not the quantity of time devoted to their needs but the quality of love and devotion that counts.

Thus the very heart of a woman's psychological life is at issue. Not that it differs really from the psychological life of any woman heretofore, because psychological strength is determined not by the absence of conflict but by how it is solved and mastered. Nevertheless a woman's actions, however incredibly different from her own superficial motives, indicate she may be strangely at home in a private world of doubt, fear, and hate.

A woman may derive a kind of hostile pleasure simply in the company of the kind of persons who delight in gossip and the espionage of social secrets and rumors; or she may lose her economical bearings and become intoxicated in the excesses of in-

stallment buying. Or hounded by the agony of self-doubt, a woman may not only sour on those around her but use her position to de-evaluate her husband and reduce him to insignificance.<sup>3</sup> She may put the younger offspring in a nursery school, and engage herself in a suburban neurosis and alcoholism, or in a profitable program of private, or organized, sexual infidelity. Or a woman may so detest the joys of motherhood and wifehood that not only does she function incapably in bearing children but she utilizes wifehood as a means only for social position and private design. But even the frantic life of civic and charitable activities sooner or later becomes a burden. On the other hand a woman, in protesting the trials of her own miserable status, may participate in pointless anonymous letter-writing, or under the banner of Christianity and patriotism, of all things, engage in the kind of indignation movements that appeal especially to the aggressively ignorant and to hate-filled human beings.

But a wise and balanced woman knows what kind of woman she really is; she is not intolerant of tradition and personal choice. Indeed she respects the individuality and diversity of womanhood. She is convinced not only of the dignity of womanhood and her reproductive powers but also of her spiritual and natural titles to the same things any man possesses. But a wise woman magnifies man's ability, seeking his judgment even though she's already made up her mind. A wise woman is certain of her faith. She lives according to her age, drawing inspiration and strength not vicariously through a teen-age daughter, nor from the illusion of being youthful and admired, nor from the never-never land of Peter Pan, but from herself and her environment.

But if she is troubled, she is troubled most by the rareness of real men,<sup>5</sup> and the failure of men to take responsibility in what has been labeled a man's world.

The instinct of womanhood is to give and nourish. The spirit of women, singly and as wives, in homemaking or in teaching, child welfare and nursing, is to guide and teach and be a light wherever it is dark. The power of the feminine mind can turn men toward either good or evil and make them greater or smaller than they are.<sup>12</sup> They can inspire men and children and sow the eternal seeds of immortality. Thus the noblest stage of womanhood and womanly love is

achieved when all masculine wishes have been given up<sup>4</sup> and when womanhood is made unmistakably feminine.

This, I think, is the rich meaning of womanhood—the meaning in the past and in the present—the capacity to be feminine and the ability to practice the kind of feminine virtues that eternally nourish children, men and society.

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### Brother Juniper



"... But, Doc, I can't go back and tell 'em I have 'house-  
maid's knee'! Couldn't you make it 'athletes foot'?"