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*Donna-Marie Cooper O'Boyle*

**Women Thirsting for Living Water:**

***Mulieris Dignitatem* and the International Women's Congress in Rome**

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Cover Story...

# Women Thirsting for Living Water: *Mulieris Dignitatem* and the International Women's Congress in Rome



his year marks the twentieth anniversary of Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, "On the Dignity and Vocation of

Women," penned on August 15, 1988. It is the first letter written exclusively for women. I was among the 260 delegates from all over the world who were invited by the Pontifical Council for the Laity to

participate in a three-day congress in Rome, "Woman and Man, the Humanum in its Entirety."

Cardinal Stanislaw Rylko, the President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, expressed that *Mulieris Dignitatem* has lost no relevance since 1988, and that it continues as a great rich source of inspiration. Pope Benedict said that he who accepts the challenge of going deep into the document offers "great human richness not just for women but for all of us."

I was honored and exhilarated to review with the other delegates the freshness of Pope John Paul II's sentiments, and rediscover the feminine genius of our Blessed Mother who brought it to its fullness. *Mulieris Dignitatem* gives us an undeniable witness and example that John Paul II gave to theological anthropology. "God created the person as man and woman. Only on this principle can we understand the dignity of woman."

In the past twenty years, we have seen a renewed recognition both of the dignity of women and of the difficulties that Catholic women face today as we strive to live according to our God-given dignity and identity. The conference reminded us of our responsibility to reflect back to women the beauty in their vocation to holiness, to aid in uplifting the dignity of women, and to rescue the marginalized.

A tireless promoter of women's rights and their God-given dignity, Pope John Paul II speaks to women through *Mulieris Dignitatem* with a Christ-like, loving compassion, admiration, and a divinely inspired understanding of a woman's



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heart. He thanked all women, “Thank you, *every woman*, for the simple fact of being *a woman!* Through the insight which is so much a part of your womanhood you enrich the world’s understanding and help to make human relations more honest and authentic.” He reminds us of Jesus’ great love for women, which transcended His culture.

Lamenting women’s lack of acknowledgement throughout history, Pope John Paul said women were “frequently at a disadvantage and excluded from equal educational opportunities, underestimated, ignored and not given credit for their intellectual contributions...to this great, immense feminine “tradition” humanity owes a debt which can never be repaid. Yet how many women have been and continue to be valued more for their physical appearance than for their skill, their professionalism, their intellectual abilities, their deep sensitivity; in a word, the very dignity of their being!” This has prevented women from realizing their God-given gifts and has caused them to doubt their dignity.

Through the document, the Holy Father assured us that society owes much to the “genius of women” because of the inconspicuous yet invaluable, beginning with daily relationships between people, especially within the family. His words bring comfort to a woman’s heart, knowing that our Church upholds women’s rights and their God-given dignity.

### **“They marveled that He was talking with a woman...” (Jn 4:27)**

Many women who are noted in the Gospels and apostolic writings as having personally encountered Jesus, devoted their lives to prayer and usually accompanied Him as He journeyed with the Apostles; proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God.

Faith was passed down through “domestic churches.” Pope John Paul II told us that “the witness and achievements of these Christian women, as martyrs, virgins, mothers of families have had a significant impact on the life of the Church.”

“They marveled that he was talking with a woman” (Jn 4:27) specifically because Jesus’ companions and disciples would never behave in such manner. Jesus contradicted their norms with regard to a woman’s role and place in society and was a constant witness to the equality of man and woman and the dignity and respect that each deserve.

### **“If you knew the gift of God ...” (Jn 4:10)**

When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well (John 4: 1-30), He was there to offer His Living Water while the woman was there to fetch water for her family. When the woman realized who He was, she asked Him for the Living Water. She became the first missionary, and brought back Jesus’ life-transforming message to her people. Are we like that woman who initially made excuses and rationalizations? Are we *too busy fetching water* that we disregard God’s promptings to receive His Living Water to convert our souls?

### **Awareness of a Mission**

“From the beginning of Christ’s mission, women show to him and to his mystery a special sensitivity which is characteristic of their femininity” (MD 16) Women did not abandon Jesus, as most of His Apostles did. They accompanied Him to Cavalry, they were first at the tomb. They are the first to find it empty. They are the first to hear, “He is not here. He has risen, as he said” (Mt 28:6). They are the first to embrace His feet (Mt 28:9). They are also the first to be called to announce this truth to the Apostles (Mt 28:1-10; Lk 24:8-11).

Pope John Paul II brilliantly explains that, “The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that *God entrusts the human being to her in a special way.* Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns women in a special way—precisely by reason of her femininity—and this in a particular way determines their vocation.”

Femininity is a beautiful thing! God has given women many gifts which she ministers through her feminine heart; caring for all of the human beings that God has entrusted to her—at the service of evangelization and love to family, neighbors, co-workers, and strangers.

Women have been entrusted with an awesome mission. “A woman is strong because of her awareness of this entrusting, strong because of the fact that God “entrusts the human being to her,” always and in every way, even in the situations of social discriminations in which she may find herself. This awareness and the fundamental vocation speak to women of the dignity that they receive from God himself, and this makes them “strong” and strengthens their vocation. Thus the ‘perfect woman’ (Prov 31:10) becomes an irreplaceable support and source of spiritual strength for other people, who perceive the great energies of her spirit. These ‘perfect women’ are owed much by their families, and sometimes by whole nations” (MD 30).

As a source of spiritual strength, Christian women can help ensure that all women will become *aware* that God has entrusted the human being to them. In a confusing world, our Christian word, love and example will lead women to the Living Water where their thirst will be Divinely satiated. Recognition of women’s dignity, vocation, and awareness of her mission to build up the Church will be passed down—woman to woman, heart to heart.



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