

"The Church is Feminine From its Origins" *(Pope Francis)*

Thanks to the Archbishop and Bishop Michael and to all the generous women who have organised this special Mass for us tonight. It is a very symbolic occasion because at this time in the history of the church, through the body of the Synod, we are reflecting and discerning in a new way, on the question of the role of women in the church in our time and we are gathered here tonight as part of this reflection.

A couple of weeks ago, in an interview, Pope Francis was asked what he thinks is the role of women in the church. His answer is interesting, and I quote:

"Regarding the subject of women's roles in the church, ...it is true that women can and should be more present in the places of decision of the church. But this I would call a promotion of functional type,' he says. '[Moving] only in this way you do not come far down the road. We must rather think that the church ... is feminine from its origins.'

Behind this statement of Pope Francis is a very significant implication for the whole church. He is saying to women, yes indeed, women should be in positions of leadership in the church and he intends to do something about it and right now in Rome he has set up a commission to investigate this and we shall be hearing more about it in the not too distant future. However, he stressed that women should not be reduced merely to function, no matter how significant that function might be. Women are much more than this and their role in the church is much greater than this.

What I would like to do tonight is offer a little contribution towards a reflection on what it is that Pope Francis might be getting at when he says that the church is feminine in its origins and as an example I would like to highlight the role of three Marys in the church, who represent three significant symbols of the church as feminine.

- Mary, the Mother of God.
- Mary of the Gael, St Brigid, one of the patrons of Ireland.
- Mary Magdalen, whose feast we are celebrating in this Mass tonight.

There was a time in the church when the celebration of the feast of Saint Mary Magdalene was regarded as optional. A priest was free to omit the Mass of this feast. However, Pope Francis has made the celebration of the feast of St. Mary Magdalene obligatory throughout the universal church.

A. The Church as Mother:

Mary, the Theotokas, the God bearer and the splendour of creation. When Pope Francis says that the church is feminine in its origins, he speaks first of all about Mary the mother of Christ. Mary carries within herself all the many realities of what the church is but I will focus on her role as mother. The church is mother and women alone can symbolise this for the world. Everybody needs a mother. Even God needs a mother. One of the early fathers of the church, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, 4th. Century, said:

“ The whole purpose of life is that each of us gives birth to Christ. That is what we are called to do - to imitate the Mother of God and give birth to the Christ life in ourselves.”

That's what the church is for, to reveal Christ through giving birth to Christ. St. Paul: “It is no longer I that lives but Christ who lives in me”. We are mothers of Christ, above everything else – not just the women but the men also - but it is women who symbolise what the church's mother is. The entire church is mother of Christ in the sense that the we who are the church give birth to Christ.

Meister Eckhart, the great Dominican Mystic of the 13th century said,

"Of what use is it that Christ was born in a stable in Bethlehem if he is not also born in me?" So the whole church is mother - giving birth to the Christ life and revealing Christ to the world.

B. The Church as Bride

And this takes us to the second Mary, the Mary of the Gael, Saint Brigid. We heard already this evening about the miraculous powers of Brigid. She wasn't a mother. She symbolised the second reality of the church that is, the church is bride, the bride of Christ. Such was the fame of Brigid as the bride of Christ that even to this day in the English speaking world, all men give her name to the woman they desire to marry – his Brid /his Bride. We probably have many women here tonight who are consecrated women, brides of Christ, and we

celebrate them as well as the mother. Consecrated women symbolise the church as bride but not only this. Consecrated women symbolise the fulfilment of the church, what the church is to become in eternity, " ...the marriage of the lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready." (Rev 9:17) The church will come to its final fulfilment in eternity at the time of the great marriage between the bride and Christ. So all consecrated women, religious sisters, nuns and other forms of consecrated life which may be represented here tonight, are a sign of the fulfilment of the church because from the earliest tradition of the church, the consecrated woman, because of her espousal to Christ, was recognised as one who is "complete unto herself". And so it will be with the church in eternity. She, the bride, will have reached her fulfilment and her completion in Christ. St. Pope John Paul II said,

"What would become of the world if there were no [Consecrated women]? The Church can in no way renounce the consecrated life, for it eloquently expresses her inmost nature as "Bride". (Vita Consecrata).

The consecrated woman is what I would call the "Heaven dweller" because she lives half her life in heaven in the company of the angels and saints through her life of prayer and contemplation. She lives in the realm of the supernatural as a normal mode of being and consciousness and she brings the gifts of heaven out to the world in the form of Christ's loving compassion. Such a woman was Brigid - the spouse, the heaven dweller, the sign of the ultimate fulfilment of our humanity. Let me give you an example.

One day I answered the door of the Monastery to two women. It's customary for the people when they visit the shrine of Saint Brigid and, since our Monastery is very close by, they will sometimes call to pray for a while in our Monastery chapel and to meet one of the sisters. One of the women told me a story.

She said that when she was a child, her mother gave birth to a little boy. This little boy was a normal little child like any other healthy baby but as time past, they began to notice that he had no interest in being active in anyway. He was quite unresponsive. He could take his food but that was all. When he was one year, all he did was lie in his cot or on cushions on the floor – just wherever his mother laid him. When he was two years, it was still the same. Doctors were baffled and couldn't help in anyway. They thought it might have been some form of brain damage. This mother, who lived about 7 miles away from the shrine of Saint Brigid, made the decision that she would go to Brigid and speak to her and plead

for her child. As an expression of her love for her child she performed a penitential act of walking to the shrine every day for nine days as a novena of penance – 7 miles there and 7 miles home. Each day at the shrine she would pray to Saint Brigid and plead for her child. This is how love drives a mother, she walked 14 miles a day, every day for nine days and when she returned home on the ninth day, she found her child running around playing with the other children. The child was completely healed, and physically active in spite of the fact that the child had never had any muscular function. Now, if you were driving up past the shrine at this time, you would have seen a woman standing at the statue of Saint Brigid saying her prayers. But what was invisible was a much greater drama because heaven and earth were meeting. Two women, a mother and a consecrated woman who lived 1500 years apart, drawn together because of the love of a child. This is the amazing reality of the church where continually heaven and earth interact, with the Saints. Brigid is still very much alive in the church. She is still available to us. She is still working miracles among us - just as she did during her earthly life because even then, as a consecrated woman, she lived her life in the realm of the supernatural. She is the spouse who pleads with Christ her beloved, and intercedes on behalf of those who come to her. So tonight we celebrate and thank all consecrated women who have lived such dedicated lives, giving themselves totally to the service and mission of the church.

C. The Church as Apostolic, Prophetic and Mystical:

And so we come to the third woman, the woman whose feast we celebrate tonight, Saint Mary Magdalene. What dimension of the church does she represent? We have the mother, we have the bride. But the church is also apostolic, the church is prophetic, the church is mystical and Mary Magdalene was all three of these. In some ways, Mary Magdalene represents the vocation of the single woman and also the childless married woman. Often such women make their homes places of welcome, of love and companionship. The love of Christ is manifested in their spirit of hospitality and their times of solitude draws them into a deep prayer life where the silence enables them to experience the divine presence. Such was Mary Magdalene. She was a transformed mystic. She was the woman, as the gospel tells us, who was possessed by seven demons. We have no idea of what her life must have been like. The horrendous darkness that tormented her for years and out of which she could not escape. But the love of Christ liberated her and so she devoted her entire life to knowing and living in the experience of the presence of his love. This is what a mystic is – someone

who lives in the experience of divine love as a normal mode of being. One of the great theologians of the Vatican Council, Karl Rahner, said - "The Church of the future will be a mystical church or it will not be the church at all." Mary Magdalene symbolises this in the most wonderful way. The church is mystical. We are all called to the mystical life. Mary recognised the risen Christ through the love in his voice when he spoke her name. We too recognise the voice of his love when we awaken to the mystical dimension of our own souls.

Mary Magdalene was also an apostle. She was the first apostle for she was sent by Christ to tell the other apostles that he had risen from the dead. As Pope Francis often quotes, "...she was the apostle to the apostles". So, the church is apostolic because we are sent to proclaim the good news, all of us in one way or another. Yet it was a woman that Christ chose to be the first to proclaim the news of his resurrection. This was not an accident. It wasn't just that she happened to be the one in the garden at the time. It was a divine choice. Our Lord Jesus from the beginning knew that his church would be the bride, the one who would be the ultimate fulfilment of his own purpose as the incarnate Son of God and so he wanted the first proclamation of his resurrection to be made by his bride who was symbolised in the woman, Mary Magdalene.

She was also a prophet because, as we heard in the gospel tonight, Christ told her of the coming mystery of his ascension into heaven. She knew this before anyone else and she was given this as a prophetic message to bring to the apostles. This is why we need to understand that when Pope Francis is discerning about the role of women in the church, he's not thinking about what jobs women should do. I don't mean to be disrespectful here, for women certainly give all kinds of wonderful service in every parish and they do so with unfailing generosity and commitment. Also, it is true that women should be seen to take an active part in the leadership of the church and in decision-making within the church and Pope Francis is in the process of ensuring that this happens. But he does not want women to be reduced to function because the symbolism and the power and the beauty of the feminine is intended by Christ to be something much greater and Pope Francis does not want to lose the mind of Christ regarding the feminine in the church. It is so important that all women consciously hold themselves within the beautiful reality of the mystery and dignity of who we are in Christ.

When our Lord Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to the apostles for the first time, they were absolutely overjoyed, they were stunned, they were amazed, they were crying, they were laughing, they were hugging each other. They couldn't believe that here was the risen Jesus in front of their eyes - the one whom they saw crucified only three days ago. Yet, while they were exhilarated in their joy, what was Jesus like? We are told in the gospels. He was cross! He was annoyed with them. The word used in Mark 16 is that, "...he upbraided them". Why? Because they didn't believe Mary when she told them the good news of his resurrection and Jesus was not pleased that his apostles did not recognise the role that he had given to this woman. This is the challenge Jesus gives His apostles in our time – to listen to women and to recognise the role he has given to women. I would ask the question tonight, is Jesus cross with our apostles now? I don't believe so. Our bishops, our apostles, are here with us tonight and have invited us all to the cathedral to celebrate women in the church and they are listening to the voice of women. I would also say that Jesus is well pleased with our Pope Francis, who is earnestly wanting to receive a full understanding of the role of the feminine in the church. It is clear that he wants the role of women to be articulated in all its beauty and not to be minimized. And so we who are women must rejoice in the knowledge of who we are for the church and who the church is for us.

So let us thank God for all the women who over the centuries have carried the vocation of symbolising for us the beauty and splendour of Christ's church and may everyone of us continue to follow this vocation, remembering that men too are the church and that men also share in this mystery of being mother and bride of Christ. Yet, it is given to women to be a visible symbol and sign of what the mystery of the church as feminine means. I find this is beautifully expressed in a quote from the founder of my own Order, Saint Francis of Assisi, when he says to both men and women:

" We are mothers of Christ when we carry him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience. We give birth to Christ through His holy manner of working in us, which should shine before others as an example."
(2nd. Letter to the Faithful)

So then, let us all, men and women, take up this magnificent vocation in which we all share, to be a revelation of Christ to the world.