

National Council of Catholic Women

Rosary Meditation on the Dignity of Women



Plaque in Mary's Garden at the Basilica National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. acknowledging the donation of the garden by the NCCW in 2000. Photo courtesy of Sharon O'Brien.

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NCCW Board members in Mary's Garden, Basilica National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, D.C. in 2016. Photo courtesy of NCCW.

Introduction:

This Rosary Meditation is presented for your prayerful use by a committee of the 2017 Spirituality Commission of the National Council of Catholic Women. The committee drew its inspiration from scripture and three papal documents:

1. "Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* of the Holy Father Francis to Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Consecrated Persons, Christian Married Couples and All the Lay Faithful on Love in the Family, March 19, 2016"
https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf
2. "Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* of the Supreme Pontiff, John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the occasion of the Marian Year, August 15, 1988"
http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html
3. "Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* of the Supreme Pontiff, John Paul II to the Bishops, Clergy and Faithful on the Most Holy Rosary, October 16, 2002"
https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20021016_rosarium-virginis-mariae.html

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The Rosary Meditation for each of the four mysteries: Joyful, Sorrowful, Luminous and Glorious begins with a selection of Catholic teaching on the dignity of women, then each of the five mysteries within cite Scripture, contain a reflection by the committee and include a prayer related to a specific role(s) women have in building God’s kingdom.

For your information, when citing papal documents, the entire paragraph must be cited. Numbers at the beginning of the paragraphs refer to the paragraphs as presented in the documents, numbers in parentheses refer to foot notes included at the end of each papal document entry and are presented here with approval of © *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*.

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The committee prays that the recitation and reflection on the mysteries will be the source of information and inspiration on the dignity of women.

Additionally, the Committee provides the following selections from the papal documents. These selections so inspired our work that we offer them to you for your prayerful consideration.

Selections from Papal Documents:

RESOURCE: *AMORIS LAETITIA*, Pope Francis, Chapter Two, The Experiences and Challenges of Families

54. In this brief overview, I would like to stress the fact that, even though significant advances have been made in the recognition of women’s rights and their participation in public life, in some countries much remains to be done to promote these rights. Unacceptable customs still need to be eliminated. I think particularly of the shameful ill-treatment to which women are sometimes subjected, domestic violence and various forms of enslavement which, rather than a show of masculine power, are craven acts of cowardice. The verbal, physical, and sexual violence that women endure in some marriages contradicts the very nature of the conjugal union. I think of the reprehensible genital mutilation of women practiced in some cultures, but also of their lack of equal access to dignified work and roles of decision-making. History is burdened by the excesses of patriarchal cultures that considered women inferior, yet in our own day, we cannot overlook the use of surrogate mothers and “the exploitation and commercialization of the female body in the current media culture”.⁴² There are those who believe that many of today’s problems have arisen because of feminine emancipation. This argument, however, is not valid, “it is false, untrue, a form of male chauvinism”.⁴³ The equal dignity of men and women makes us rejoice to see old forms of discrimination disappear, and within families there is a growing reciprocity. If certain forms of feminism have arisen which we

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must consider inadequate, we must nonetheless see in the women's movement the working of the Spirit for a clearer recognition of the dignity and rights of women.

42 *Catechesis* (22 April 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 23 April 2015, p. 7.

43 *Catechesis* (29 April 2015): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 30 April 2015, p. 8.

RESOURCE: *Mulieris Dignitatem*, St. Pope John Paul II, Chapter I Introduction, A Sign of the Times,

1. THE DIGNITY AND THE VOCATION OF WOMEN - a subject of constant human and Christian reflection - have gained exceptional prominence in recent years. This can be seen, for example, in the statements of the Church's Magisterium present in various documents of the Second Vatican Council, which declares in its Closing Message: "The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling".^[1] This Message sums up what had already been expressed in the Council's teaching, specifically in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*^[2] and in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam actuositatem*.^[3]

Similar thinking had already been put forth in the period before the Council, as can be seen in a number of Pope Pius XII's Discourses ^[4] and in the Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* of Pope John XXIII.^[5] After the Second Vatican Council, my predecessor Paul VI showed the relevance of this "sign of the times", when he conferred the title "Doctor of the Church" upon Saint Teresa of Jesus and Saint Catherine of Siena,^[6] and likewise when, at the request of the 1971 Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, he set up a special Commission for the study of contemporary problems concerning the "effective promotion of the dignity and the responsibility of women".^[7] In one of his Discourses Paul VI said: "Within Christianity, more than in any other religion, and since its very beginning, women have had a special dignity, of which the New Testament shows us many important aspects...; it is evident that women are meant to form part of the living and working structure of Christianity in so prominent a manner that perhaps not all their potentialities have yet been made clear".^[8]

[1] The Council's Message to Women (December 8, 1965); *AAS* 58 (1966), 13-14.

[2] Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World "*Gaudium et spes*," 8; 9; 60.

[3] Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity "*Apostolicam actuositatem*," 9.

[4] Cf. Pius XII, *Address to Italian Women* (October 21, 1945): *AAS* 37 (1945) 284-295; *Address to the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations* (April 24, 1952), *AAS* 44 (1952), 420-424; *Address to the participants in the XIV*

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International Meeting of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (September 29, 1957): AAS 49 (1957), 906-922.

[5] Cf. John XXIII, Encyclical Letter "Pacem in Terris" (April 11, 1963); AAS 55 (1963), 267-268.

[6] Proclamation of St. Teresa of Jesus as a "Doctor of the Universal Church" (September 27, 1970): AAS 62 (1970), 590-596; Proclamation of St. Catherine of Siena as a "Doctor of the Universal Church" (October 4, 1970): AAS 62 (1970), 673-678.

[7] Cf. MS 65 (1973), 284f.

[8] Paul VI, *Address to participants at the National Meeting of the Centro Italiano Femminile* (December 6, 1976): "*Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*," XIV (1976), 1017.

Chapter V, Jesus, *Women in the Gospel*

13. As we scan the pages of the Gospel, *many women, of different ages and conditions*, pass before our eyes. We meet women with illnesses or physical sufferings, such as the one who had "a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself" (Lk 13:11); or Simon's mother-in-law, who "lay sick with a fever" (Mk 1:30); or the woman "who had a flow of blood" (cf. Mk 5:25-34), who could not touch anyone because it was believed that her touch would make a person "impure". Each of them was healed, and the last-mentioned - the one with a flow of blood, who touched Jesus' garment "in the crowd" (Mk 5:27) - was praised by him for her great faith: "Your faith has made you well" (Mk 5:34). Then there is *the daughter of Jairus*, whom Jesus brings back to life, saying to her tenderly: "Little girl, I say to you, arise" (Mk 5:41). There also is *the widow of Nain*, whose only son Jesus brings back to life, accompanying his action by an expression of affectionate mercy: "He had compassion on her and said to her, 'Do not weep!'" (Lk 7:13). And finally there is the *Canaanite woman*, whom Christ extols for her faith, her humility and for that greatness of spirit of which only a mother's heart is capable. "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire" (Mt 15:28). The Canaanite woman was asking for the healing of her daughter.

Sometimes the women whom Jesus met and who received so many graces from him, also accompanied him as he journeyed with the Apostles through the towns and villages, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God; and they "provided for them out of their means". The Gospel names Joanna, who was the wife of Herod's steward, Susanna and "many others" (cf. Lk 8:1-3).

Sometimes *women appear in the parables* which Jesus of Nazareth used to illustrate for his listeners the truth about the Kingdom of God. This is the case in the parables of the lost coin (cf. Lk 15: 8-10), the leaven (cf. Mt 13:33), and the wise and foolish virgins (cf. Mt 25:1-13). Particularly eloquent is the story of the widow's mite. While "the rich were putting their gifts into the treasury... a poor widow put in two copper coins". Then Jesus said: "This poor widow *has put in more than all of them...* she out of her poverty put in all the living that she had" (Lk 21:1-4). In this way Jesus presents her as a model for everyone and defends her, for in the socio-juridical system of the time widows were totally defenceless people (cf. also Lk 18:1-7).

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In all of Jesus' teaching, as well as in his behaviour, one can find nothing which reflects the discrimination against women prevalent in his day. On the contrary, *his words and works always express the respect and honour due to women*. The woman with a stoop is called a "daughter of Abraham" (Lk 13:16), while in the whole Bible the title "son of Abraham" is used only of men. Walking the *Via Dolorosa* to Golgotha, Jesus will say to the women: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me" (Lk 23:28). This way of speaking to and about women, as well as his manner of treating them, clearly constitutes an "innovation" with respect to the prevailing custom at that time.

This becomes even more explicit in regard to women whom popular opinion contemptuously labelled sinners, public sinners and adulteresses. There is the Samaritan woman, to whom Jesus himself says: "For you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband". And she, realizing that he knows the secrets of her life, recognizes him as the Messiah and runs to tell her neighbours. The conversation leading up to this realization is one of the most beautiful in the Gospel (cf. Jn 4:7-27).

Then there is the public sinner who, in spite of her condemnation by common opinion, enters into the house of the Pharisee to anoint the feet of Jesus with perfumed oil. To his host, who is scandalized by this, he will say: "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much" (cf. Lk 7:37-47).

Finally, there is a situation which is perhaps the most eloquent: *a woman caught in adultery* is brought to Jesus. To the leading question "In the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?" Jesus replies: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her". The power of truth contained in this answer is so great that "they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest". Only Jesus and the woman remain. "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, Lord". "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again" (cf. Jn 8:3-11).

These episodes provide a very clear picture. Christ is the one who "knows what is in man" (cf. Jn 2:25) - in man and woman. He knows *the dignity of man, his worth in God's eyes*. He himself, the Christ, is the definitive confirmation of this worth. Everything he says and does is definitively fulfilled in the Paschal Mystery of the Redemption. Jesus' attitude to the women whom he meets in the course of his Messianic service reflects the eternal plan of God, who, in creating each one of them, chooses her and loves her in Christ (cf. Eph 1:1-5). Each woman therefore is "the only creature on earth which God willed for its own sake". *Each of them from the "beginning" inherits as a woman the dignity of personhood*. Jesus of Nazareth confirms this dignity, recalls it, renews it, and makes it a part of the Gospel and of the Redemption for which he is sent into the world. Every word and gesture of Christ about women must therefore be brought into the dimension of the Paschal Mystery. In this way everything is completely explained.

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Chapter IX, Conclusion, *If you knew the gift of God*

31. "If you knew the gift of God" (*Jn 4:10*), Jesus says to the Samaritan woman during one of those remarkable conversations which show his great esteem for the dignity of women and for the vocation which enables them to share in his messianic mission.

The present reflections, now at an end, have sought to recognize, within the "gift of God", what he, as Creator and Redeemer, entrusts to women, to every woman. In the Spirit of Christ, in fact, women can discover the entire meaning of their femininity and thus be disposed to making a "sincere gift of self" to others, thereby finding themselves.

During the Marian Year *the Church desires to give thanks to the Most Holy Trinity* for the "mystery of woman" and for every woman - for that which constitutes the eternal measure of her feminine dignity, for the "great works of God", which throughout human history have been accomplished in and through her. After all, was it not in and through her that the greatest event in human history - the incarnation of God himself - was accomplished?

Therefore *the Church gives thanks for each and every woman*: for mothers, for sisters, for wives; for women consecrated to God in virginity; for women dedicated to the many human beings who await the gratuitous love of another person; for women who watch over the human persons in the family, which is the fundamental sign of the human community; for women who work professionally, and who at times are burdened by a great social responsibility; for "perfect" women and for "weak" women - for all women as they have come forth from the heart of God in all the beauty and richness of their femininity; as they have been embraced by his eternal love; as, together with men, they are pilgrims on this earth, which is the temporal "homeland" of all people and is transformed sometimes into a "valley of tears"; as they assume, together with men, *a common responsibility for the destiny of humanity* according to daily necessities and according to that definitive destiny which the human family has in God himself, in the bosom of the ineffable Trinity.

The Church gives thanks *for all the manifestations of the feminine "genius"* which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations; she gives thanks for all the charisms which the Holy Spirit distributes to women in the history of the People of God, for all the victories which she owes to their faith, hope and charity: she gives thanks for all *the fruits of feminine holiness*.

The Church asks at the same time that these invaluable "manifestations of the Spirit" (cf. *1 Cor 12:4ff.*), which with great generosity are poured forth upon the "daughters" of the eternal Jerusalem, may be attentively recognized and appreciated so that they may return for the common good of the Church and of humanity, especially in our times. Meditating on the biblical mystery of the "woman", the Church prays that in this mystery all women may discover themselves and their "supreme vocation".

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May *Mary*, who "is a model of the Church in the matter of faith, charity, and perfect union with Christ",^[63] obtain for all of us *this same "grace"*, in the Year which we have dedicated to her as we approach the third millennium from the coming of Christ.

With these sentiments, I impart the Apostolic Blessing to all the faithful, and in a special way to women, my sisters in Christ.

[63] Cf. *ibid.*, ([62] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church "*Lumen gentium*,") 63.

RESOURCE: *ROSARIUM VIRGINIS MARIAE*, Introduction

1. The Rosary of the Virgin Mary, which gradually took form in the second millennium under the guidance of the Spirit of God, is a prayer loved by countless Saints and encouraged by the Magisterium. Simple yet profound, it still remains, at the dawn of this third millennium, a prayer of great significance, destined to bring forth a harvest of holiness. It blends easily into the spiritual journey of the Christian life, which, after two thousand years, has lost none of the freshness of its beginnings and feels drawn by the Spirit of God to "set out into the deep" (*duc in altum!*) in order once more to proclaim, and even cry out, before the world that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour, "the way, and the truth and the life" (*Jn 14:6*), "the goal of human history and the point on which the desires of history and civilization turn".⁽¹⁾

The Rosary, though clearly Marian in character, is at heart a Christocentric prayer. In the sobriety of its elements, it has all the *depth of the Gospel message in its entirety*, of which it can be said to be a compendium.⁽²⁾ It is an echo of the prayer of Mary, her perennial *Magnificat* for the work of the redemptive Incarnation which began in her virginal womb. With the Rosary, the Christian people *sits at the school of Mary* and is led to contemplate the beauty on the face of Christ and to experience the depths of his love. Through the Rosary the faithful receive abundant grace, as though from the very hands of the Mother of the Redeemer.

(1) Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 45.

(2) Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus* (2 February 1974), 42: AAS 66 (1974), 153.

THE JOYFUL MYSTERIES



Nancy Poll, then Service Commission Chair with Ana Esmeralda on a Cross Catholic Outreach mission trip to Guatemala in 2014. Photo courtesy of NCCW.

THE JOYFUL MYSTERIES (Monday and Saturday)

CATHOLIC TEACHING ON THE DIGNITY OF WOMEN

RESOURCE: *Rosarium Virginis Mariae on the Most Holy Rosary (October 16, 2002) John Paul II, CHAPTER II MYSTERIES OF CHRIST – MYSTERIES OF HIS MOTHER*

The Joyful Mysteries 20. The first five decades, the “joyful mysteries”, are marked by *the joy radiating from the event of the Incarnation*. This is clear from the very first mystery, the Annunciation, where Gabriel's greeting to the Virgin of Nazareth is linked to an invitation to messianic joy: “Rejoice, Mary”. The whole of salvation history, in some sense the entire history of the world, has led up to this greeting. If it is the Father's plan to unite all things in Christ (cf. *Eph 1:10*), then the whole of the universe is in some way touched by the divine favour with which the Father looks upon Mary and makes her the Mother of his Son. The whole of humanity, in turn, is embraced by the *fiat* with which she readily agrees to the will of God.

Exultation is the keynote of the encounter with Elizabeth, where the sound of Mary's voice and the presence of Christ in her womb cause John to “leap for joy” (cf. *Lk 1:44*). Gladness also fills

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the scene in Bethlehem, when the birth of the divine Child, the Saviour of the world, is announced by the song of the angels and proclaimed to the shepherds as “news of great joy” (Lk 2:10).

The final two mysteries, while preserving this climate of joy, already point to the drama yet to come. The Presentation in the Temple not only expresses the joy of the Child's consecration and the ecstasy of the aged Simeon; it also records the prophecy that Christ will be a “sign of contradiction” for Israel and that a sword will pierce his mother's heart (cf Lk 2:34-35). Joy mixed with drama marks the fifth mystery, the finding of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple. Here he appears in his divine wisdom as he listens and raises questions, already in effect one who “teaches”. The revelation of his mystery as the Son wholly dedicated to his Father's affairs proclaims the radical nature of the Gospel, in which even the closest of human relationships are challenged by the absolute demands of the Kingdom. Mary and Joseph, fearful and anxious, “did not understand” his words (Lk 2:50).

To meditate upon the “joyful” mysteries, then, is to enter into the ultimate causes and the deepest meaning of Christian joy. It is to focus on the realism of the mystery of the Incarnation and on the obscure foreshadowing of the mystery of the saving Passion. Mary leads us to discover the secret of Christian joy, reminding us that Christianity is, first and foremost, *euangelion*, “good news”, which has as its heart and its whole content the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the one Saviour of the world.

Mulieris Dignitatem (August 15, 1988) John Paul II, CHAPTER II WOMAN-MOTHER OF GOD (THEOTÓKOS) Theotokos

4. Thus the “fullness of time” manifests the extraordinary dignity of the “woman”. On the one hand, this dignity consists *in the supernatural elevation to union with God* in Jesus Christ, which determines the ultimate finality of the existence of every person both on earth and in eternity. From this point of view, the “woman” is the representative and the archetype of the whole human race: she *represents the humanity* which belongs to all human beings, both men and women. On the other hand, however, the event at Nazareth highlights a form of union with the living God which can *only belong to the “woman”, Mary: the union between mother and son*. The Virgin of Nazareth truly becomes the Mother of God.

5. This event is clearly *interpersonal in character*: it is a dialogue. We only understand it fully if we place the whole conversation between the Angel and Mary in the context of the words: “full of grace”.^[19] The whole Annunciation dialogue reveals the essential dimension of the event, namely, its *supernatural* dimension (***). Grace never casts nature aside or cancels it out, but rather perfects it and ennobles it. Therefore the “*fullness of grace*” that was granted to the Virgin of Nazareth, with a view to the fact that she would become “*Theotókos*”, *also signifies the fullness of the perfection of “what is characteristic of woman”, of “what is feminine”*. Here we find ourselves, in a sense, at the culminating point, the archetype, of the personal dignity of women.

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When Mary responds to the words of the heavenly messenger with her "fiat", she who is "full of grace" feels the need to express her personal relationship to the gift that has been revealed to her, saying: "*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord*" (Lk 1:38). This statement should not be deprived of its profound meaning, nor should it be diminished by artificially removing it from the overall context of the event and from the full content of the truth revealed about God and man. In the expression "handmaid of the Lord", one senses Mary's complete awareness of being a creature of God. The word "handmaid", near the end of the Annunciation dialogue, is inscribed throughout the whole history of the Mother and the Son. In fact, this *Son*, who is the true and consubstantial "Son of the Most High", will often say of himself, especially at the culminating moment of his mission: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (Mk 10:45).

At all times Christ is aware of being "the servant of the Lord" according to the prophecy of *Isaiah* (cf. *Is* 42:1; 49:3, 6; 52:13) which includes the essential content of his messianic mission, namely, his awareness of being the Redeemer of the world. From the first moment of her divine motherhood, of her union with the Son whom "the Father sent into the world, that the world might be saved through him" (cf. *Jn* 3:17), *Mary takes her place within Christ's messianic service*.^[20] It is precisely this service which constitutes the very foundation of that Kingdom in which "to serve ... means to reign".^[21] Christ, the "Servant of the Lord", will show all people the royal dignity of service, the dignity which is joined in the closest possible way to the vocation of every person.

Thus, by considering the reality "Woman - Mother of God", we enter in a very appropriate way into this Marian Year meditation. *This reality also determines the essential horizon of reflection on the dignity and the vocation of women*. In anything we think, say or do concerning the dignity and the vocation of women, our thoughts, hearts and actions must not become detached from this horizon. The dignity of every human being and the vocation corresponding to that dignity find their definitive measure in *union with God*. Mary, the woman of the Bible, is the most complete expression of this dignity and vocation. For no human being, male or female, created in the image and likeness of God, can *in any way* attain fulfilment apart from this image and likeness.

[19] Cf. Encyclical Letter "*Redemptoris Mater*," 7-11 and the texts of the Fathers cited in Note 21: loc. cit., 367-373.

[20] Cf. *ibid.*, 39-41: loc. cit., 412-418.

[21] Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church "*Lumen gentium*," 36.