

Chinese Women and the Family from a Christian Perspective

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I am treating the role of the Chinese Woman in the Rapidly changing Hong Kong family from a Christian point of view, so I will begin by looking at how the Holy Scriptures define what a woman is. The book of Genesis says: “God created man in his own image, (in the image of God he created him), he created them male and female,” (Gen. 1:27). God created both of them in his image, not only as individuals, but in their common humanity, as a ‘unity of the two’. Therefore, men and women are essentially equal. For this reason Christianity gives great importance to the dignity of woman. She is seen as an equal counterpart of man. They are both persons, and both are called to participate in the intimate life of God. In the plan of God men and women are called to live in a communion of love, in the likeness of God who is love, who is unity in the Trinity; and to reflect to the world this communion of love. Thus man and woman are called to exist mutually ‘one for the other’.

From the Christian point of view, the role of the woman is better understood when we consider the role that Mary had in the plan of salvation. When the moment came to carry out the greatest work in history—the reconciliation and reunification of all people with God and with one another—God turns to a woman, to Mary, and asks for her free consent so that His Son, the Redeemer, can become incarnate in her. Thus, the new

covenant begins with a woman—the woman of the Annunciation at Nazareth. Herein lies the absolute originality of the Gospel. It is a ‘sign’ that points to the fact that in Christ “there is neither male nor female”. (Gal. 3:28). The mutual opposition between man and woman is essentially overcome because in God we are ‘all one’.

In the eyes of God, therefore, women are equal in dignity to men. In general, however, this truth has not been very well observed. Discrimination against women, for many reasons, has been manifested for centuries and women have attempted to react to this in many ways, achieving some positive results.

Today, women have acquired new possibilities for self realization, finding ways to supplement their traditional role as a housewife by pursuing a career. This is itself is positive in so far as it is a source of personal enrichment as well as a valid contribution to society. There are those, however, for whom it is not a choice but a necessity ; they are forced to look for a job in order to keep up with the rising living standard of the society. In both cases, though, it is important that the two roles of the woman—as housewife and mother and as career woman—be kept in the right balance.

In Hong Kong, an ultra-modern, capitalistic society, the woman is faced with many contrasts and rapidly changing values. The traditional values of Chinese culture, like filial piety, unity, strong family ties, reciprocal support and so on, are suffocated by the strong currents of materialism, personalism, hedonism, egoism and self-affirmation. It is at this point that religion becomes an important factor in helping to face these realities both within the family as well as in the society.

In this context, how then can we define the role of a Christian Chinese woman in the family and in society today? The Christian woman, like all women, has the desire to build a beautiful, happy and united family based on love. She knows that the origin of this love is God Himself who is Love. She is aware that she is called by God to bring this love not only to her family, but also to her society through the witness of an authentic Christian life.

Oftentimes, however, human ideals are far from reality. It is not uncommon nowadays to hear of couples separating after two, three or even ten years of marriage. It is very disheartening to realize that many couples do not know what perseverance, sacrifice, and marital fidelity mean. Unfortunately it has become almost a normal practice to separate or to obtain a divorce as a response to the seemingly logical question: “Why should I continue to bear all this suffering? Why not separate and start my own life again?” It is at this point that the Christian values help to overcome these

difficulties by teaching one to rely on the Grace of God and to draw strength from Him.

For the Christian woman, marriage means a promise of faithfulness up to the end because it is God who unites two people through this sacrament. In fact it is written in the Holy Scriptures: "Man must not separate what God has joined together." (Matthew 19:6). This is not only a command, but the sign that God will continually give man and woman the grace to remain united forever.

I have come across cases of couples in crisis who, by coming into contact with other Christian couples who are living their faith, found the strength to overcome their differences and to start again. These difficult moments can therefore be transformed into a beautiful period of learning how to love the other with a love that comes from God. To continue to love, even when one does not feel it, because Jesus asked us to love not only when we feel like it but always. Where there is love, divine love, a family will never be divided. The Christian woman, therefore, has a very important role to play in keeping the family together.

The family, in fact, is the basic cell of society and there can be hope for a new society and a new world only if there are 'new people' brought up in families where love reigns according to the authentic Christian spirit. And here too, the Christian woman's role as an educator of the future generation is of extreme importance.

Another point which I would like to bring up is the controversial issue of abortion—a terrible reality which is destroying the family and society today. In our present society, it has become a widely accepted practice to terminate unwanted pregnancies because it would be inconvenient to have a child at this moment, because it would ruin one's career, because it would be a burden on the family budget and so on—a mentality which is the fruit of egoism and of materialism. But for the Christian woman the answer is clear. The fifth commandment says: "Thou shall not kill." (Ex 20:13) The total adherence to Christian values and the support of the Christian community gives one the strength to go against the current. It is the Christian woman's role to help those around her to understand that children are a blessings from God, and that is all the family's needs they should trust in God, recalling the words of Jesus: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His Justice, and all the rest will be given to you". (Mt 6:33)

Difficulties in the family may also arise when one's spouse does not share the same Christian faith. Problems like family planning methods, the religious upbringing of the children, the possibility of fulfilling one's Christian duties like going to church, religious gatherings and so on—all may become obstacles in achieving common agreement and a more harmonious relationship between the husband and the wife. This apparently negative situation in which a Christian woman may find herself could be an occasion to give witness to her Christian faith; a chance to grow spiritually; a chance to open a deeper dialogue with her spouse; a chance to love with the measure Christ showed us by dying on the cross for us—indeed, a love without measure.

In fact, the love that Christ taught us has very specific qualities—concreteness, sacrifice and a total giving of oneself—qualities that are innate in the woman and which are brought to fulfillment only through God. The Christian woman draws the strength to love even in the most difficult situations from this faith, from Jesus' words and teachings, from the sacraments and from the support of her community. I know of some Christian women married to non-believers. At first they encounter certain conflicts and difficulties in their marital life. But through their sacrifice, patience, perseverance, concrete love, their authentic and coherent Christian life, their husbands eventually found God. A Christian woman, then, is also called to be an instrument of God in making as many people as possible discover God's love and His presence in their life.

In this talk, I was just able to touch briefly some topics which I hope have helped to give you a clearer picture of a Christian woman's role in the family—an extremely important and essential role. It is up to us to discover it day by day and to bring it to fulfillment for the good of humanity.