

## **WOMANHOOD, MOTHERHOOD, AND FAMILY**

### **Feminist Reflections**

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**Abstract:** This article is the feminist reflections on womanhood, motherhood and family as found in the present day society. The author begins her reflections on the Indian women in their relationship to the families. The religio-cultural domination of men which has its root in patriarchy is expressed in the slavery of women in various manners and the resultant lack of health suffered by them. The violence against women is an insult to injury. Women in Christianity are no exception to this general Indian scene. The author claims that even the generous John Paul II in his wholehearted support of women has not gone far enough in this regard. However, in the changing social scenario and challenge to missionary engagement, the pastoral need today is to recapture the biblical image of woman and man as seen in the creation stories of Genesis and Jesus' approach to women in the gospels. This will enable women to make a far more significant contribution than what they make today.

**Keywords:** woman, motherhood, family, patriarchy, vulnerability, society, religion, Indology, slavery, feminism, health, violence, discrimination, creation, equality, culture, mission, counter-culture, social action, HIV/AIDS

### **1. Introduction**

Melodramatic and over-the-top though it may be, one of my favourite Hindi movie dialogues still is Shashi Kapoor saying to his brother (Amitabh Bachchan) in the movie *Deewar* - '*mere paas ma hai*' (mother is with me). It was a profound moment when A.R. Rahman quoted the same<sup>1</sup> in his Academy Awards acceptance speech for original score:

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<sup>1</sup>See <http://aaspeechesdb.oscars.org/link/081-15/>; retrieved on 05.06.2015. "Before coming, I was excited and terrified. The last time I felt like that was during my marriage. There's a dialogue from a Hindi film, called "*Mere paas ma hai*," ... So mother's here, her blessings are there with me. I am grateful for her to have come all the way... "God is great." Thank you."

“There is a Hindi dialogue ‘*mere paas ma hai*’ which means even if I have got nothing I have my mother. I want to thank her for coming all the way to support me.” Besides his ‘loving’ mother Kareema Begum, who was seated among the audience at the Kodak Theatre, the ‘Mozart of Madras’ also went on to add in Tamil, “*Ella pukalum iraivanukke* (All glory and fame is to God)” As Indians, we take pride in our mothers. Perhaps it is because we recognise that there is something sacred about them. Distinguishing this sacredness in them, Pope Francis has said: “The qualities of gentleness, of particular sensitivity and tenderness, which is abundant in the female soul, represent not only a genuine force for the life of families, for the irradiation of a climate of peace and harmony, but also a reality without which the human vocation would be unfeasible.”<sup>2</sup> In most Indian cultures people take offence if an abusive word is uttered against mothers.

Almost every person in our society starts life in a family of some kind. The kind of family one has influences the kind of person one grows up to be. In families, children first encounter the concepts of right and wrong. They also interact with role models who shape their sense of what it is possible for them to do and to be. “The family is fundamental because it is the place where there germinates in the human soul the first perception of the meaning of life. This perception grows in the relationship with the mother and with the father, who are not the owners of the life of the children but the first collaborators with God in the transmission of life and the faith.”<sup>3</sup> The family is the ‘little Church’ because it transmits God; it transmits the love of Christ.<sup>4</sup> The formative experience of family is core to each individual’s identity. Even in one’s adult life, reflection on ‘who I think I am’ inevitably includes reflection on the formative influences in my life, generally understood to be most powerful during the impressionable years of childhood. If it is true that family plays a major role in shaping each one of us, then family requires the most careful attention from both the society and the Church.

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<sup>2</sup>See <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-s-address-to-the-pontifical-council-for-culture>; retrieved on 05.06.2015.

<sup>3</sup>Pope Benedict XVI in his address to families and youth gathered in Palermo’s Piazza Politeamato, Sicily on 09.05.2010.

<sup>4</sup>Pope Benedict XVI, address at Palermo’s Piazza.

## **2. Indian Families and Indian Women**

Majority of Indian mothers are home-makers whether they stay at home managing affairs there or have a job outside. They are the centre of family life. An Indian mother takes care of the individual needs of every member of the family to the extent of forgetting her own individuality. She is the one who cooks, cleans, does the laundry, takes care of the little ones, supervises their homework, goes to the market, picks vegetables from the garden, takes care of the sick in the family, holds the family together when sibling rivalries appear, and manages the various crises of the family. She turns out to be a counsellor par excellence and a confidant in times of trouble. Sitting in our mother's lap we learned to speak. Holding her hand we took our first baby step. The members of the family learn their first prayers from their mother. Her loving face hovered over us most of our infant years.<sup>5</sup> She never made any fuss about it when we made mess. In our adult life, we long for home and in our nostalgia we remember our mothers' home cooked meals. The list is endless.

## **3. The Patriarchal Reign**

Most Indian families are patriarchal in nature. Most of us have strong bonds of affective relationships with our immediate family and with a large extended family. A great majority of Indian families are still intergenerational. Indian society and individuals thrive on togetherness and mutual support from our kith and kin. It is the women of the family, especially our mothers and grandmothers who accompany the infants and young children in their formative years. They play a great role in shaping the human personality that each one becomes in their adult life. In our culture, the care of the whole family especially the vulnerable – the young, the sick and the elderly fall mainly on the shoulders of women. They are expected to give and never count the cost. It is assumed that it is their nature to love tenderly and give themselves to the care of those around.

While Indians take pride in the support we receive from our families, families can also be agents of systemic oppression especially of women because of the expectations that are placed on them. Within Indian families, the authority of the ruling male (husband, father, or son) is considered supreme. While looking at the historical roots of the

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<sup>5</sup>In February 2015, Pope Francis said that women knew "how to show the tender face of God, his mercy, which translates in the availability to give time more than to occupy spaces, to welcome rather than to exclude."

oppression of women in India, multiple interrelated forces such as religion, patriarchal culture, caste system and the related institutions emerge as the most important causes of discrimination and inequality in our society.

#### 4. Women and Religion

In the founding, interpreting and control of all major religions in India the actors have been upper class and upper caste men. It is they who defined morality, ethics, behaviour and even law. They decided the duties and rights of men and women, and the relationship between communities and sexes. Even today it is the upper caste men who are most influential in deciding and shaping the national policies. Almost all Indian religions consider women to be inferior, impure and sinful. It is as though just because they are born as female they are guilty of something.

An Indian woman is revered as *Devī* on the one hand and treated as a *dāsi* (slave) on the other. She is considered as an embodiment of *Śakti*, but at the same time she is considered as *abala* (weak) and the one who is to be protected all through her life: by father, husband, and son respectively.<sup>6</sup> She is honoured as a mother yet kept as infantile. While the reverential feelings exist at the ideological level, she is socially treated as inferior and is assigned discriminatory values. Her birth and well-being are neither preferred nor celebrated. In fact, India's skewed sex-ratio, maternal mortality, and increasing sexual violence against Indian women speak volumes regarding India's treatment of women.

#### 5. Slavery of Women and Health

Very often women are not part of major decisions made in an Indian family regarding property, choice of education, choice of spouses, careers, religious rituals, or celebrations. Even decisions regarding their own bodies and personal welfare are influenced by circumstances related to cultural norms and expectations placed on them by our patriarchal society. For instance, there is a custom that Indian women and girls in a family eat after the men and boys of the family. The average nutritional intake of women is 1400 calories daily. However, the necessary requirement is approximately 2200 calories. 300 women die every day due to childbirth and pregnancy related causes. In fact, India has one of the highest maternal mortality rate in

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<sup>6</sup>The dependency code of *Manusmṛti* V.148 justifies social relationships that approve of female subordination and male authority.

the world. 92% of women in India suffer from some kind of gynaecological problems. 56% of married women/pregnant women are anaemic. 50% of the deliveries are not conducted safely. The proportion of tubectomy operations to total sterilizations was 95.6 percent.<sup>7</sup> Amartya Sen is of the opinion that the health of women in reproductive age group has impact on the health of Indian population and the stability of Indian economy.<sup>8</sup>

## 6. Violence against Women

Women's issues should not be narrowly construed by our tradition merely as sexual. The multiple forms of violence an Indian female has to face during her life time within families and outside of it has been brought to public awareness in the recent years. Indian society continues to prefer sons more than daughters. Often they are considered as *paraya dhan*.<sup>9</sup> The custom of giving and receiving dowry continues to place our daughters on the 'marriage market'.

## 7. Women in Christianity

Christianity is no exception when it comes to keeping women subjugated even though Jesus' words and deeds were countercultural with regard to women and their liberation. The Catholic teaching regarding marriage and family which value the equality of partners and mutual love relationship between them is a far away reality for many Indian women within their marital homes. Justice for women in the fullest sense must not be marginalized as the concern of a few, much less as incompatible with the Catholic social mission to safeguard dignity and promote genuine solidarity.

Speaking to the annual plenary assembly of Pontifical Council for Culture in February this year the Pope Francis said: "I like to describe the feminine dimension of the Church as a welcoming womb that regenerates life." As a woman religious in India I would like to think of the Church as a mother about whom I can proudly claim: '*mere paas ma hai*'. As I reflect on womanhood, motherhood and family, I remember two things: The first is from St. John Paul II that God

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<sup>7</sup>Family Welfare Statistics in India 2011, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

<sup>8</sup>See Amartya Sen, "Many Faces of Gender Inequality," *Frontline* 18, 22 (27 October – 9 November 2001).

<sup>9</sup>She is the 'wealth to be enjoyed by strangers'. This is a reference to her marriage which takes her away from her own home and makes her part of another family.

entrusted human beings to women in a special way.<sup>10</sup> The second is from Pope Francis that “women are called to service, not servitude.”<sup>11</sup> The pendulum of attitude towards women within our families and the Church swings between this special privilege and servitude. The question is whether the Mother Church will take care of her daughters and provide an atmosphere where they feel at home and are welcomed.

## 8. Biblical Image of Woman and Man

Grounded in the Genesis account of human creation in *imago Dei* and Jesus’ prophetic praxis in relationship to women, the Catholic teaching not only promotes the role of women in the family but also has increasingly emphasized their valuable contributions in public life. First of all we have the statement that human beings are made in the image of God (Gen 1:26). The first parents shared the same essence, function and substance. In the joint commission in chapter two of Genesis, God does not give more authority or power to the man but jointly entrusts man and woman with the tasks of filling the world with new life and seeing to it that everything works harmoniously. In God’s design then, there is mutuality; not only do they share in essence, since both are made in God’s image, but they share in function, since both are called to care for God’s world together.

In Genesis 2 we see that Eve also shares the substance of Adam, having been taken from the rib.<sup>12</sup> She is not a divine afterthought; rather she is on the same level as him which is made known by Adam’s response as he awakes recognizing the beauty of the equality: at last a partner, “bone of my bones.” Remember he was lonely prior to this realization. She is not an add-on to his life but truly a companion, an equal, a partner comparable to him. The existing model in India we saw earlier in which the dreams and aspirations of man and the family fill centre stage, and in which the woman tries to fit her

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<sup>10</sup>*Mullieris Dignitatem*, 30.

<sup>11</sup>“I suffer - to tell you the truth - when I see in the Church or in Church organizations that the role of service, which we all have and should have... when a woman’s role of service slides into servidumbre [servitude].” From the address of Pope Francis to participants in a seminar organized by The Pontifical Council for The Laity on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Mullieris Dignitatem*. Clementine Hall, 12.10.2013.

<sup>12</sup>See R. M. Chennattu, “Dignity of Women in Christian Perspectives” *Journal of Dharma* 37, 1 (March 2012), 61-78 for a detailed study of the creation story in Genesis 2 especially the rib symbol and the phrase “helper fit for him.”

life in and around his, is called into question by the very biblical text, which is very often used to claim its legitimacy.

### 9. Jesus, Women, and the Church

In the ministry of Jesus, in his treatment of women, his teachings about discipleship, and especially his invitation to women as disciples there is a call for mutuality and respect with regard to all relationships. Love is the characteristic sign of discipleship and mark of a Christian community. This is exactly what is expected within the 'domestic church' or in the most intimate relationship between two Christians - marriage. Jesus respected women as full, rational human beings. For instance, he engaged the women at the well (John 4) in the same type of conversation full of double meanings that he had had with Nicodemus, a highly educated member of the Jewish elite (John 3). The Samaritan woman accepted Jesus' words and was entrusted with his revelation of himself as the messiah.

Catholic as well as feminist approaches towards the relationship between men and women in families affirm equal human dignity, seek justice for the vulnerable and uphold liberation for the oppressed. A feminist concern for women's experience precisely as disadvantaged within families, in the Church and in the society, and the struggle for their equal social power both reflect and challenge Catholic teaching. Catholic feminism per se entails neither "masculinization" nor heresy.<sup>13</sup> The truth is that Catholic feminism takes up the meaning of the Gospel and God's action in human lives in the light of women's lived experience, asking what the tradition does to and for women.<sup>14</sup> The Church is truly blessed with a clear teaching.

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<sup>13</sup>John Paul II's concern in *Mulieris Dignitatem* that "women's pursuit of their rights not end in their 'masculinization'" or Cardinal Ratzinger's accusation that Christian feminists are "seeking power" or making themselves "adversaries of men" or trying to "dominate men" (Ratzinger authored *On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and World* released by Vatican, 31 July 2004) come to mind.

<sup>14</sup>Georgia Masters Keightley, "Catholic Feminism's Contribution to the Church's Social Justice Tradition" in Francis P. McHugh and Samuel M. Natale, *Things Old and New: Catholic Social Teaching Revisited*, 333-363, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993, 334, 336-337; Andrea Lee, and Amata Miller, "Feminist Themes in *Laborem Exercens*" in Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, *Readings in Moral Theology, no. 5: Official Catholic Social Teaching*, New York: Paulist Press, 1986, 418.

## 10. The Pastoral Need Today

The expected change in the area of woman-man relationship can either be a help or a threat to the teaching and to our values about marriage and family life. We need to listen to the current lived reality of families if we are to understand the pastoral needs of today's marriages and family homes. For this to be achieved, genuine listening of women's struggles with oppression within families, society and culture needs to take place. This listening can lead to dialogue and understanding which eventually can lead us towards transformative action. Women's stories of struggle with faith and life, within a Church where they feel as though they are "resident aliens" and their efforts to empower themselves need to be told so that future generations can learn from them.<sup>15</sup>

The view of the Church regarding women has undergone great change. The vision of woman in official Catholic social thought found in Pope Leo's portrait of *a weak creature in need of shelter and control through obedience to her natural master*,<sup>16</sup> took a swerve in the affirmation of her full equality in more "public" spheres in post-John XXIII era. However, ambivalence toward women's social roles persists. In spite of several positive ecclesial teachings, a tension (if not contradiction) exists between these teachings on equal human dignity and affirmations of women's contributions in social and political life, on the one hand, and an emphasis on women's maternal function, familial vocation and gender complementarity, on the other. Even the self-declared "*papa feminista*," John Paul II supported women's equal access to social, economic and political goods while emphasizing the "feminine genius" of motherhood as women's primary vocation and a dualistic complementarity of the sexes. This anthropological dualism underlies the ways in which women are treated or not treated explored above. A separate-but-equal status continues to hinder women's flourishing in work inside and outside the household alike.

## 11. Culture with a Mother and Family with a Father

Motherhood is a vocation and fullness of life, but that does not prevent a person from contributing to the society through a profession. Human beings develop their emotional and affective world in the family and

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<sup>15</sup>See E. S. Fiorenza, *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.

<sup>16</sup>C. E. Gudorf, *Catholic Social Teaching on Liberation Themes*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980, 259.

so family is a priority for any society. Having stable families can indeed reduce the bulk of India's social problems. In order to properly settle this shared view of the world and family we need to delve deeper into the meaning of fatherhood, which is the only effective defence that can save motherhood. Moreover, fatherhood – to love and provide for the good of others in a way that pertains to men – must be exercised within their families and towards their wives in a special way. Fatherhood must be exercised in the public sphere advocating in favour of motherhood, a woman's way of loving, her professional and cultural acumen.

If we persist in insisting on the incorporation of women into a work environment that does not allow for dedication to family, we prevent them from making their unique humanizing contribution to the shaping of the society. Responsibility for this does not only depend on women, but also on those who accept their work. The contribution of women – giving life and humanizing the world – is necessary in order to maintain the family and to ensure that work is not only compatible but that it is in the service of the family and the individual. If humanity is specially entrusted to women, women must be empowered to live up to this calling.

## **12. Women and the Social Involvement**

Catholics emphasize the fact that social involvement is indispensable for full personalization. However, the ideology of separate spheres has helped sustain not only inequities in the workplace, but also a lack of mutual accountability in shared household and parenting responsibilities.<sup>17</sup> Feminists have rightly identified the disproportionate burden women who work outside of the home bear in terms of a "second shift." In part due to this tendency, it is well known in academic circles that women who have small children face many obstacles to be made permanent in the job or get a promotion in the current one. While they may constitute a privileged sector of working women, the example is helpful for considering ways in which Catholic educational institutes are well poised to embody support for women by fostering policies and practices that help women balance work-life demands. Women with small children are less likely than men with small children to earn a permanent post. Many women with

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<sup>17</sup>For a lucid assessment of these intersecting issues, see C. Firer Hinze, "U.S. Catholic Social Thought, Gender, and Economic Livelihood" *Theological Studies* 66 (2005), 568-591.

small children face a “time bind” and fail to thrive professionally because of intense competition, long hours, and on-going demands. Sometimes young women teachers are instructed not to get pregnant as the institute cannot afford the economic drain that the hiring of another teacher can cause.

Given the Catholic social tradition’s affirmation of women’s equal dignity, the significant role of the family in society, and the need for institutions to protect both, Catholic institutes are particularly obligated to support mothers as a matter of justice. Efficiency and competition in the marketplace of educational institutions today must be moderated by greater concern for the way work schedules and compensation support or threaten the bonds between spouses and between parents and children.

### **13. Changing Society and Challenge to Mission**

Given India’s present context of massive migrations and farmer suicides, very often it is women, children and the elderly who are left behind to eke out a living for themselves. When a poor rural woman migrates to the city she ends up as domestic worker who is vulnerable to multiple forms of abuse. The Nigerian theologian, Teresa Okure, has argued that two viruses more dangerous than HIV enable its rapid spread among societies’ most vulnerable: sexism and global poverty. Taken together they help explain the alarming reality that in many of our towns and villages, the highest risk factor for HIV infection is that of being a married woman.<sup>18</sup> The grip of sexual “double standards,” harmful concepts of masculinity and patriarchal religions combine to jeopardize Indian women’s health and wellbeing. In addition to a lack of genuine autonomy, women’s vulnerability to HIV is directly linked to contexts frequently marked by poverty and violence.

The Church has prophetically addressed social sin in recent decades, but too rarely does it offer sustained critiques of sexism and how it intersects with other unjust structures that HIV/AIDS exploits. Paul Farmer, a medical anthropologist, has argued that one of the main reasons for AIDS to remain a “disease of men” in the minds of most is “that the majority of women with AIDS had been robbed of their voices long before HIV appeared to further complicate their lives.

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<sup>18</sup>Kevin Kelly, “Conclusion: A Moral Theologian Faces the New Millennium in a Time of AIDS” in James Keenan, ed., with John D. Fuller, Lisa Sowle Cahill, and Kevin Kelly, *Catholic Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention*, 324-332, New York: Continuum, 2000, 325.

In settings of entrenched elitism, they have been poor. In settings of entrenched racism, they have been women of colour. In settings of entrenched sexism, they have been, of course, women." <sup>19</sup> He is convinced that economic, political and cultural forces significantly shape the dynamics of HIV transmission. Within the Indian context, it is the Dalit woman and the poor woman who are on the receiving end of such multiple forms of oppression. The precarious existence of women within Indian families needs to be taken into consideration in our theologizing and in our missionary praxis.

#### 14. The Solace of a Family and Its Role

When we come to the majority of middle class Indian families there is a dramatic change happening due to both husband and wife venturing into jobs and choosing to live far away from their traditional family home. Cut off from their cultural moorings they end up alienated and uprooted. These families are under a lot of pressure: too little time, too much to do just living, working and caring for each other, not enough understanding, help and appreciation from society or the Church. We would hear a lot about loneliness and not being welcome. Materialist values portrayed on TV and in the newspapers don't help. Many of them would say that faith in God and a prayer life does help. So too do patience, good humour, tolerance and good family communication. Families are grateful for today's health, social and educational benefits they receive from the companies they work for. But their greatest blessing by far they admit is that of simply being together as a family.

No one can deny that families are an important school of moral learning, but too many families teach inequality and subordination, not principles of justice. They are not teaching tender love, and mutuality. Feminist scholars question how children whose first experiences of adult interaction are unequal altruism, or privileges in the case of India's sons, domination and manipulation in the case of India's daughters can learn and accept the principles of justice they need in order to be citizens in a democracy committed to the equal worth of all.<sup>20</sup> No government or church can be indifferent to whether or not children grow up to be literate, functioning members of its economy.

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<sup>19</sup>Paul Farmer, "Women, Poverty, and AIDS" in Farmer, Margaret Connors and Janie Simmons, *Women, Poverty, and AIDS: Sex, Drugs, and Structural Violence*, 3-37, Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1996, 5-6, 23.

<sup>20</sup>See Susan Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, New York: Basic Books, 1989.

The government and societies at large, thus depend, at least in part, on the labour of caretaking and childrearing, work that is today overwhelmingly done by women. Given its evident importance, domestic labour largely done by women, must be given greater public recognition. We need to make a strong case for taking such care-giving within the family seriously. In spite of the Indian aspiration to march into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as an economic giant in the world, our women still lag behind, doing the vast majority of domestic labour - not only tending the house, but also raising and caring for children. Feminist scholars have attacked traditional approaches to the family that obscure this inequality.

## 15. Conclusion

“I came that they may have life, life in abundance” (John 10:10). Let this life in abundance be experienced by women of India. We need to enable women in our families to experience and promote this life for themselves and for those they love. Given the reality of women’s experiences we have briefly visited here, from violence to domestic scapegoating to inequities, women both in the family and in the Church long to be listened to and to be understood. However, genuine listening is no simple undertaking. It takes courage and humility to listen to women and subjugated people anywhere. And courageous listening necessitates listening to all of women’s experience, not just the sanitized, edited, controlled, and conforming to Church teaching, not pleasant, not comfortable, but the truth. “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). Pope Francis has exhorted husbands and wives: “In order to resolve the problems in their relationships, men and women need to speak to one another more, listen to each other more, get to know one another better, love one another more. They must treat each other with respect and cooperate in friendship.”<sup>21</sup>

Regarding the duty of the Church towards women in this regard, Pope Francis has this to say: “There is no doubt that we must do far more to advance women, if we want to give more strength to the reciprocity between man and woman. In fact, it is necessary that woman not only be listened to more, but that her voice carry real weight, a recognized authority in society and in the Church.”<sup>22</sup> Heeding to this call to be open to women and their “issues”

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<sup>21</sup>Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 15 April 2015.

<sup>22</sup>Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 15 April 2015.

comprehensively construed and experiences fully engaged, the Church can continue to better embody just practices that support women. If a Catholic parish or institution or NGO is where the Church does its thinking, perhaps humane praxis in areas touching on welfare of women and the wellbeing of families will help author the next wave of Catholic social thought on families, more adequately reflecting norms of justice and mutuality moving towards better and effective partnership between women and men in our families and our communities. Jesus summed up the totality of what God expects of us with the commands to love God and to love those around us sacrificially. We should love each other with the kind of love that involves kneeling before the other in humble service.<sup>23</sup>

Jesus' norm is sacrificial love. It is ironic that just when he is lifting up the subjugated people, treating them as human beings, he also calls the same people both men and women to sacrificial service. Why free them and enslave them again? It is a different thing entirely to be in relationships of mutual service and love than to work while others take their leisure. One making sacrifices for another when no sacrifice is made by the other, it can result in drudgery and a deadening of relationship. The call Jesus made to all his followers, to imitate them in humble self-sacrifice, makes loving service rich joyful and safe. Rejecting the hierarchical model of marriage in favour of a love relationship shaped by Jesus' definition and demonstration of love would be truly countercultural for the Indian society and Church.

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<sup>23</sup>In John 13 we see a tension as it was countercultural for their master to be washing the disciples' feet.