

Original French

CHANGING PATTERNS OF WOMANHOOD

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We are going to try and discover what changes are taking place at this time, in patterns of womanhood.

The changes taking place
in the world concern
women

I was not here this morning, to hear what Father Russo had to say, so perhaps I am going to repeat what he said about the changing world we are living in, but my approach will be from a woman's point of view, as we are women. It is a platitude, but none the less true to say that we are living in a totally changing world. All these changes concern us, they concern us as human persons, and as women too. We cannot, in fact, ignore these changes, first of all with regard to information. At the present time, on account of mass media, we know straight away what is going on in the world, and cannot remain unaware of these happenings. This shows right away that we can no longer be confined within our former, reassuring, traditional patterns. We are shaken out of these, whether we want to be or not.

We must first of all try to find out what these changes mean for us as women. I will make no claims to give a complete analysis, but will merely pick out some of the important elements of this general change in humanity, which directly affect us. Even if we choose not to be affected by these changes, we are. What are the main outlines of these changes? This is the first point, and I would just like to mention it briefly, as it deals with themes we are all well acquainted with.

What is the meaning of
these changes?

The problem which interests me most, as a philosopher, is : what is the value of these changes? Are they good? Are they bad? We must know what criteria to use to make this decision. Are we going to remain bound to former patterns, under the impression that they are the right ones? Are we going to reject new patterns under the impression that they are wrong? On the other hand, what is the meaning of these changes? Do they mean progress or decline? Are we losing sight of a conception of womanhood which was the only good and true one, and are we surrounded by distortions of this image which can only bring in their wake extreme misery for mankind? In other words, are we at the end of a world, or at the beginning? We must therefore decide on our criteria for judging. On what are we going to base our judgement as to whether they are good or bad,

whether they mean progress or decline? In a more down-to-earth way, what are we women going to choose as our models of life and action, not only for ourselves, but for those around us, and who will come after us? What will our new patterns be?

The main outlines of these changes.

Let us very rapidly mention the main outlines of these changes. Certain subconscious patterns are starting to disappear in certain strata of humanity, in certain countries, but are still prevalent in others. These are now condemned everywhere.

Certain patterns of womanhood are starting to disappear

For example (I would like to go over this very quickly), women are seen carrying their children, feeding them, going out to look for wood, water, looking after the fire, sweeping, washing, welcoming their husbands, resigned to seeing their children leave home, entirely wrapped up in their homes, taking very little or no part at all in social and public life. At the present time, these patterns are starting to be swept aside, as household requirements change, with mechanization and the progress of comfort. This progress is not equal in all countries, but all the world is going in the same direction: the sign of progress is the fridge or the vacuum cleaner. All these former patterns are embodied in women's dress too. We no longer live in an age when women wear veils, are confined to the house or hide their figures. We live in an age of trousers, bikinis, mini-skirts and the maxi. There are many new facets of women in trousers, as soldiers, as workers, even in social work. Of course women have always worked, perhaps to a larger extent than men, because they worked all day, but in the home. Today, they work everywhere, as manual workers, heads of firms, teachers, doctors, and in all fields, in administration, research, business, etc...

The new patterns of womanhood are criticized

But these women who go out, who work, who bear responsibilities, who are involved in political life, who teach, who create, who are engaged in research, who think, who discover themselves as human persons are still to a great extent, objects of discrimination with regard to men, because former patterns persist. There is a fundamental ambiguity here: even the most evolved women very often dream of a return to former patterns. This is the case of women with guilty consciences, who are both fully bound up in new patterns and endeavours, and yet who experience a sense of culpability from their former patterns. We all know the problems I am talking about now. But sometimes it is felt that these changes must be curbed, that women must be brought back to their place in the home, that it is going against their natures, that it is inviting catastrophes for tomorrow and the future. I think it should be said straight away that these changing patterns of womanhood do not signify that a revolt is brewing, perhaps they do not constitute a revolt at all, or a revolution, but that they are one of the main elements of a changing world.

These changing patterns are bound up with changes in humanity

These changing patterns of womanhood are bound up with changes in humanity, and in particular with the changes taking place in human knowledge and technique in all fields. For example, the introduction of mechanical appliances in the home can

either be a form of freedom or a new form of slavery, on account of commercial publicity and debts incurred. We are finding it increasingly difficult to do without mechanical appliances, and soon will not be able to do without them at all. Think what our life would be like at the present time without electricity in the home : namely, without hot water, sewing machines, vacuum cleaners, fridges, telephones, easier cleanliness, etc... The introduction of mechanical appliances is an inevitable fact, and changes our situation more deeply than we would think.

A scientific change Progress and new discoveries in physiology and medicine bring inevitable changes which question us in a fundamental way. The introduction, particularly of birth control, turns the status of women upside-down : release from the age-old distress of motherhood and fatality, a release, since there is not only the aspect of a release from eroticism, women become free in a whole new responsibility which brings with it entirely new factors and problems; the spacing of births at a time when people are living longer sets women an enormous problem : what will I do when my children have left home? Women are faced with problems of social insertion, the value of eroticism : women are becoming conscious of their bodies. This coincides with a radical change taking place in the family group and the tribe; the family is becoming smaller, more individual, and this creates many problems. Women can no longer be classed on the basis of former patterns, as protectress of the home, the mother's lap, the sympathetic ear, but they must rediscover themselves.

Which cannot be avoided This scientific change is not a matter of choice, since, as you know, we are caught up in a situation where the population is increasing at a tremendous rate, that in the year 2000, according to the most accurate calculations, there will be $7\frac{1}{2}$ milliard inhabitants instead of the $5\frac{1}{2}$ milliard there are today. This is a problem which is a source of anxiety for many countries, which are forced, laying aside all spiritual and moral considerations, to introduce methods of family planning, not only by birth control, but also by sterilization. The other day in France, there was a very interesting programme on the television on this subject. It showed Pakistan, and the health centres where men could go to be sterilized. They go in mass for this operation, aided by government propaganda. It is a problem which faces us everywhere. It is even possible that in the not-too-far distant future, countries will pass laws limiting the number of children each woman is allowed to have to two, because otherwise, we will simply not survive. Some scientists are of the opinion that a general atomic catastrophe is necessary, so that the rest of the world can go on living. These immediate distressing problems show us that the changes taking place are absolutely inevitable.

What must we think about these changes? What is the meaning of these changes? I cannot answer this question as I do not feel that the meaning is shown in the changes. We do not know precisely what to think about them : whether they are good, or bad. They have a double character : mechanical appliances give us freedom, but at the same time make us slaves. Birth control can set us free, but at the same time, it becomes a necessity

it makes us slaves too, it injures life and the human person. Are these changes a means of fulfilling or of destroying ourselves? Are we going to lose our spiritual values? Are we not in danger of corrupting our nature as women, our vocation as such, which according to traditional patterns is a vocation of welcome, of love, of a sense of life. Are we not in the process of corrupting our Christian vocation? What traditional models do we find in Christianity? For a long time, at least in certain trends of the Church, we were shown an insipid picture of the Virgin Mary, without her true theological dimension and reduced to an unconscious projection of a model of femininity, bearing no resemblance to what Christ said. In answer to the person who said : "Happy the womb that bore you and the breasts you sucked!" He replied : "Still happier those who hear the word of God and keep it!" The ideal we are shown is always marked by the characteristics of submissiveness, obedience, interiority, the maternal lap, etc... But we are called on to lead lives which are to a large extent contrary to these patterns. Is this not dangerous? I would like to repeat the question I have just asked : can we avoid these changes? The answer is certainly no, we cannot avoid them. What must be our

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nal patterns worth?

course of action? What are our traditional patterns worth? This is the first question : are they to be thrown on one side? Must we do away with these former patterns completely, or rather, although these former patterns are unacceptable as they are for today, do they not contain some fundamental values which can be lived in a new way and reconsidered? Do we not need to change our patterns of womanhood? Do we not need to create new patterns? The conception of women as queen of the home, the guardian of the house gradually loses all kind of meaning with women who live in Council houses, or perhaps in collective groups or shanty towns, in dreadful or over-luxurious economic conditions, in towns of the future such as Brasilia, where nothing, no pattern at all will be compatible with the traditional pattern of women as guardians of the home, that is, of the fireside. We must think about these patterns because they permeate us, making our changes very difficult. What are we to do?

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Well, we must reconsider these traditional, fundamental values. If we do not want to lose what is valuable for always in these former patterns, we must invent new models of behaviour, on condition that we realize that the word model used here, does not in any way mean patterns to copy, but structures to adapt to changing situations. Just as these structures must be constantly reconsidered, the situations too must be reconsidered and criticized. Here we are getting at the

rough lifelong
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theme of these meetings. We must give ourselves lifelong education, and try to help others achieve it. Lifelong education, namely, we cannot make any plans to create models which are going to last for centuries, because everything changes so quickly. We must try and work out a lifelong model. I myself would like to propose that we take Christ as our lifelong model, only we must no longer imitate Him as we did in the past; we must understand that Christ is not a model we must copy in a slavish fashion - besides, how could we? He is a spirit and man, through his redemption must make the spirit of Christ real in the world today, forever new. To do

this, he must go **right** down to his deepest sources, so that he can draw unceasingly on both the new and the old : this is the image of the Gospel.

Who are we?

For my third point, I would like us to think about our status as women, as human persons, and as Christian women, as we must be living images of Christ and not mere reproductions in millions of examples of a false image which would just become a myth. To reach an understanding of our fundamental values, we must first find out who we are, and what we are called on to be. I would like you to think about this now.

Human persons

First of all, fundamentally, we are human persons. We are, along with men, the Human Person, I would like to refer here to several texts from Genesis which come back to this question three times : Genesis 5. 1,2 : "Male and female He created them. He blessed them and gave them the name 'Man' on the day they were created". And Genesis goes even further, for who is this man? The two other texts indicate that the human person is the image of God : Genesis 1. 26 : "Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild beasts and all the reptiles that crawl upon the earth", which confirms man's domination and mastery of the earth. Genesis 1. 27 : "God created man in the image of Himself, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them". Therefore, we have a threefold solemn statement of fact : mankind means men and women, and men and women together are the image of God. This lays the root foundation for the dignity of mankind, men and women and their equality.

The image of God

I think that this must be our charter : the image of God. I would like to go over the ideas of certain Fathers of the Church, with regard to the image of God. At the moment, my students and I are studying what is the heart of this image of God : it is the gift of freedom, given to man by God, which cannot even be destroyed, as St. Bernard says, by the fire of Hell. Man is always the image of God, because this image of God is man's freedom... it is this that makes man the image of God. Freedom means the power to choose, and to judge our choice; it is free will, the innate characteristic of man. It is the basis of respect for all human persons. Each human person is the image of God, no matter what his status, sex, colour, social class, mental state, whether or not he is intelligent, cultivated, sane or insane, mentally ill, or in full possession of his faculties, whether he is weak or strong, rich or poor, every man is the image of God. If I consider a human person as an inanimate object, or as an animal, dominated by its needs, without any freedom of choice, then I injure humanity in itself, and what is worse, I injure God since I mock His image. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which you are familiar with, and which has been drawn up by Christian philosophers, including Maritain, is based on this, and it declares that there can be no discrimination with regard to class, race, colour or sex.

It is a charter of liberation

Women are therefore, along with men, the image of God. This is a charter of liberation, as we must learn to be free. Christ has taught us, and if we read the Gospel, we will find our freedom

therein. The message of salvation, brought by Christ, is the same for men as for women, there is no difference in status. We are created by God to His own image, we are sinners and we find our salvation in Christ. It was to the Samaritan woman, a sinner, that Christ proclaimed Himself as the Messiah. It was Christ who proclaimed His Resurrection to the women and who told them to go and announce it to the men who had taken flight. I will not pursue this point further, as you all know the Gospel and know to what extent we find our freedom therein. Christ makes no discrimination between men and women.

To restore this
divine image

We must all then, men and women, restore this divine image of ourselves, through the mediation of Christ : this is what Saint Bernard said. We are the image of God, but we have lost our likeness to Him in the same way as a photo is blurred or can be faded with time; we should strive all our lives to restore this likeness. This likeness is not dependent on a particular situation; each and every one of us can and must restore it, and begin to resemble God. Salvation means freedom therefore, the liberation brought by this message; and this liberation is the liberation of love. Love is our life and it is our mission, not only as women, as people would sometimes have it, but everyone's mission, men and women, man as a whole, to restore this love in himself. Consequently, our work of salvation and liberation must be a joint effort. "There are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus", This is our fundamental charter.

Do these changes
make us lose our
femininity?

Let us go on now to examine some ideas from this point of view, which, I feel, is quite fundamental. Let us examine the notions and ideas of former patterns which defined us and define us still, that we bear in us like a query, sometimes like remorse, and often like unhappiness. We are under the impression that if we move in the direction of the changes I have very rapidly mentioned, we are going to lose our fundamental nature as women, we are going to lose our feminine vocation, we will no longer fulfil our roles or functions as women, and consequently, humanity will miss out on something. It is the great fear of many men : if women become emancipated, what is going to happen to men without the quality of femininity? It is an important question, because for mankind to be complete, we need the perfect harmony of masculinity and femininity. It is difficult to define these exactly. We know we need each other, not just in the couple, in the strictest sense of the word, but in humanity too. Men cannot do without women, and women cannot do without men. A purely masculine or a purely feminine society is both unhealthy and incomplete, we need each other. But how can women reach an understanding of themselves as women, and men as men? The short analysis I am going to make is just as valuable for men as for women : but my approach will be from the women's point of view, as it is our problem today.

We give a meaning
to what nature has
given us

Nature : We have a feminine nature which has marked us out for love and motherhood, and, it is said, for a passive role in both cases. I have not the time to make a very deep analysis, but if our spiritual or moral behaviour were to be motivated by a nature

which was to destine us irrevocably for these functions or these roles, without our having any choice in the matter, then we would not be human persons, because this would destroy our freedom with regard to this nature. However, we have a nature : we do not define ourselves entirely. We have, in particular, a body. We are aware of our bodies, which is not the case at the level of inanimate objects or animals. We are aware of ourselves, we do things for ourselves, for example, we wash ourselves, we adorn ourselves, we do exercises, we go to Beauty Parlours, that is, we take this so-called natural body and remodel it on designs and plans which are very different from each other. We take what nature has given us, and we give it a meaning; this is shown by the fact that in dressing ourselves, our choice of clothes expresses what we would like the world to think of us. If we clothe ourselves in a religious habit, or if we dress as hippies, other people are going to read a meaning into it, something which does not happen with regard to animals, besides, this meaning could simply be aesthetic. The idea I would like to bring out by these examples, is that we, as human persons, are part of

We are always part of a culture

a culture and civilisation; our words, our actions, the impression we give of ourselves to others, and as others see us, our behaviour, all these show certain judgements we have of ourselves, of the world, our conduct. I would just like to take one example : scientists who study the origins of humanity recognize that men have lived in certain places. Why? Because they have cooked their meals, because they have decked themselves in necklaces, bracelets, or rings in their noses, because they have buried their dead with burial rites. But the fact that they have buried their dead has a meaning, which goes far and away beyond immediate nature, it shows belief in a future life - which goes beyond "nature".

This culture is in a state of change

On the other hand, this culture does not stand still, it is always in a state of change. We never stop giving ourselves new meanings; we change our meanings. We are always making plans. What would a human person be if he looked no further forward than the present moment? He would be dead, because death is precisely the end of the future, at least on a human level. We are always making plans, we go forward, we look to the future, we build our future. What are we doing here if we are not building our future, which only exists in our thoughts, in our wishes, in our values, in what we judge good or bad. Man creates, and creates himself first of all, then everything around him, all his ideals, all his values. This is the fundamental vocation of man, and when I say man here, I mean men-and-women. Namely, the wish to hang on to unchanging patterns is a denial of their fundamental vocation. This fundamental vocation, and I would like to go back to what we have just said, is to be the image of God, and of God as a creator, a God who is always new, who is there ever present in an eternal newness, and all eternity will not be long enough, I will not say to exhaust, but to progress neverendingly in Him; and our life now is already this progress, and a creative progress at that. The nature we admire is a nature remodelled by man and included in human projects.

We have a biological function

Let us speak now of vocation. To give a definite example, I will take the vocation which is always considered as the definition of womanhood : the vocation of motherhood. Women are made-to-be-mothers. we have all heard this time and time again. What is our opinion? I will go over this quickly as I am pressed for time. Women certainly have the biological function of reproduction. It is not a human characteristic, but one which is common to all mammals. This physiological or biological motherhood can become a vocation, but it is not one in itself for women alone, for can we talk about mammals having a vocation? We should rather talk about biological function. This biological function can be taken by women(who are human persons) as a vocation. Perhaps it is not, since motherhood is not a necessity; there are unmarried women who are not mothers, sometimes by choice, sometimes not. Would we say that because of this, they are not women? This would be both absurd and ridiculous. It can be a vocation for women to be mothers, and this is most often the case; or it need not be.

Women are free with regard to this

Women are free then with regard to this vocation. It is not their fate, or at least it should not be, for women should have the choice of making this a vocation. They can choose this vocation by right, and they must not confuse this vocation of motherhood with "their" most basic vocation, which is the same for every human person, namely to be the image of God. I would like to go back to what has just been said, because if women do not fulfil this vocation, then they do not fulfil themselves as human persons. If they weaken, if they degrade themselves, if they abandon themselves to the level of animals or anything else, then they betray what they need to be complete human persons. But they can very well renounce the vocation of motherhood without being unfulfilled human persons, just as men can renounce fatherhood, which is quite admissible. We must not confuse the two levels. Women can fulfil themselves specifically by motherhood, and this is something men cannot do, but women have the choice. They can fulfil themselves otherwise, and perhaps do not fulfil themselves at all by motherhood. When motherhood is glorified unconditionally, there is no reference made to inhuman pregnancies which are infra-human, which are borne and lead women to commit acts which are the exact opposite of this fundamental vocation, of this form of a vocation of love, which is to give life, or at least to be careful of life and which can be their specific keynote. This is the case of women who kill their children, who lead their children to death with them, or a problem which is quite the order of the day at the present time, who undergo abortions. Women do not willingly undergo abortions, they are driven to them. Why? Because they have been driven to bear an inhuman pregnancy. I think we should be very careful about these things.

But we can make it a vocation

Therefore, motherhood is a possibility of fulfilment, but it must be taken in a true human spirit. On the other hand, it is a temporary vocation, because, without any illusion, it is temporary during our lifetime. We do not always give birth to more children, our children leave us and it is then we must continue to progress as persons and as human persons, and not fall back into a sense of frustrating

nostalgia for ourselves and our children. We must realise that it is not an eternal vocation to be mothers, it is a vocation for this period of time and the essential part of this will be certainly transformed in the Kingdom of God, in a way we cannot imagine, because it will be the love we have put into it that will be transformed and which will be eternal, not the mere biological function. This can be a human form of freedom, that is a risk to be taken, it is not first of all for themselves that ~~women~~ are mothers.

We must not confuse the function with the vocation.

We must then distinguish very carefully between the vocation of motherhood and the biological function of motherhood. We must not confuse the function with the fundamental vocation. The human subject goes beyond its functions, it must always release itself from its functions by fulfilling them within the given space of time. The function can be a language which speaks - but it must speak. If motherhood is a language of selfishness, then it is not the language that is needed, and the problem must be looked at thoroughly. We cannot identify human persons with their functions or their roles because it reduces them to the state of machines, tools and means to an end. But we cannot treat each other just like means to an end; this is what our good old philosopher Kant said, and in this sense, he was deeply Christian.

We must not think in terms of womanhood but of women,

To conclude, I would just like to say that there is no such thing as an unchanging or absolute pattern of womanhood. Womanhood is an abstraction, a mythology; there are women and there are us, with our diversity of characters, races, temperaments, our different ethnic origins, nationalities, originality, the lives we are living now.

who are responsible, along with men, for all humanity.

Women are free persons who are responsible through themselves for all humanity. With men, they are on the road towards the Kingdom of God with all their brothers. And they must see that it comes, they must build this Kingdom of God intelligently, with imagination and with a creativity which a new look at problems all the time. Women are not objects defined once and for all by virtue of their nature and functions. They have to build humanity together with their male brothers. They have to forge the world which is already in our hands, and which will be the world of tomorrow, the world of our descendants, so that the fundamental values of the human person, in its dignity as the image of God, can be fully recognized in it and can advance in a truer fashion, day by day.
