

## Christ the King - C

Women's Conference

23 November 2013

Dear sisters and friends in Christ:

### *Introduction*

Today the Church's liturgical year comes to an exultant close with our celebration of Christ the King. A certain splendour accompanies today's feast, and the first two Readings reflect this tone of triumph: the naming of David – Jesus' ancestor through his stepfather Joseph – as king and shepherd of the people of Israel; and St. Paul's great hymn in his Letter to the Colossians in which he proclaims that "all things have been created through him and for him . . . in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:16,19).

Before commenting on the Gospel, however, I would like to thank all of you for participating in this First Archdiocesan Women's Conference. What a sign your presence is of the strength, vitality and commitment of the women of the Archdiocese of Vancouver! Thank you for being Catholic women, captivated by Christ, and thank you for all you doing, each one in her particular way, to build up the Church, the first budding forth of the Kingdom on earth. And I would also like to express special gratitude to Michele Smillie and the organizing committee and the marvelous speakers who accompanied you today. I look forward to hearing more about the success of the conference and the plans to keep its momentum moving forward.

## ***Prophetic Vocation and Mission of Women***

From the very first pages of the Bible, we read that man and woman, created in the image of God, are meant to complement one another as stewards of God's gifts and as partners in communicating his gift of life, both physical and spiritual, to our world. Sadly, we must acknowledge, as Blessed John Paul did so often, that this God-given dignity, vocation and mission of women in the Church has frequently been insufficiently understood and esteemed by bishops, priests and laity alike. It is now evident to all of us that Christ himself promoted women's true dignity and the vocation corresponding to that dignity. At times this caused wonder and surprise, often to the point of scandal, because his behaviour differed from that of his contemporaries. More than ever, then, the Church now realizes how urgently we need to experience what the late Pope called the "prophetic charism" of women<sup>1</sup> as the first bearers of love, as teachers of mercy and as artisans of peace. They bring warmth and humanity to a world that all too often judges the value of a person by the cold criteria of usefulness and profit.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Blessed John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 29.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily, Amman (10 May 2009).

Indeed, just last month, in an address to a seminar marking the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of John Paul’s *Mulieris Dignitatem*, of which you have no doubt heard much today, Pope Francis indicated how he understood women’s prophetic charism when he said: “I would like to stress that woman has a particular sensitivity to the things of God,’ above all in helping us understand the mercy, tenderness and love that God has for us.”<sup>3</sup>

In an earlier interview last September, the Holy Father expressed his conviction that it is “necessary to broaden the opportunities” for women in the Church, and to “think about the specific place of women also in those places where the authority of the Church is exercised.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Francis, Address to Participants in a Seminar Organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity on the Occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem* (12 October 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Francis, Interview with Father Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God: A Conversation with Pope Francis,” *America*, vol. 209:8 (30 September 2013).

Francis is challenging us to ask deep questions and develop new ways of thinking and acting. We all need to examine our conscience, and I include myself in this examination. As he has asked, “What presence do women have in the Church? Can it be developed further? This question is close to my heart,”<sup>5</sup> he said. In what ways, then, has the Church received and been enriched by the gifts of women? Have we neglected or ignored the voices and gifts of women? And, perhaps most significant, how is the Spirit inviting the Church to move forward? What are new opportunities open for women to serve in the Church? “We have much more to do in making explicit this role and charism of women.”<sup>6</sup>

### ***Gospel Paradox***

Now let’s look more closely at today’s Gospel. It might strike us as odd for a celebration of Christ’s kingship. Here is Jesus, “the King of the universe”<sup>7</sup> who is pinned on the Cross, having been accused of blasphemy by the religious leaders and judged guilty by Pilate, an official of the Roman Empire which ruled the world. Raised up on

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<sup>5</sup> Francis, Address to Participants in a Seminar Organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity on the Occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem* (12 October 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Francis, Press Conference on Flight to Rome from Rio de Janeiro (28 July 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Opening Collect for the Solemnity of Christ the King, *Roman Missal*, 481.

Calvary, Jesus appears not as Lord but as Captive of the forces of betrayal and wickedness: a man abused by authority and the forces of evil.

After being scourged and crowned with thorns, he is on the Cross, helpless. Having been “handed over” by his enemies, this is the moment that he reveals himself as King.

The inscription above the Cross, “This is the King of the Jews” (Lk 23:38) was formulated by Pilate to provoke the people. It worked. The soldiers and leaders who read it mocked Jesus (cf. Lk 23:36-37). There is jeering and sneering, and provocative words are hurled at this King by the crowd and one of the criminals crucified by his side. They taunt “the first-born of all creation” (Col 1:15) and put him to the test to see whether he has the power to save himself from death. The words, “He saved others let him save himself,” are deeply ironic. Beneath their cruel gaze, he truly is saving others, but he does so finally, precisely by *not* saving his own self. He gives himself in death so that we might have life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10).

All the power of God is there in the love shown by Christ’s painful death. To save us, and to bring us to himself in heaven, God will suffer even the torment of death on the Cross. Love that is willing to suffer is greater than power that is able to coerce, and that love is there on the Cross.

That's why there is here no gesture of power on Jesus' part, no final miracle. As opposed to every other king, he is unguarded. He disavows the protection of armies. He rejects self-defense. He abjures force. "This is a king?" the crowds scoffed. No, this is a scandal. This is a stumbling block. But Jesus refused to accept the ordinary trappings of kingship, which for both Jews and Romans, implied domination.

On the contrary, his scepter here was a reed; his crown, one of thorns; and his throne, the wood of the Cross. What Jesus proposed was the great truth that we have to hear over and over again: that God's ways are not our ways, that love is sacrificial.

### ***Never What We Expect***

What are we to make, then, of Jesus as King? He totally reverses the roles usually assigned to royalty. He refuses to be the master of the world, the mighty monarch, the spiller of blood. His Kingdom subverts our notion of kingship. Today, like two thousand years ago, accustomed to seeing the signs of royalty – whether in royal families or sports heroes or movie stars – in success, power, money and ability, we find it hard to accept such a King, a King who makes himself the servant of the little ones, of the most humble, a King whose throne is the Cross.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily, Cotonou (20 November 2011).

We get to the heart of the matter when he see that he is the King who serves the other; the one who dies for the other

But we are forever wanting something else, namely, a God who would come and clean up the world and satisfy our thirst for justice by showing some raw muscle power and banging some heads here and now. We are impatient with quiet, moral power that demands infinite patience, mercy and a long-term perspective. We want a hero, someone with the blazing guns of a Hollywood superhero but the heart of a Mother Theresa. We want to eradicate evil with the destructive tools of our hands. That's what we want from our God, not the power of a Man pinned to the Cross and offering forgiveness to a repentant sinner.

We must accept this new vision of things. We cannot repress Jesus' title as King. To do so would be to repress the earth-shaking revolution of his realm.

### ***Sharing in Christ's Kingship***

Admittedly, the mystery of the Cross is difficult for us to comprehend – a Gospel of prosperity and success and the good life is much easier, more to our liking. But the Cross of our King reminds us that Christianity is not a religion that gives us what we “want” at the superficial level. No, it is a constant call to see in another way, to hear with a different ear, to act with a love that is disinterested; that is, to love even those, perhaps especially those on the periphery, on the margins of

our lives and consciousness, all those who appear so “unlovable” and “undeserving.” What Jesus asks of us is to follow him along the way, to serve, to be attentive to the cry of our children, of our families, of the poor, of the weak, of the outcast.

To be disciples of Christ the King we have ourselves to share in his kingship, to participate in his service. Like him, we have a *kingly* role in the life of the Church. Like our Master, we are to reign. But “to reign = to serve.” We cannot forget that we reign only if we imitate the Christ who washed his disciples feet, fed the multitudes, surrendered himself on the Cross, and continuously “hands himself over” to others in his Eucharistic Body and Blood.

### ***Conclusion***

The scene of Jesus in agony on the Cross is a striking symbol of the mystery of mercy and reconciliation, a mystery of which women are heralds in their families, communities, workplace and society. By your witness of life and power of your word, you bring them Christ’s redeeming love, a love which is stronger than evil, stronger even than death itself.

The Eucharist makes present our Lord’s self-giving love of the Father and offers forgiveness of our sins. It is the supreme act of his kingship and mercy.

Let us pray that Our Lady, ever beside her Son, the Crucified King

of the Universe, will guide us to understand and to live what it means to true disciples of his Kingdom with our particular vocation and mission.

\_ J. Michael Miller, CSB  
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