

**Second Lenten Conference at the Heart of Mary Shrine, Carvalhos, Pedroso Vila Nova de Gaia
- March 5, 2023**

The role of women in the Church

Dr. Ana Maria Abreu

On March 5, the second conference of Lent took place in the Claret Auditorium of the Shrine Coração de Maria in Carvalhos, Pedroso, Vila Nova de Gaia. The heavy rain that was felt that afternoon was not enough to discourage the presence of about 100 people to listen to Dr. Ana Maria Abreu's lecture on the theme "The role of women in the Church."

As usual, the conference began with a musical moment led by Cristóvão Faria, whose beautiful voice immediately centred the audience on the spirit of the event. This was followed by the presentation of the speaker by José Figueiredo, who began by congratulating Father Marçal, the promoter of the conference cycle, on his eightieth anniversary. He proceeded with the framework of the theme and made a brief presentation of the speaker's curriculum, highlighting her role as director of human resources in an institution for the elderly.

Dr. Ana Maria Abreu began her talk with a question: "What does it mean to be a woman?", indicating that before thinking about the role of women in the Church, it is important to understand what it means to be a woman. She recalled that the Bible identifies two models of woman, in two women conceived without original sin: Eve and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The Book of Genesis relates that Eve did not trustingly surrender to the plan that God presented to her, since she wanted a leading role, allowing herself to be seduced by the temptation of having all knowledge and ending up severing her relationship with God. She was not able to accept something that was forbidden to her and that might perhaps be revealed to her at the right time. Mary, on the other hand, confidently surrendered herself to God's plan, despite having a far more radical and daring challenge than Eve, for to be an unmarried mother in the Jewish society of the time was to risk death, in addition to widespread incomprehension. Mary was also curious to know - "What will this be like?" - - but accepted a role of complementarity with St Joseph, confidently submitting to the many setbacks that arose. This did not mean - the speaker pointed out - that Mary was not capable of initiative and action, as the episodes of the loss and finding of Jesus in the Temple and the Wedding at Cana show.

She explained that, in fact, Eve's cut-off from God had consequences, as is made clear when God explains to her the suffering that she will experience because of her pregnancy and her submission to her husband. In her opinion, these consequences are still felt in today's society, so that the woman continues to resort to seduction and manipulation in the search for a certain domination, falling, however, into a type of subservient passion towards the man.

Dr. Ana Maria Abreu pointed out that she was not advocating that women should assume a mimicking of men, but on the contrary should preserve and value their differences, which would not be contradictory with the struggle for equality with men in terms of dignity and rights. In this regard, she quoted Pope Saint Paul VI, who in the encyclical "Humanae Vitae" warned, with regard to the use of contraceptives, that to follow a path that alters the characteristics given by nature to women would open the door to infertility and disrespect for their dignity, leading to their being treated as an object of selfish pleasure. The speaker explained that if the woman has a certain rhythm given by nature, perhaps it was God's way of guaranteeing her a certain respect.

A society that leads a woman to copy a model that is not her own will cause her to stop being a woman, deforming her. Equality in value and dignity for woman is demanded, but this does not mean that complementarity in the man-woman relationship should not be valued, because, from her point of view, it is in the difference that one completes the other and only in this way can they mutually evolve and perfect each other (as indicated in "Humanae Vitae"). In this regard she gave the example of marriage, in which man and woman are equal in dignity, committed to building something in common, repudiation and polygamy being inadmissible, which would take away the woman's dignity.

Dr. Ana Maria Abreu went on to point out some characteristics that are generally more evident in women (having explained that this does not mean that men do not also have them to a certain extent) and which, in her opinion, women (and society in general) should value instead of belittling due to social pressure to mimic the male model. These are the taste for the concrete, the capacity to carry out several activities simultaneously, attention to detail, intuition (commonly called the "sixth sense"), leadership (often hidden, but capable of stimulating the coherence of wills), resistance in the face of difficulties, compassion and the capacity to transmit faith. She explained that women are able to see beyond the visible, to read between the lines, and end up assuming a de facto leadership in the family and other social spaces by their ability to promote convergence in the disparity of wills. Moreover, the history of humanity is full of testimonies of women's resistance in the face of difficulties, their capacity for compassion and dedication to others, beginning with their children, placing themselves at the service of others. She recalled the words of Pope Francis about the role of women in the transmission of faith within the family, in the image of Mary who brought Jesus to humanity.

The speaker shared that when preparing the conference she took into account his reference to the Lenten period, which led her to reflect on the role of women at the time of Christ's Passion, denoting that there were no women present at the Transfiguration of the Lord and that despite this, at the moment of greatest discouragement, they did not flee (like the men), did not deny, but remained with Him until the end, because of the great loving zeal they nurtured in Him. This led her to agree with Pope Francis when he says that this is why women were the first to receive the Good News of the Resurrection.

In the final part of her talk, Dr. Ana Maria Abreu recalled some women saints who have marked the Church and humanity: St Monica and her perseverance in the conversion of her son St Augustine; St Catherine of Siena who needed no academic studies to advise the popes and be declared "Doctor of the Church"; St Teresa of Avila who with full trust in God overcame all resistance to carry out the mission God gave her; St Teresa of Calcutta who is a testimony of female resistance, determination and courage before the powers of the world.

By way of conclusion, the speaker summed up the main ideas that she sought to transmit:

- i) Women must not fall into the temptation of underestimating their own characteristics;
- ii) Equality with men must be defended through the affirmation of femininity, without underestimating the identity of being a woman;
- iii) Women must have a prominent place in the Church, since the Church is also "feminine" and "mother";
- iv) Society must allow women to keep their characteristics: motherhood and the family cannot be an obstacle to the integration of women.

She quoted the words of St. Paul VI in his message to women at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council: "Women, you who know how to make the truth sweet, tender and accessible, commit yourselves to make the spirit of this Council penetrate the institutions, schools, homes and daily life. Women of the whole universe, Christians and non-believers, you to whom life is entrusted at this grave moment in history, it is up to you to save the peace of the world".

At the end of the talk Cristóvão Faria sang a beautiful Marian song and Father Marçal greeted those present, thanked the collaborators in organising the conference and expressed his appreciation for the presence and communication of the speaker.

José Manuel Cruz