



This year marks the 25th anniversary of *Mulierus Dignitatem*, the Apostolic Letter from Blessed John Paul II on the dignity and vocation of women. *Mulierus Dignitatem* describes the special role of woman as life-bearer – a unique capacity that belongs to every woman, whether or not she has ever given birth. The anniversary of its publication is a wonderful opportunity to reflect again on how in supporting women in their role as life-bearers, we promote a culture of life.



RESPECTING the LIFE-BEARER

When a new life has come into the world, why do our thoughts naturally turn first towards the mother, rather than the father? Because we know that while she did not create life on her own, it is she who has carried, sustained and borne this life. It is the mother who journeys with her child inside her for nine months. She gives her all to this task, so that her little one can be born and experience the life and love that they have been made for – a life designed by God for a unique and eternal purpose, a life unrepeatable and irreplaceable.

The grand adventure of a human life – and all that it accomplishes – is only possible because of a mother. As the philosopher Alice von Hildebrand explains, “*Not only did a woman bear every man that invented or discovered every single thing in the universe, but the souls that a woman bears will live forever. They’re immortal.*”¹ When we praise a woman who has just given birth, we recognise the marvellous nature of the task she has fulfilled. Jesus himself recognised this when he exclaimed, “*When a woman is in labour, she is in anguish because her time has come; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born into the world.*” (John 16:21)

The role of woman as life-bearer

Blessed John Paul II comments on how the role of life-bearer is integral to a woman's personality and expresses itself in her attitude and sensitivity to those around her: *"This unique contact with the new human being developing within her gives rise to an attitude towards human beings – not only towards her own child, but every human being – which profoundly marks the woman's personality"*.²

St Edith Stein explained how this capacity to physically nurture a child brings the body and soul of every woman into an intimate unity, which *"imposes itself on the entire nature of woman"*.³ Caring for life is not something separate to a woman; it is part of her very being.

Men also have a role to care for every human being, because God entrusts us all to one another. *"But this entrusting concerns women*



in a special way – precisely by reason of their femininity – and this in a particular way determines their vocation".⁴ Motherhood is a particular grace given to a woman by God. *"Maternity is something so beautiful that in Holy Scriptures its perfection is attributed to God Himself: we are told in the Old Testament that if a mother were to abandon the fruit of her womb, God will never abandon his children"*.⁵ Part of the specific vocation of women is to be open to this grace, and to share

it with the men close to her. In doing so, it becomes a great service to the Church and to the world.⁶

Women are life-bearers whether or not they physically bear children. Blessed John Paul II teaches that virginity and motherhood are *"two dimensions of the female vocation"*,⁷ and that one does not exclude the other. Mary, the *"first disciple"*, expressed in a unique way the fullness of the vocation of woman. St Augustine explains the dimension of virginity in Mary's motherhood by teaching us that *"the Virgin Mary first conceived in her heart"*,⁸ while Pope Francis reminds us of the bodily dimension of her maternity: *"Mary's true motherhood...ensures for the Son of God an authentic human history, true flesh in which he would die on the cross and rise from the dead"*.⁹

A call and a task

Respecting and defending the special vocation of woman as life-bearer is given to men and women. Sadly, in many places around the world, the role of women as bearers of life is under attack. Their capacity to nurture new life is seen as a problem, instead of something which should inspire honour, gratitude and a profound respect.

The pregnant woman is a powerful sign to the world of the dignity of the human person and the truth that the female body is a tabernacle, not a product to be consumed or a commodity to be traded.

Sadly, wherever human dignity is violated in the world and the human person treated as an object, women suffer in a particularly disturbing and heartbreaking way.

Current challenges to the dignity and vocation of women

Distortion of the beauty of women

In today's highly visual society, images of women surround us – but many of these images distort, rather than reveal, the true beauty of women. Women's bodies are unashamedly used in a superficial way by advertisers to sell their product.

The beauty and dignity of women is particularly distorted by the widespread use of pornography. A recent survey found that a majority of Australian men view between one and five hours of pornography a week.¹⁰



Instead of portraying the beauty of women, these images foster a view of the woman as an object to be used only to satisfy a sexual need.¹¹ They promote an underlying view of sexuality that characterises women as a *"thing"* to be consumed, instead of a person to be respected, loved and cherished. Pornography and sexualised advertising are fundamentally hostile to women as life-bearers, because they refuse to recognise that a woman's sexuality is a *gift* – one that is profoundly personal and intimately connected with her life-giving capacity.

Corruption of the sexual act

The most horrific example of attacking the dignity of woman and her unique capacity to bear life comes from acts of sexual violence perpetrated against women. Many women daily face the danger of rape and other forms of sexual assault.¹²

In Australia, as around the world, women are used as sexual consumables in prostitution. The practice of sex trafficking, where women are brought to Australia from overseas, and then forced to repay a fictitious debt to their *"sponsors"* by working as prostitutes is particularly horrific.¹³ Some cases are reported,¹⁴ but most go unnoticed and unchallenged.

Contraception

Sadly, a woman's capacity to bear life is too often seen as a defect which needs to be dominated, rather than a gift which needs to be respected and supported. In developed countries, contraception is lauded as a cure for everything from teen pregnancies to sexually transmitted diseases to a way for families to manage their finances.

Through Western eyes, suppression of fertility is seen as a cure for poverty. In a recent report, the United Nations called contraception a "fundamental human right" and disappointingly proposed it as the best way to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity, to reduce poverty and to achieve developmental goals. But the woman in the developing world wonders why there is such a lack of willingness to invest in the health, education and social programs needed to address the real causes of the poverty that surrounds her.

Thankfully, there are dedicated people and organisations who truly endeavour to support women. Organisations such as WOOMB International train teachers in the Billings Method of natural family planning so that more and more women around the world can be educated and empowered with the knowledge of their own fertility.

Modern methods of natural fertility awareness are highly effective – 98 to 99 per cent¹⁵ – in helping couples to achieve or postpone a pregnancy, with none of the damaging effects of contraceptives. Such methods encourage a deeper respect for women. They recognise that it is the responsibility of men – and society – to respect and accommodate the gift of a woman's fertility, rather than pressure her to act against her body by using contraceptive drugs or devices.



*"Women are the life-bearers. They're sacred vessels touched by God himself, the cradles of life...which brings with it an extraordinary dignity and beauty."*¹⁶

– Alice von Hildebrand

Abortion

When contraceptive methods "fail", abortion is often seen as the next option. In parts of the world where women suffer high levels of sexual abuse and assault because of conflict or poverty, abortion is unfortunately promoted by some human rights organisations as a "remedy" for these tragedies. But it is never right to do further violence to women who have already been victims¹⁷ or to take the life of an innocent unborn child. Pregnant women everywhere must receive the support and care they deserve. And social, legal and educational efforts must continue to focus on changing social conditions and men's attitudes to women so that a woman's physical safety is protected and her sexuality and human dignity are respected.

Catholic organisations like MaterCare International seek to assist women in their role as lifebearers by setting up hospitals and training local doctors and midwives in developing countries.¹⁸ The work of MaterCare and others stands "against the tide" of many other non-government organisations (NGOs)

and international agencies, who continue to channel funds into the provision of contraception and abortion, rather than invest in much-needed maternal health care and fertility education.

Gendercide

Up to 200 million baby girls around the world have been aborted or killed in early infancy because of a cultural preference for sons.¹⁹ This phenomenon of "gendercide" attacks the role of woman as life-bearer in two ways. Firstly, hundreds of millions of girls are denied the right to life because being a female is culturally undervalued. It also attacks the mother, who tragically is often coerced to abort or kill her baby girl, doing violence to herself and her own role as life-bearer. Even though countries like Australia condemn this practice, unfortunately our state and federal governments have so far declined to collect statistics to determine whether and to what extent unborn baby girls are being selectively aborted here.²⁰

Sterilisation of disabled girls

Both in Australia and overseas, sterilisation is being used as an alternative to providing the care we owe to women with disabilities. In July 2013, an Australian Senate inquiry²¹ found that disabled girls are being forcibly sterilised, robbing them of their fertility and denying them the normal experience of being a woman. The stories of these women discovering that they have been sterilised only when trying to conceive give insight into the heart-breaking effect of having the ability to bear life taken away for the convenience of others.

There are many reasons given for forced sterilisation – management of menstruation, prevention of pregnancy, and even the eugenic notion of stopping "defective" genes from being passed on. Each reason has at its heart the same utilitarian principle – it is easier to rob these women of their role as life-bearer than it is to invest in social and health programs that would protect them from sexual assault, care for them during menstruation, and provide support for them during pregnancy and in their roles as mothers. But our duty as a community is to provide "ongoing and regular family support... to assist in the day-to-day care and the needs of the person with disability".²²

Commodification of motherhood

The "outsourcing" of life-bearing is a recent and troubling phenomenon. Women – usually from developing countries – are paid to be surrogate mothers of the children of others. Surrogacy may be undertaken because the woman wanting a child with her husband is not physically able to carry a child, or because a same-sex male couple desires to have a child. The "life-bearers for hire" are paid a few thousand dollars, equivalent to their yearly wage, to bear a child.²³

While it is deeply natural and normal for a married couple to desire a child, surrogacy is a tragic exploitation of a woman's poverty and of her role as life-bearer. With this practice, women become both the 'consumers' and the 'consumed'. The true vocation of woman as lifebearer is distorted, because the bearing of life is not just a biological function, but a unique expression of her whole person, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Surrogacy dramatically fails to respect this.

Elizabeth Anscombe (1919-2001), one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, was also the loving Catholic mother of a big family. Once when she was visibly pregnant with her seventh child, she entered a lecture hall at Oxford University to find that one of her students had written on the blackboard the taunt, “*Anscombe breeds*”. Smiling, Professor Anscombe picked up a piece of chalk and finished the sentence, writing “*Anscombe breeds immortal beings*”²⁴.



Ways we can respect life by upholding the dignity of the life-bearer

We need to be people of hope and remember that Christians have previously had to confront a society awash with contraception, abortion and infanticide, especially of baby girls. Christian concern for the vulnerable and willingness to respect the dignity of women were powerful tools for the evangelisation of the old pagan Roman world. Even in the face of these challenges, there are ways we can continue to uphold, celebrate and promote the dignity and vocation of women:

- By taking Jesus Christ as our example – “*Christ’s way of acting, the Gospel of His words and deeds, is a consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women*”.²⁵
- By nurturing a closer relationship with Mary, the Mother of God and our mother. In Mary, women are able to recognise their own dignity and greatness, being chosen by God to be the bearers of life. And in Mary, the whole Church “*joyfully contemplates... that which she herself desires and hopes wholly to be*”.²⁶
- By recognising and supporting the unique role of fathers. A man teaches his children by word and example how to uphold the dignity of women – in the way he treats his wife and the other significant women in his life. In a particular way, it is seen in the clear expectations he places on his sons in their attitudes towards women, and in the authentic fatherly love and care he shows to his daughters, which helps them to realise their own intrinsic dignity and worth.
- By affirming, in public and in private, the respect, care and dignity owed to all women as bearers of life, especially women who are

pregnant or the mothers of young children. Offering friendship, encouragement, a kind word, a meal, or a prayer are simple acts which express appreciation for their great act of love in giving life to another human being.

- By educating ourselves and our children about the issues facing women at home and around the world, and speaking with others about them.
- By supporting groups and organisations dedicated to the dignity of women, who make a practical difference in Australia and around the world (see below).

Collective Shout www.collectiveshout.org

Women’s Forum Australia www.womensforumaustralia.org

MaterCare International www.matercare.org

Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia www.catwa.org.au

Pregnancy Help Australia www.pregnancysupport.com.au

WOOMB International www.woombinternational.org

- By prayer, seeking the intercession of Mary, the bearer of He who is life – asking her to protect and defend women everywhere. The Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary are a beautiful and powerful meditation on the gift of life and the vocation of woman to be life-bearer.



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25. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, n15.
26. Pope Paul VI. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n103.

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