NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

We need a deeper theology of women

Isabella R. Moyer | Aug. 9, 2013 NCR Today

Do we need a deeper theology of women? You bet we do. What we don't need is a definitive theology.

In 2008, I attended the International Congress on "Women and men, the humanum in its entirety" sponsored by the Pontifical Council for the Laity [1] on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem [2]*.

The congress became the springboard for a new women's section at the Pontifical Council for the Laity. A website was opened [3] and invitations sent for submissions of articles to encourage ongoing global discussions on the role of women in the church and in the world.

A positive result from this women's section is its acknowledgement of the need for many voices. In a recent essay posted in the women's section, "Woman, women [4]," Giorgia Salatiello writes that historically, women's reflections on the feminine condition were largely based on the experiences in the northern hemisphere,

> *In some cases there has been an awareness of the particularity of the analyses and proposals, but at times a universal character has been ascribed to the 'feminine condition' which is in reality, the condition of some groups of women, often the socio-economically privileged. In recent decades the picture has changed a great deal, and today women from other parts of the world (Latin America, Africa, Asia and Australia) also commit themselves and all their subjectivity to reflecting on themselves and their world, asking not just men but also other women that they be heard.*

The key question, according to Salatiello, is: "What is it that unites, at the deepest level, all women who recognize themselves as Christians and what, on the other hand, generates differences between them which cannot be ignored without imposing foreign models on some part of them?"

The weakness of both the 2008 congress and the women's section is its apparent acceptance of *Mulieris Dignitatem* as a definitive view of woman and man. Yet even some presenters at the congress respectfully suggested this is but one man's thesis, a thesis that needs further study. Blessed John Paul II, on the one hand, praised our "feminine genius" as a natural tendency to gentleness, nurturing and holiness. Then with a swift backhand, he announced that these characteristics are more important than the priesthood, so we shouldn't feel slighted if ordination is closed to us. One bishop at the congress courageously said the arguments lack logical strength and are therefore rejected by many. The reasoning, he suggested, needs to be revisited and ongoing dialogue encouraged.

The process of deepening a theology studies all existing voices from popes to theologians to the daily experiences of ordinary women and men. It requires searching for and acknowledging the truth that is unquestionable while challenging that which requires further study. It must also assume the freedom to do so without fear of retribution.

Letting go of the desire for a definitive theology of women will allow for a broader dialogue that crosses

cultural, economic, social and political boundaries.

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