



THE VALUE OF MOTHERHOOD

I feel deeply honoured to have received this invitation to speak at this significant conference on Motherhood. I first came to Poland over 10 years ago by invitation of my friend and colleague, Professor Bogdan Chazan. I have come to learn much about the history of your country, appreciate the strength of faith, of culture, of language and in particular your nation's courage. I had the privilege of meeting Pope St. John Paul II, whom I grew to love as a great Saint. I also have grown to love Borscht.

Pope St John Paul II, in his Millennium letter reminding us that we were celebrating the greatest event in human history, wrote;

“The Father chose a woman for a unique mission in the history of salvation: that of being the Mother of the long-awaited Saviour. The Virgin Mother responded with complete openness.”

God became flesh, assuming a human nature and became a man in the form of **Jesus Christ**, the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity. How extraordinary that God should have chosen the way all human beings come into the world, and what an honour that God should ask of a young human woman to become the Mother of our Saviour. This is the most intimate relationship ever between God and a human being, a relationship in which His son was nourished and nurtured in-utero for 280 days through the baby's placenta attached to the inside of Mary's womb. Indeed, God chose another woman, Mary's cousin Elizabeth, to play an important role in God's plan of salvation who conceived miraculously too, a son six months earlier than Mary. John was to be the “voice of one calling: In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.” His Mother was with Jesus throughout his life, suffering much and becoming a refugee soon after His birth, being warned by Simeon that a sword would pierce her heart. She made a home in Nazareth for thirty years and then followed Him throughout his ministry. Finally, to be at the foot of the cross when he died, but not before His last act, to make sure His Mother had a home. I am sure she kept a close motherly watch on the young apostles after the Ascension.

I hope that theologians present will not consider me heretical if I suggest that all mothers could have some special share, or deeper appreciation, of the mystery of the Incarnation, through the faithful acceptance of their own pregnancies and birthing experiences. Indeed, they may also have a special understanding of her suffering at the foot of the cross when they lose their own children; killed by war, terrorism, or disease.

Motherhood has special significance in every culture as the most complete expression of the special vocation of women. In some developing countries, motherhood is taken even more seriously, and mothers are revered, considered to be a central part of the family. In *Mulieris dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II writes that women make a **‘sincere gift of self’** to others, which is made clear and obvious in the case of motherhood. The woman as mother is entrusted with the responsibility of bearing and bringing to birth human beings. The woman has her own way of existing for others, of making a gift of self to others, and she is obliged to resist domination by men; she does not lose her original femininity in doing that. But she too can neglect and impair ‘the sincere gift of self’. Motherhood implies a special openness to the new person. She is entrusted with human beings and has received love in order to give love; it is her characteristic dignity. “Parenthood” is realised much more fully in the woman; pregnancy absorbs all her energies, body and soul, as her body becomes the home and source of nourishment for her child. Motherhood, in Christian tradition since Mary's faithful Fiat, became a part of God's new covenant with humanity. It is therefore the gift to humanity, of such fundamental importance, that it must be cherished and served in special ways, appreciating its dignity as the key to healthy families and societies.

“A Mother”
when you're a child she walks before you.....
to set an example

**when you're a teenager she walks behind you.....
to be there should you need her
when you're an adult she walks beside you.....
so that as two friends you can enjoy life together**

But do we, in contemporary society, acknowledge and cherish the role of motherhood?

Each year, on March 8th for International Women's Day, organizations from around the world come together to celebrate, acknowledge and address issues affecting women. We hear words like "equality", "inclusiveness" and "justice". However, all too often, the word we don't hear, a word central to humanity, is **motherhood**. It is a role too often dismissed and undervalued by today's women's movements. The reason for this is simple. We in the west have reduced motherhood to a choice, and choice shifts the burden of responsibility. Motherhood has been reduced to one of choice to be made on her own and, as such, she must face the consequences of that "choice" individually. Thus, mothers have been largely omitted from conversations in the public realm about women's issues. Women have been convinced that continuing a pregnancy is an act of choice, and that they are solely responsible for the outcome of that choice.

In 2018, during a speech made at the Gates Foundation's Goalkeepers Summit, French President Macron commented that mothers with large families, those with several or more children, have multiple children due to ignorance and lack of education, echoing the prevalent Western stigma against motherhood. Similar statements are echoed in the chambers of politicians, and even by church leaders, throughout the world. Macron and those like him are seemingly ignorant of the fact that large families have been culturally the norm for generations in many countries, and many successful and educated families, including those in Canada, the United States and Europe, are included in this tradition. To state that large families is a signifier of ignorance or lack of education not only insults mothers who have specifically decided to have many children, but also adds to the decline in the value of motherhood on a rampant rise in Western society. The treatment of mothers and children, the vulnerable populations in our communities, is the benchmark of a society's moral integrity. It is our hope that world leaders can not only learn from these women and their families, but also support them and provide them with the resources they so desperately need in order to successfully conceive, deliver and parent their children.

Women comprise 49.6% of the world's population. The majority will each spend nearly 20 years potentially becoming pregnant, and then the rest of their lives as a mother. We must bring mothers back to the forefront of our conversations about women, because mothers face especially challenging obstacles. For example, being a mother in Canada or the United States is the primary determining factor as to whether or not a woman lives below the poverty line. Also, being pregnant puts women at higher risk for physical violence (homicide is the number one cause of death among pregnant women in the United States). When a mother chooses to stay home and raise her children, she becomes the greatest protector of the environment, but our society punishes her, not only economically but also socially, stigmatizing and devaluing her role in our community. Worst of all, in countries without proper health care, pregnancy can be a death sentence.

As maternal health care providers, we believe it is our responsibility to offer an alternative to a choice-based consumer culture that prizes wealth and power over inherent value and dignity. We acknowledge that people are shaped by their surroundings. Our focus is to surround women and children with an alternative perspective of life based on community, charity and potentiality. Mothers deserve to be at the centre of our discussions and acknowledgements about womanhood, rather than be excluded and silenced by the prevailing pro-choice ideology.

The year 2017 marked the 50th anniversary of the passage of the UK abortion law, the first in a Western country which brought about a fundamental change in traditional Hippocratic medical practice in obstetrics and gynaecology. Through a process of gradualism, abortion on demand became the basis on which maternal health care was/is based. For the first time, doctors were given a license to use their skills to kill one of their patients, the unborn. This process has continued in throughout the west, today all medical professionals face medical and moral dilemmas with the passage of legislation approving physician assisted suicide on the rise. Doctors will use professional skills or co-operate in the killing of their patients, the disabled, newborns, the terminally ill, and the elderly, as a health care service. The right to practice according to conscience is also being denied and criminalized. The result is that the traditional relationship between patient and doctor will undergo, and is undergoing, a fundamental change from a covenant of trust, to simply a contractual agreement. Thus, medicine will no longer be a

vocation. With this and the decrease in religious vocations and increasing pressure on Catholic health organizations, the fundamental ministry of the Church is under threat.

Christian obstetricians and midwives are privileged to serve the co-creators of new life. Therefore, theirs is a special responsibility to provide care, for mothers and their babies, based on life and hope, especially when life threatening complications arise for either or both of them. We need to revitalize the women's movement by advocating the role of mothers, recalling the special vocation of motherhood and its importance to our society. Women's global voice is not a whole without the voices of mothers from around the world.

“The most important person on earth on earth is a mother. She cannot claim honour of having built Notre Dame Cathedral. She need not. She has built something more magnificent than any cathedral- a dwelling for an immortal soul, her baby's body. The angels have not been blessed with such a grace. They cannot share in God's creative miracle to bring new saints to heaven. Only a human mother can. Mothers are closer to God the Creator than any other creature. God joins forces with mothers in performing an act of creation. What on God's good earth is more glorious than to be a mother?”

The Venerable Cardinal Josej Mindszenty of Hungary (1892-1975)

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