

# GAUDIUM ET SPES SUGGESTS A CHANGE IN MORAL IMAGINATION TO ENSURE THE JUST TREATMENT OF WOMEN

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*Gaudium et Spes* is a pastoral constitution that puts a great deal of emphasis on the dignity of the human person and the solidarity of the entire human family. It encourages us to support this dignity and solidarity in the context of the modern world, to scrutinize the “signs of the times,” and to interpret these signs in the light of the gospel.<sup>1</sup> It recognizes the shift from a static concept of reality to a more dynamic and evolutionary one and highlights various concerns that have arisen as a result of this shift.<sup>2</sup> One of the concerns that the document highlights is the social relationships between men and women.<sup>3</sup> The constitution stresses that “every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s intent.”<sup>4</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* recognizes discrimination as an evil that is to be overcome and encourages us to work towards the elimination of discrimination.

Forty years after the publication of *Gaudium et Spes*, women around the world are still struggling to be treated with dignity, to be afforded basic human rights, and to live free from the threats of violence and injustice, despite attempts that have been made to legislate rights and protections. Women suffer from systematic discrimination in every country in the world, whether it is through more explicit and violent forms as in many Third World countries and patriarchal societies, or subtler job discrimination and pay inequities that occur in Western societies. Individual countries, as well as the United Nations, have enacted laws to end discriminatory practices, but, even in countries that have ratified the UN Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), state delegations consistently report how difficult it is to change traditions and stereotypes. This paper makes the case that to change the plight of women around the world there must be not only strong external controls and protections that laws impose, but also a change in the moral imagination to break down the cultural traditions and stereotypes that allow women to be treated as less than human. First, we must recognize the stereotypes that persist to harm women and how these lead to violence and discrimination.

## Treating Women As Property

Women, in many countries, are viewed as property and as belonging to someone, overwhelmingly a male. William Countryman in his book, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex*, shows how traditionally in patriarchal families women are defined by property rights. They belong to the male head of the household. Countryman states that “property denotes something which is understood as an extension of the self, so that a violation of my property is a violation of my personhood.”<sup>5</sup> In this framework, injuries done to women

are wrong because they are injuries done to the head of the household. The head of the household, however, can dispose of his property as he wishes.

Women, as property, are used for sexual fulfillment, economic advantages, power plays, reproductive lineage, etc. Women, in other words, are at the disposal of their owner. In many countries this image of women continues and globalization, with its emphasis on laissez-faire capitalism, only strengthens this image. Where women have no other financial resources, they too sometimes regard their bodies as property and sell it for financial gain whether it is through prostitution or more and more frequently for reproductive reasons, only now they regard *themselves* as the owner of this property.

## Women and Violence

The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women defines violence as “any gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.”<sup>6</sup> It includes but is not limited to:

“(a) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation;

(b) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and the intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution;

(c) Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs.”<sup>7</sup>

Although there are many international documents and treaties that condemn violence against women, violence against women continues at unprecedented rates. One in three women throughout the world will suffer from violence simply because they are female and most likely at the hands of their intimate partners. A common feature in all forms of violence against women is that of domination. Men view themselves as the dominators of women and use violence to assert their power. “Through this assertion of power, men instill fear in women, control their behaviour, appropriate their labour, exploit their sexuality and deny them access to the public world.”<sup>8</sup> Because men control the knowledge systems, violence against women has been trivialized and often viewed as a private matter. In many countries, men view themselves as the owners of the women in their family, and this belief has become strongly embedded in cultural and traditional practices. “Cultural norms associated with abuse include tolerance of physical punishment of women and children, acceptance of violence as a means to settle interpersonal disputes, and the perception that men have ‘ownership’ of women.”<sup>9</sup> When women are viewed as property and not as persons it becomes almost impossible for them

to leave abusive relationships especially if there are children involved or if dowries have been paid.

There is also a strong link between violence against women and HIV/AIDS. The virus is both a cause and a consequence of violence against women. In many societies the women who are tested for the AIDS virus are pregnant women and if they test positive they are accused of bringing the virus into their families even if they have been infected by their male partners.<sup>10</sup> Women also become HIV infected as a result of rape and sexual assaults and in many marital relationships they do not have the power to refuse sex with an infected spouse. A recent UN study done in South Africa “showed that women who were beaten by their husbands or boyfriends were 48 per cent more likely to become infected by HIV than those who were not. Those who were emotionally or financially dominated by their partners were 52 per cent more likely to be infected than those who were not dominated.”<sup>11</sup>

When countries are in conflict or at war the violence against women escalates. Not only does domestic violence increase but also women are raped and trafficked in overwhelming numbers. For example, during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda between 250,000 and 500,000 women and girls were raped.<sup>12</sup> To highlight the atrocities done against women in conflict I quote from the UN experts who traveled the world and listened to women’s testimony and published the document, *Women, War, Peace*:

But knowing all of this did not prepare us for the horrors women described. Wombs punctured with guns. Women raped and tortured in front of their husbands and children. Rifles forced into vaginas. Pregnant women beaten to induce miscarriages. Foetuses ripped from wombs. Women kidnapped, blindfolded and beaten on their way to work or school. We saw the scars, the pain and the humiliation. We heard accounts of gang rapes, rape camps and mutilation. Of murder and sexual slavery. We saw the scars of brutality so extreme that survival seemed for some a worse fate than death.<sup>13</sup>

Statistics show that during the wars of the last decade, 75% of the victims were civilians, and the majority of those were women and children. Women’s bodies become the battleground for men.

In addition to rape and sexual abuse, many women are trafficked out of one country into another to be used in forced labor that often includes prostitution.<sup>14</sup> From 1995 to 2000, trafficking in women grew almost 50%, and it is estimated that almost two million women are trafficked across borders annually.<sup>15</sup> The annual profit from trafficking is between five and seven billion US dollars and this trafficking has become the third largest source of profit to organized crime after drugs and arms. Many of those trafficked are young girls. A 1995 survey in Cambodia, indicated that 31% of the sex workers in Phnom Penh and 11 provinces were between the ages of 12 and 17.<sup>16</sup> The Human Rights Task Force in Cambodia reports that those children under 18 who were trafficked were sold by various individuals: 44% were sold by intermediaries, 23% by family members, 17% by boyfriends, 6% by an employer, 6% by unknown persons. These girls are forced

to service 20 to 30 men a day.<sup>17</sup> As a result many of these girls acquire sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

### **Negating Women's Decision-Making Capabilities**

In addition to the explicit violence done against women, women are also discriminated against in more subtle ways. One of the most prominent methods is to keep women out of decision-making roles. As a result, decisions are made for them. Women often have little input as to what is in their best interests. Two ways this is systematically done is to: (1) deny women education and (2) keep women in traditional caregiving roles so that they have little time or energy to participate in the political realm. Both of these approaches limit women's economic security and make them vulnerable. (Statistics show that seven out of ten of the world's poor are women and children.<sup>18</sup>)

### **Limiting Women's Access to Education**

Throughout the world many women and girls are illiterate. Without an education women are unable to pursue further goods and are often reduced to chattel. Statistics show that in the countries where women are uneducated they are most likely to be regarded as the possessions of men who use women to serve and cater to them without any reciprocity on their part. Without an education, women often become disposable and have little recourse from society. The four main reasons why girls are less likely to attend school than boys worldwide are: "(a) parents are more likely to spend meagre resources on educating a boy; (b) many families do not understand the benefits of educating girls, whose role is often narrowly viewed as being prepared for marriage, motherhood and domestic responsibilities; (c) girls in many communities are already disadvantaged in terms of social status, lack of time and resources, a high burden of domestic tasks and sometimes even a lack of food; and (d) the burden of care for ill parents and younger siblings often falls on girls, which jeopardizes their ability to attend school."<sup>19</sup>

### **Devaluing Caregiving Responsibilities**

One of the most difficult issues to address is women's care-giving activity. Throughout the world women are the primary caregivers. A UN-NGO working group report states: "Sole responsibility for caring for children, older people, the sick or disabled, combined with domestic work, is a major barrier to women's equality; this is because of the time and energy it demands and the consequent stereotyping of women's capacities."<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, this care-giving work that women provide is essential to the maintenance of individuals and communities. The former United Nations Secretary-General, Javier Perez stated: "The way a society treats its children reflects not only its qualities of compassion and protective caring, but also its sense of justice, its commitment to the future and its urge to enhance the human condition for coming generations. This is as disputably true of the community of nations as it is of nations individually."<sup>21</sup> Women cannot and should not walk away from caregiving, nor should men. Caring for individuals who need assistance is one of the most important tasks of a society. It is how we best protect human dignity, asserting to individuals that they are of value not only

when they are free, independent individuals but also when they are in need of care. It is how we best express our solidarity. As *Gaudium et Spes* states: "...we are witnesses of the birth of a new humanism, one in which man is defined first of all by his responsibility toward his brothers and toward history."<sup>22</sup>

Too frequently, however, this care-giving work has not been viewed as work in the full sense of the word. In most societies it is not financially reimbursed nor valued. It is usually not included in nations' GDPs. It is also assumed that this work will be done by women without financial reimbursement. Even when this work is part of the paid economy, such as nurses' aides, daycare workers, etc., it is at the bottom of the pay scale. To keep women from becoming economically vulnerable, women have been encouraged to enter the paid workforce and abandon their care-giving responsibilities. This, however, has left many people who are in need of care, unattended. There must be a new recognition that it is not the care-giving labor that makes one vulnerable but the way that care-giving labor is organized. Joan Tronto, in her book *Moral Boundaries*, argues that "our perception that care is somehow tied to subordinate status in society is not inherent in the nature of caring but is a function of the structure of social values and moral boundaries that inform our current ways of life."<sup>23</sup>

Pope John Paul II's "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World" also stresses the importance of this work. Although the letter still links caring labor more closely to women it concludes by stating:

Far from giving the Church an identity on an historically conditioned model of femininity, the reference to Mary, with her dispositions of listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting, places the Church in continuity with the spiritual history of Israel. In Jesus and through him, these attributes become the vocation of every baptized Christian. Regardless of the conditions, states of life, different vocations with or without public responsibilities, they are an essential aspect of Christian life. While these traits should be characteristic of every baptized person, women in fact live them with particular intensity and naturalness. In this way, women play a role of maximum importance in the Church's life by recalling these dispositions to all the baptized and contributing in a unique way showing the true face of the Church, spouse of Christ and mother of believers.<sup>24</sup>

The important point that John Paul is stressing here is that all of us, male and female, are called to care for others. This is what our baptism calls us to do. I am not arguing here whether women are more or less adept at doing this labor than men but trying to make a case that whoever does this work should not suffer from discrimination as a result of doing it. All societies must come to greater appreciations of this labor and change structures and organizational patterns so that this work can be done appropriately without having caregivers suffering specifically because of the work they do. Care is a central concern for all human life. But laws can only go so far. Peoples' hearts also need to be

changed and I suggest that the church can play an important role in this work by helping to reform moral imaginations.

## Moral Imagination

Mark Johnson, defines the moral imagination as our: "...capacity to see and to realize in some actual and contemplated experience possibilities for enhancing the quality of experience, both for ourselves and for the communities of which we are a part, both for the present and for future generations, both for our existing practices and institutions as well as for those we can imagine as potentially realizable."<sup>25</sup> He explains that the way we frame and categorize a situation will determine how we reason about it, and how we frame it will depend on which metaphorical concepts we use.<sup>26</sup> He states: "Metaphor enters our moral deliberation in three ways: (1) It gives rise to different ways of conceptualizing situations. (2) It provides different ways of understanding the nature of morality as such (including metaphorical definitions of the central concepts of morality, such as will, reason, purpose, right, good, duty, well-being, etc.) (3) Metaphor also constitutes a basis for analogizing and moving beyond the 'clear' or prototypical cases to new cases."<sup>27</sup>

Andrew Greeley highlights how the Catholic imagination is very attuned to this way of reasoning because of its sacramental world-view. The Catholic imagination, he states, "tends to emphasize the metaphorical nature of creation. The objects, events, and persons of ordinary existence hint at the nature of God and indeed make God in some fashion present to us."<sup>28</sup> For Catholics, God and grace lurk everywhere.

Metaphors have power. Paul Ricoeur in *The Rule of Metaphor*, reminds us that metaphor always involves a pair of terms or relationships. He states: "If metaphor always involves a kind of mistake, if it involves taking one thing for another by a sort of calculated error, then metaphor has to disturb a whole network by means of an aberrant attribution."<sup>29</sup> Metaphors redescribe reality. They are the "apprehension of an identity within the difference between two terms."<sup>30</sup> It is important therefore that we use our metaphors correctly because the descriptive power of metaphor has the ability to change thought processes.

Traditionally, the primary metaphor that has been used to define women is that of "property." William Countryman in his book *Dirt, Greed and Sex*, demonstrates that the property metaphor played a primary role in patriarchal families. In such families, it is the male head of the house who controls all other members. For example, "The wife was a form of property; adultery was violation of the property of another and should therefore be punished with violation of one's own."<sup>31</sup> This seems to still be the overriding metaphor in many societies. For instance, when we find countries at war, men from the enemy ranks frequently rape the women of the opposing sides as occurred during the conflict in Rwanda. These rapes are not so much sexual acts as they are demonstrations of power. The enemy is collecting the spoils of war and women are part of those spoils. Just as the losers' material possessions are gathered and distributed, so are their women. One kills one's enemy; one rapes his property.

When women are viewed as property they become objectified and are used and disposed of as men wish. They are not viewed as fully human but as extensions of the male. If a man views his wife as property, he may feel that by beating her he is only doing what he is entitled to do. He can do what he wishes with his property and others should not infringe on his rights. Women sometimes also internalize this property metaphor only now they view themselves as the owners of property. We hear this argumentation used when women claim that it is their right to have an abortion. They view the fetus as an extension of themselves, therefore, they should be able to dispose of the fetus as they wish. Likewise, when women claim that they have a right to sell themselves into prostitution they are using a property metaphor. Their claim is, "It's my body." Property metaphors are individualistic metaphors that separate owners of property from relationships to others. When one owns something, that thing can be used solely at the owner's discretion. Property is disposable. One sells, rents, uses property as one wishes. Hence, under this metaphor, even when women are not abused, they are still under the control of men. Men control their movement, their daily activity, their citizenship, their state in life. The emphasis is not on the well-being of the woman, for she has been reduced to a commodity, but on how the woman, the extension of the male self, can promote the well-being of the man. This usually means doing those activities that he does not care to do such as preparing the food, maintaining the household, caring for the children, the sick and the elderly.

Property metaphors stress individual ownership, autonomy, and control; remove bonds of reciprocity; and objectify persons. For women to be regarded as fully human, this metaphor must be changed, and I would suggest that the change should be to the metaphor of gift.

### The Concept of Gift

Throughout *Gaudium et Spes*, persons are referred to as gifts. We are reminded that everything is a gift of God, and we are to use God's gifts to build up society. *Gaudium et Spes* states that: "man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."<sup>32</sup> Likewise, when speaking of the relationship between men and women the document speaks of the "mutual gift of two persons."<sup>33</sup> Although *Gaudium et Spes* repeatedly uses the metaphor of gift, it does very little to develop what is meant by gift. But a better understanding of this metaphor is necessary because the concept of gift as it has been studied in the philosophical literature often is referred to in economic terms, and as such has become suspect. Jacques Derrida, for example, states that not only is the gift impossible, but it is *the impossible*.<sup>34</sup> To understand what he means by this, we need to look at some of the seminal literature that defines gift and explores the components of gift giving.

### The Relationship Between Givers and Receivers

Most researchers on the topic of gift would agree that one of the most prominent works in this field is *The Gift* by Marcel Mauss.

Mauss begins by examining the gift-giving systems in the archaic societies of North America, Melanesia, Polynesia, and Oceania. He highlights how gift giving in these societies is a social event that involves collectivities and not individuals.<sup>35</sup> Although the gift giving may appear to be voluntary, it is strictly compulsory, and failure to participate in either the giving or receiving aspect of the process could possibly lead to war because it would be viewed as a rejection of the bond of alliance and commonality.<sup>36</sup>

Gift giving carries obligations. Mauss observed a three-part structure to the gift giving in these societies. There was the gift, the obligation to give, and the obligation to receive and reciprocate.<sup>37</sup> The gift was important not only for the inherent quality of the object itself, but because it was believed that in passing on a gift, one passes on part of oneself. This was referred to as the *hau*.<sup>38</sup> It was the *hau* of the thing that yearned to be returned to its owner. Through the presence of the *hau*, a connection was established between the giver and the receiver. Hence, to make a gift to someone was to pass on part of oneself, and to receive that gift was to receive part of the giver. In a diluted way, we experience this in our culture, when we view a gift that we have been given and begin to reminisce about the person who gave us the gift. We may not believe that the gift carries the spirit of the giver, but the gift does connect us, even if only momentarily, to the person who gave us the gift.

One is obliged to give because this is the way that one proves one's good fortune. By sharing one's fortune and giving it away, one puts others into one's debt. One can only give because one has also received. The gift is not given in order to make others happy, but to establish a relationship. Mauss states: "Yet it is also because by giving one is giving *oneself*, and if one gives *oneself*, it is because one 'owes' *oneself* – one's person and one's good – to others."<sup>39</sup>

The obligation to receive is as important as the obligation to give. When one is offered a gift, refusal to accept it would be refusal of not only the gift but part of the giver as well, because the thing that is passed on is infused with the individuality of the donor.<sup>40</sup> It would also mean refusing the bond that the gift would establish, for by accepting the gift the receiver binds oneself to the giver. Although being a receiver puts one in an inferior position to the giver, it also enables one to become a giver oneself. The circle of giving is established and reciprocating gifts, passing on what one has been given, is central to the entire concept of gift giving in archaic societies. Those who are the recipients on one day become the givers on the next.<sup>41</sup> Not to share what one has received is to kill its essence and to destroy it both for oneself and for others.<sup>42</sup>

Gift giving formed the central means of distribution in these societies. Although there were obligations attached to all forms of the giving process, the emphasis was not so much on the gift given, as it was on the relationships and the bonds that were established in the process. One was obliged to be generous, but one was also obliged not to refrain from putting oneself into the debt of another. Everyone who was a giver had also been a receiver. The very system depended on the fact that gifts circulated, because if gifts were pulled out of circulation, the process stopped. By pulling a gift out of circulation, one remained forever indebted. All that one had had been given by another, hence one was in

a constant state of indebtedness. And yet, although all of these obligations existed, there was still the possibility that things could be otherwise. One could refuse to give, and one could refuse to receive. Hence, the concept of gift remained intact.

Mauss never explains, however, how the gifting process began. The donor is already always a donee. Therefore, one never knows why there is a gift in the first place. One is caught up in the circularity of gift giving without understanding the logic behind the first gift, and if in giving one gives oneself, then everyone spiritually becomes a member of everyone else.<sup>43</sup>

It is because of this very circularity that Derrida states that there can be no gift because in order to be gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift or debt.<sup>44</sup> Each time that there is a counter-gift, the gift is annulled. Derrida concludes therefore that the only thing that the gift gives is time – time to forget that a gift has been given before a gift returns. It is the lapse of time between the gift and the counter-gift that permits one to mask the contradiction between the experience of the gift as a generous, gratuitous, unrequited act and the fact that it is a stage in a relationship of exchange.<sup>45</sup> Once it is realized that gift giving is only a stage in a relationship of exchange, it should also be realized that if one gives a gift that cannot be adequately returned, relationships of dependency are established and there is no true autonomy on the part of the receiver of the gift.

Gary Shapiro highlights, however, that Mauss would counter this argument by stating that the phenomenon of gift as experienced in archaic society cannot be understood in terms of the modern individualistic and economic categories, where gift giving is an exception and not the very nerve of communal life.<sup>46</sup> In the economy of a gift giving society, the gift is for all and none. It is put into circulation, but it is destined to be the permanent possession of none.<sup>47</sup> As it circulates, it also establishes bonds of solidarity. The relationship between the giver and the receiver is one of solidarity with reciprocal dependence, and, although there is obligation attached to this process, the gift giving and the resulting obligation are not calculated. Although one may be obliged to give, one may not do so while calculating what one will receive in return.<sup>48</sup>

Lewis Hyde defines gift as “a thing we do not get by our own efforts. We cannot buy it; we cannot acquire it through an act of will. It is bestowed upon us.”<sup>49</sup> It is therefore something that we are not entitled to, but something that another has given to us, but need not have given to us. Because we have been gifted we are pulled into the gifting circle and are nudged towards becoming gift givers ourselves. The spirit of the gift is kept alive by passing it on. Once one pulls the gift out of circulation and amasses it for oneself, the gifting cycle is broken, and with it new relationships are kept from developing. Gifts establish bonds and evoke gratitude and generosity.

What is missing from these sociological and philosophical approaches to gift giving is an understanding of why the circle of gift giving began in the first place. Although there is an analysis of how the cycle works once one is caught up in it, there is no attempt to discern how the process began. Theology offers an explanation.

## A Theological Approach

Enda McDonagh in his book, *Gift and Call*, stresses that all that is comes from God. Everything that we have has been freely given to us by God, and we are not entitled to any of it but are to receive it gratefully and direct it towards accepting and helping others.<sup>50</sup> It is not only our possessions but our very selves that are gifts, and we are called to be a particular individual human being. We can become givers, therefore, because we have been receivers – receivers not only of objects but of our very existence.

To do this, however, we need to begin with a recognition of our total dependence on others and refuse the appearance of self-sufficiency. Takeo Dai in his book, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, stresses how this is a difficult concept for Western societies to comprehend. In the West there is an emphasis on self-reliance and self-sufficiency. In Japan, however, dependency is honored and the persons who embody it in its purest forms are most qualified to stand at the top of Japanese society.<sup>51</sup> In the West, market economies make dependency and gifts suspect and marginalize gifts to the private realm where they become unrelated to issues of justice. Generosity is displaced from the public realm.

Webb in his book, *The Gifting God*, analyzes how this plays out in Western, capitalistic societies. He stresses that in capitalistic societies, needs are exploited for profit and one does not give to others what they need so that they too can become gift givers. Rather one takes advantage of their needs for one's own aggrandizement.<sup>52</sup> This market approach attempts to remove property from circulation and those who exchange are treated as strangers and remain so after the exchange has taken place. In this approach, "There are owners and property and prospective buyers. The property has no independent moral significance. Its 'worth' is measured fully by the price agreed upon by buyer and seller. The relationship of buyer and seller is governed by contract, an agreement that specifies in often precise detail what each party expects from the other."<sup>53</sup> This is in direct contradiction to the concept of gift as put forward in archaic societies, where it is the gift that binds people to each other and widens the individual's sense of belonging. As was stated before, gifts lead to solidarity.

In contrast to this market understanding of gift, theology teaches that God is the original giver of everything, and God is excessive. God gives grace and grace overflows from God's fullness. It is the means by which we advance from nonbeing to being.<sup>54</sup> This gift is given freely, is not coerced, and the proper response to this gift is gratitude, which signifies an understanding of dependence on another and a realization that what we have received is to be shared and not hoarded.<sup>55</sup> As humans, we are able to give only because we have been given, and the first giver is God. As we accept God's gift and become gift givers ourselves, we define our very personhood and establish connections to others, recognizing that we do not belong to ourselves.<sup>56</sup> The end point of giving then becomes a community that responds to giving with further giving.<sup>57</sup>

## Replacing the Ownership/Property Image with the Concept of Persons as Gifts

Everything about gift runs counter to the ownership/property image and operation. The concept of gift is applied universally – all persons, male and female, are gifts and not possessions. Because our lives are gifts from God, we are already caught up in the gifting cycle. The fact that we have been gifted calls us to be givers ourselves. The spirit of the giver that has been passed on to us in the *imago Dei* means that our lives do not belong to us but to God. We become stewards of our lives. Stewardship means that we are endowed with something to which we are not entitled, but which is entrusted to our care for a period of time. It involves caring for something that has ties to another. It means that we cannot absorb this thing into ourselves, but must nurture it so that it can one day be passed on as good as or better than we received it. When we are stewards of something, we must one day let it go, for it is only loaned to us. Stewardship makes us caretakers, not owners, and therefore ownership cannot be transferred. William May refers to this relationship as follows: “It emphasizes a relational rather than a possessional view of the self. It explores the relationship between human beings for its clues to their being and value and our obligations to them, rather than assigning values according to the numbers scored.”<sup>58</sup> Because we are gifts of God and possess God’s spirit within us, we cannot sell ourselves nor can anyone own us. We can only self-gift ourselves to another and in the process pass on the spirit of God and establish bonds of solidarity.

These bonds that gifts create are not the contractual, legal bonds of the market, which are only valuable as long as both parties have something to gain from the relationship. Gifting bonds, unlike contractual bonds, which are between people who are concerned about maintaining their independence and equality, establish relationships that are asymmetrical. People in gift relationships are not in positions of equality. The receiver becomes beholding to the giver. So when a woman gifts herself to a man, not only does he not own her; he is in a position of indebtedness, and likewise, when a man gifts himself to a woman. Once we recognize that another has gifted himself or herself to us it enables us to be gift givers ourselves.

It is our very indebtedness, therefore, that pushes us into becoming givers ourselves. Being indebted is not a sign of weakness but a sign of solidarity. It connects us to others, reminding us that we are all interdependent and that sometimes we need to be receivers and sometimes we need to be givers. Gifting relationships lead to alternating inequality or interdependence. These relationships require trusting that others will be there for us when we need them and remind us that we must be there for others when they need us, without any kind of selfish calculation. We put ourselves into the hands of our gift partners, realizing that unconditional love and compassion are the foundation of these relationships. We give to another not because we expect something in return but because we have experienced gift.

### Reciprocity in Gift Giving

Reciprocity in the sense of gift giving is very different from the reciprocity of exchange, which states that because you gave something to me, I now owe something in return. This is a very individualistic and legalistic approach to reciprocity. Reciprocity in the sense of gift giving means that because I have been gifted I too can be a giver. I may not simply take my gifts and use them for my own welfare, but I need to move beyond myself and help others to become givers. The value of the gift is not in ownership but in dispossession. In order to keep the spirit of the gift alive, the gift needs to be connected to the larger community, so that the community may be a gifting community. When gifts are drawn out of circulation and amassed by specific individuals the community suffers. Gift giving is expansive, it moves outward, whereas accumulation removes things from circulation and moves inward. When we are concerned about amassing things or people rather than sharing our possessions or those people we know with others, we turn in on ourselves and are more concerned with what others can do for us than with the gifting process. Gift giving always involves letting go and moving outwards.

This is the opposite of thinking that we are entitled to something, which often leads to spending all our energy protecting our entitlement. When we recognize that we are not entitled to a gift, but that it has been freely and spontaneously given, we become grateful rather than demanding. Martha Beck, when describing her experience of raising a son who was born with Down Syndrome writes: “I have been blessed with love both human and divine, and I believe that there is no essential difference between them. Any person who acts out of love is acting for God. There is no way to repay such acts, except perhaps to pass them on to others.”<sup>59</sup> This captures the type of reciprocity that gifting bonds encourage.

The importance of gifting relationships then is not the gift that is passed on but the ties that the gift establishes. With each gift we give, we pass on part of ourselves as well as God’s love. Possession, on the other hand, pulls everything to the self. When we recognize another as gift, it enables us to hold onto them with a lightness of touch. They are not ours. They are not extensions of ourselves. We cannot control them and some day they will be taken from us.

### **Applying the Concept of Gift to Improve the Status of Women**

Recognizing persons as gifts rather than as possessions is the call of *Gaudium et Spes*. This metaphor enables us to understand that others do not belong to us but have come into our lives because someone has loved us. Rather than attempting to control others we should be grateful for their presence and attempt to become gift givers ourselves. Bonds of solidarity are established between those who gift and those who have been gifted and the circle of reciprocity is continued.

There is a danger, however. Some people who have been gifted may opt out of the gifting cycle and pull all to themselves. This means that some will do more gift giving than others and reciprocity is broken. Although we are all called “not only to exist ‘side by side’ or ‘together,’ but are also called to exist mutually ‘one for the other’...”<sup>60</sup>, nevertheless, because sin exists, this mutuality is frequently not expressed. This then puts

those who constantly give, usually women, in vulnerable positions. Pope John Paul recognizes this when he states: “Among the fundamental values linked to women’s actual lives is what has been called a ‘capacity for the other.’ Although a certain type of feminist rhetoric makes demands ‘for ourselves,’ women preserve the deep intuition of the goodness in their lives of those actions which elicit life, and contribute to the growth and protection of the other.”<sup>61</sup>

The tension that exists then is that women are called on to continue to be givers and lovers even when this very activity puts them at great risk. On the other hand, church documents recognize that women should not be discriminated against for doing this activity. Although women should continue to be gift givers and caregivers, as should all people, the high price that women have paid because of these activities must be more fully recognized. Many more concrete statements and actions must be put in place to protect women.

First, everyone must continue to fight for the human rights of women recognizing their full humanity. Laws must be put into effect that protect women. Although hearts need to be converted there also must be external controls for those who do not wish to respect women. The church needs to recognize more fully the depth of violence against women and needs to work on weeding out any tendencies in church language or action that might contribute to the injustices and violence committed against women.

Second, the church needs to develop more fully the concept of complementarity. Too frequently this concept has been used to discriminate against women. A careful analysis is needed showing how discrimination is a social construct, built around difference, so that stereotypes and traditional practices that harm women are eliminated.

Third, there needs to be a greater appreciation that many young girls and some boys have not had the opportunity to develop sufficiently to be mature givers. Before one can freely give there must be an understanding and appreciation of the self. Too frequently, young women have been pushed into the caregiving role before they have sufficiently matured. Much more education needs to be done in this area.

Fourth, the church needs to do a much deeper, critical analysis of the family. The family can be a dangerous place for women and children. It is insufficient to simply tell husbands to love their wives. Much more concrete guidance is necessary. For example, husbands should be encouraged and taught to help with the dishes, changing the diapers, and carrying the water. In many cultures, men must be taught to be caregivers and the church should be in the forefront of this education. Changing practices changes hearts. The family is the domestic church and it is in the family that children learn what justice and mutuality look like.

The call of *Gaudium et Spes* is that women must be respected and appreciated. All discrimination against women must end. For this to happen, however, there needs to be a change of hearts as well as laws put into place that protect women. I close with another comment from Pope John Paul’s “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the

Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,” “But, in the final analysis, every human being, man or woman, is destined to be ‘for the other.’ In this perspective, that which is called ‘femininity’ is more than simply an attribute of the female sex. The word designates indeed the fundamental human capacity to live for the other and because of the other.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, #4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, #5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, #8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, #29.

<sup>5</sup> L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, Articles 1 and 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Not a Minute More: Ending Violence Against Women*. UNIFEM, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>11</sup> *Women and HIV/AIDS: Confronting the Crisis, A Joint Report by UNAIDS/UNFPA/UNIFEM*, 2004, pp. 45-46.

<sup>12</sup> *Women, War, Peace: The Independent Experts’ Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women’s Role in Peace-Building*. United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> [www.wfp.org](http://www.wfp.org), February 11, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> *Women and HIV/AIDS*, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> Helen O’Connell. *Women and the Family* (London & New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd., 1994) p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*. #55.

<sup>23</sup> Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 63-64.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,” 2004, #16.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 209.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex*, p. 149.

<sup>32</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, #24.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, #48.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The Time of the King,” in *The Logic of the Gift*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 124.

<sup>35</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (London: W.W. Norton, 1990), p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

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- <sup>43</sup> Marshall Sahlins, "The Spirit of the Gift," in *The Logic of the Gift*, p. 85.
- <sup>44</sup> Derrida, p. 128.
- <sup>45</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Marginalia – Some Additional Notes on the Gift," *The Logic of the Gift*, p. 231.
- <sup>46</sup> Gary Shapiro, "The Metaphysics of presents: Nietzsche's Gift, the Debt to Emerson, Heidegger's Values," *The Logic of the Gift*, p. 275.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p.48.
- <sup>49</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. xi.
- <sup>50</sup> Enda McDonagh, *Gift and Call: Towards a Christian Theology of Morality* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1975), p. 77.
- <sup>51</sup> Takeo Dai, *The Anatomy of Dependence* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd.) pp. 58-59.
- <sup>52</sup> Stephen Webb, *The Gifting God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 19-20.
- <sup>53</sup> Thomas Murray, *The Worth of a Child* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 18.
- <sup>54</sup> Edward Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), p. 181.
- <sup>55</sup> Richard Gula, *The Good Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 125.
- <sup>56</sup> Stephen Webb, *The Gifting God*, p. 129.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 139.
- <sup>58</sup> William May, *The Patient's Ordeal* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 37.
- <sup>59</sup> Martha Beck, *Expecting Adam* (New York: Random House, 1997), p.296.
- <sup>60</sup> John Paul II, "Letter to the Bishops," #6.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., #13.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., #14.