THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN'S DIGNITY IN THE ANGOLAN SYNODAL CHURCH: A PASTORAL CRITICAL RE-READING OF *MULIERIS DIGNITATEM* FROM ANGOLAN COSMOLOGY

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Introduction

In Angolan cultural cosmology, womanhood is understood not primarily through abstraction or function, but through life-giving presence, moral authority, and relational responsibility. Across many Angolan communities, women—particularly mothers—are traditionally revered as bearers of life, guardians of memory, and mediators of social cohesion. Motherhood is valued not only for biological fertility but for its ethical and communal significance: women transmit values, sustain families through hardship, and embody resilience amid social instability. This cultural reverence situates women at the heart of communal survival and identity.[1]

Yet this affirmation of women's life-giving role coexists with a persistent and painful contradiction. In both society and the Church, Angolan women continue to experience structural marginalization, economic precarity, gender-based violence, and limited participation in decision-making processes.[2] Patriarchy, reinforced by cultural expectations and ecclesial

1 Teresia Mbari Hinga, *African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 45–52.

2 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 12–18.

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practices, often transforms reverence into control and honor into silence. As a result, women's dignity is frequently celebrated symbolically while being undermined concretely in daily life. This paradox—between cultural affirmation and lived suffering—demands a theological response that is at once critical, pastoral, and liberative.

It is within this tension that this article undertakes a pastoral and feminist ecclesial re-reading of *Mulieris Dignitatem*. Rather than approaching the apostolic letter as a closed magisterial synthesis, the study treats it as a theological text whose meaning unfolds through contextual reception. When read through Angolan cultural values that honor women as sources of life and continuity, *Mulieris Dignitatem* offers genuine theological resources for affirming women's equal dignity, grounded in Christology, Trinitarian anthropology, and relationality.[3] At the same time, an honest engagement with women's lived experiences exposes unresolved tensions within the text, including essentialist constructions of sexual difference, insufficient attention to structural injustice, and Marian interpretations that risk spiritualizing suffering and legitimizing asymmetrical power.[4]

Situated within Angola's postcolonial and ecclesial context, this article also responds to the Church's current Synodal journey, which calls for a renewed culture of listening, participation, and shared discernment. The Synod on Synodality has explicitly recognized the exclusion of women from decision-making as a wound to ecclesial credibility and a contradiction of baptismal equality. However, in the Angolan Church,

3 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988), nos. 6–7, 18.

4 Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, ed., *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 89–97.

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the reception of Synodality remains fragile. Clericalism, patriarchal norms, and selective pastoral interpretations continue to marginalize women's voices in ministry, leadership, and theological reflection.[5]

Angolan Cultural Cosmology on Women's Value, Identity, and Dignity

Angolan cultural cosmology, rooted in the lived memory and practices of diverse ethnic communities, holds women as relational agents of life, moral continuity, and communal sustenance. Before colonial disruption, women in many central African contexts — including regions that today constitute Angola — occupied roles not reducible to biological reproduction alone, but also extended to spiritual mediation, political strategy, and social cohesion. Indigenous conceptions of personhood in Central African and Ovimbundu traditional societies often articulate women's dignity in terms of their relational contributions to the community's flourishing rather than in terms of autonomous individualism. Such cosmologies regard life-giving bodies, moral labor, and communal nurturing as essential to the survival and identity of the people.[6]

In Angolan traditional societies, the figure of the woman and mother is endowed with moral authority, functioning as a custodian of intergenerational knowledge and social memory. This cultural valuation persists in proverbs, ritual practices, and social roles, in which women are accorded honor for sustaining families, mediating conflict, and transmitting values across generations. Even within patriarchal structures,

5 General Secretariat of the Synod, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission—Synthesis Report* (Vatican City, 2023), 9–11, 46–48.

6 Teresia Mbari Hinga, *African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 45–52.

cultural rituals often require women's participation for legitimacy and continuity, signaling an enduring cultural respect for women's relational dignity.[7]

However, the prevailing colonial and postcolonial patriarchy has reduced these indigenous appraisals into forms of symbolic reverence that mask structural inequity. Decades of war, legal constraints, and socio-economic transformation have deeply challenged women's full participation in public and ecclesial life. Angolan women suffered disproportionately during the thirty-year civil war, as civilians but in roles as leaders, peacemakers, and agents of reconstruction, whose contributions have often been not only minimized or rendered invisible in dominant historical narratives.[8]

In contemporary Angola, despite constitutional provisions for equality, women continue to face systemic marginalization in decision-making, governance, and economic empowerment. National data and policy reviews highlight how inequalities in education, employment, and political representation persist, revealing a disconnect between cultural affirmations of women's moral value and their actual dignity in social structures.[9]

Feminist theological voices in the African context — particularly those emerging from the Circle of Concerned

7 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 12–18; The historical evaluation of women's roles in pre-colonial African communities and dignity in Louise du Toit, "African Conceptions of Human Dignity and Violence Against Women in South Africa," in *Human Dignity in an African Context,* ed. Motsamai Molefe and Christopher Allsobrook (Cham: Springer, 2023), 155–185.

8 Henda Ducados, "Angolan Women in the Aftermath of Conflict," *Conciliation Resources Report*, 2024, http://www.c-r.org (Accessed on 10 December 2025).

9 United Nations, *Angolan Women Require Special Attention in Effort to Achieve Equality* (UN Press Release, 2004), 1–3.

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African Women Theologians — offer vital tools for reengaging this cosmology within Christian theology. Founded to address the absence of women in theological leadership and to reclaim African cultural resources, the Circle argues for a theology that accounts for women's experiences of both oppression and empowerment.[10] Their work challenges the Church and society to move beyond token acknowledgment of women's value toward structural transformation that honors women as full subjects of faith, discernment, and mission.

Angolan Catholic leaders echo this call. Recent pastoral statements by the Association for the Promotion of Women in the Catholic Church in Angola (*PROMAICA*) emphasize women's crucial role in transmitting faith, catechesis, and community leadership, suggesting a theological anthropology that centers women's agency rather than subsumes it under patriarchal norms.[11]

Thus, the cosmological foundation of women's dignity in Angola — grounded in communal life, life-giving labor, and moral agency — becomes a critical resource for theological reflection. It challenges the Church to reconcile symbolic honor with lived equality, affirming women's identity and dignity in both cultural and ecclesial spheres.

Mulieris Dignitatem in Angolan Feminist Reception

Mulieris Dignitatem affirms the ontological dignity of women as *imago Dei* and emphasizes the relational anthropology

10 "Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circle_of_Concerned_African_Women_Theologians (Accessed on 10 December 2025).

11 Julieta Araújo, "Catholic Women Leader in Angola Highlights Women's Mission, Role in Church and Society as 'Crucial,'" *ACI Africa* (March 16, 2025), https://www.aciafrica.org/news/14703/catholic-women-leader-in-angola-highlights-womens-mission-role-in-church-and-society-as-crucial (Accessed on 10 December 2025).

of mutuality between women and men.[12] However, African feminist theologians have rightly questioned the document's tendency toward symbolic exaltation without structural critique. Mercy Amba Oduyoye argues that theological discourses that praise women's "genius" while leaving intact patriarchal power relations risk becoming "spiritualized captivity."[13]

In the Angolan context, this critique acquires acute relevance. Women are exalted rhetorically as mothers of the nation, custodians of morality, and bearers of life, yet they remain disproportionately affected by poverty, domestic violence, limited access to theological education, and exclusion from ecclesial decision-making.[14] A feminist hermeneutic must therefore interrogate how Marian symbolism and maternal metaphors—central to *Mulieris Dignitatem*—are received and operationalized within Angolan Catholic culture.

Musa Dube's postcolonial feminist hermeneutics offers a crucial corrective here. She insists that texts must be read with attention to empire, silence, and survival, particularly in African contexts shaped by conquest and extraction.[15] Reading *Mulieris Dignitatem* through Angolan women's experiences of war, displacement, and economic precarity reveals both its theological promise and its limitations.

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12 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988), no. 6.

13 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 34–36.

14 Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women's Theologies in the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 150 (2014): 5–7.

15 Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 112–118.

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Angolan Cultural Horizons and the Silencing of Women's Knowledge

One of the most urgent tasks of feminist theology in Angola is the recovery of women's epistemic authority. Angolan poet and cultural thinker Ana Paula Tavares has shown how women's voices were systematically excluded from the official narratives of nationhood, even as they sustained communal memory and resistance through oral traditions, ritual practices, and everyday labor.[16] While not writing as a theologian, Tavares's work exposes the theological significance of cultural memory, especially for women whose faith is embodied rather than textual.

African feminist theologians such as Isabel Apawo Phiri and Musimbi Kanyoro have emphasized that African women's theology must begin with women's stories, rituals, and ethical struggles, rather than with doctrinal texts alone.[17] This methodological commitment aligns profoundly with Gadamer's insistence that understanding arises from lived tradition rather than abstract systems.

In Angola, where Christianity is deeply woven into cultural identity, the failure to take women's lived faith seriously results in a distorted ecclesiology—one that celebrates women's presence while denying their interpretive authority. The fusion of horizons proposed here, therefore, requires a conversion of theological method, recognizing Angolan women not as objects of pastoral care but as subjects of theological knowledge.

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16 Ana Paula Tavares, *O Sangue da Buganvília* (Lisbon: Caminho, 1998), 9–14.

17 Isabel Apawo, "African Women's Theologies in the 21st century," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 150 (2014): 4-18 and Musimbi R.A. Kangaro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

Marian Anthropology: From Symbolic Exaltation to Ecclesial Agency

Marian devotion occupies a privileged place in Angolan Catholic spirituality. Women's associations, popular catechesis, and liturgical imagination frequently elevate Mary as the ideal of Christian womanhood. *Mulieris Dignitatem* presents Mary as the fullest realization of redeemed humanity, emphasizing her active consent (*fiat*) as a moment of profound theological agency.[18]

Yet African feminist theologians caution that Marian symbolism becomes theologically dangerous when it is detached from women's lived struggles. Mercy Amba Oduyoye argues that idealized representations of womanhood—obedient, sacrificial, and silent—can function as instruments of ecclesial control when they are abstracted from women's suffering and resistance.[19] In Angola, Marian devotion has at times reinforced expectations that women endure injustice quietly, particularly in contexts of domestic violence, poverty, and ecclesial marginalization.

A reconstructed ecclesial anthropology must therefore reclaim Mary not as a symbol of passive submission but as a disruptive theological figure, whose consent reshapes history. Such a reading aligns *Mulieris Dignitatem* with Angolan women's resilience rather than with their romanticized endurance.

Toward a Synodal Ecclesial Anthropology

Synodality, if taken seriously, requires a reconfiguration of ecclesial anthropology. Pope Francis' vision of a listening Church exposes the inadequacy of anthropologies that separate

18 Ibid., no. 18.

19 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 35–38.

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baptismal dignity from decision-making authority.[20] In Angola, women already practice Synodality at the grassroots—through communal discernment, pastoral mediation, and moral leadership—yet remain largely absent from theological formation and ecclesial governance.

African feminist anthropologists such as Isabel Phiri insist that women's moral authority, historically exercised in relational and communal forms, must be recognized as theologically normative.[21] *Mulieris Dignitatem* implicitly affirms this claim by identifying women's attentiveness to life and vulnerability as a privileged site of ethical discernment.[22] To exclude this wisdom from ecclesial deliberation is to impoverish the Church's capacity to read the signs of the times.

Priestly Formation and Seminaries in Angola: The Crucial Horizon

The credibility of this reconstructed anthropology ultimately depends on priestly formation. Angolan seminaries remain among the most decisive yet least examined sites in which patriarchal ecclesiology is reproduced. Curricula often prioritize sacramental functionality and canonical discipline while marginalizing feminist theology, African women's theologies, and Synodal ecclesiology.

If future priests are formed without sustained engagement with *Mulieris Dignitatem*, African feminist anthropology, and women's lived ecclesial experience, Synodality risks becoming rhetorical rather than transformative. As Orobator argues,

20 Francis, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* (Vatican City: Synod of Bishops, 2021), 8–10.

21 Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women's Theologies in the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 150 (2014): 7–10.

22 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 30.

ecclesial renewal in Africa will fail unless formation institutions become spaces of anthropological conversion.[23]

This reconstruction of ecclesial anthropology confronts African theologies with a shared challenge: theology can no longer be credible if it speaks about women without listening to them. *Mulieris Dignitatem* does not resolve this tension; it intensifies it. By affirming women's dignity as constitutive of humanity and the Church, it exposes ecclesiologies that rely on women's faith while excluding their voices. In Angola—still healing from war, inequality, and colonial legacies—the Church's witness depends on whether it dares to embody the anthropology it proclaims. Synodality will remain hollow unless it transforms priestly formation, ecclesial structures, and theological method itself. The dignity of Angolan women is thus not a peripheral issue but a decisive locus for the future of Catholic ecclesiology in the Global South.

Strengths and Weaknesses of *Mulieris Dignitatem* in the Context and Experience of Women's Dignity in the Angolan Church and Society

Any theological retrieval of *Mulieris Dignitatem* within the Angolan Church must resist two temptations: uncritical celebration and wholesale dismissal. The apostolic letter remains one of the most substantial magisterial texts on women's dignity in Catholic tradition, yet its reception in Angola has been ambivalent, selective, and at times pastorally counterproductive. A critical feminist analysis must therefore examine both its generative potential and its structural silences when confronted with the lived realities of Angolan women shaped by patriarchy, post-war trauma, economic precarity, and ecclesial marginalization.

23 Orobator, *The Church as Family*, 143–147.

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Strengths: Ontological Dignity as a Theological Resource for Resistance

One of the most significant strengths of *Mulieris Dignitatem* lies in its uncompromising affirmation that women's dignity is ontological rather than functional. John Paul II grounds women's worth in creation and redemption, insisting that woman and man equally image God and participate in the divine economy of salvation.[24] In the Angolan context—where women's value is often measured by marital status, reproductive capacity, or social usefulness—this theological claim carries emancipatory potential.

For Angolan Catholic women who sustain ecclesial life through catechesis, pastoral care, and communal leadership yet remain excluded from formal authority, *Mulieris Dignitatem* provides a doctrinal language to contest their invisibilization. By asserting that the dignity of women is constitutive of humanity itself, the document implicitly delegitimizes ecclesial practices that treat women as auxiliaries rather than co-subjects of the Church's mission.[25]

Moreover, the text's emphasis on relational anthropology—mutuality rather than domination—offers a theological counter-narrative to deeply entrenched patriarchal norms in Angolan society. In contexts of domestic violence, economic dependency, and normalized gender asymmetry, *Mulieris Dignitatem* can function as a resource for pastoral resistance, affirming that any relationship that negates reciprocity violates divine intention.[26]

24 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 6.

25 Ibid., no. 7.

26 Ibid., no. 10.

Marian Anthropology: Symbolic Power and Pastoral Ambiguity

Another strength of *Mulieris Dignitatem* is its Marian anthropology, which presents Mary as the fullest realization of human dignity and freedom. The document's insistence that Mary's *fiat* is an act of conscious, courageous consent challenges interpretations that reduce her to passive obedience.[27] For Angolan women—many of whom make daily life-sustaining decisions under conditions of constraint—this portrayal resonates deeply.

Yet this same Marian emphasis becomes a weakness when uncritically received within Angolan pastoral practice. African feminist theologians have long warned that Marian symbolism, when detached from women's lived suffering, risks reinforcing idealized expectations of silence, endurance, and self-sacrifice.[28] In Angola, Marian devotion has at times been mobilized to spiritualize women's pain rather than confront its structural causes, particularly in cases of domestic abuse and ecclesial exclusion.

Thus, while *Mulieris Dignitatem* offers a potentially liberative Marian theology, its reception requires critical mediation. Without feminist hermeneutics attentive to power, Mary becomes less a model of agency and more a theological instrument for maintaining gendered submission.

Weaknesses: Symbolic Affirmation without Structural Conversion

The most serious limitation of *Mulieris Dignitatem* in the Angolan context lies in its failure to address ecclesial structures

27 Ibid., no. 18.

28 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 35–38.

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explicitly. While the document speaks eloquently of women's dignity and vocation, it remains largely silent on how ecclesial authority, governance, and theological production systematically exclude women.[29] This silence has concrete consequences in Angola, where women form the backbone of parish life yet remain absent from decision-making bodies, theological faculties, and seminary formation.

African ecclesiologist Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator argues that ecclesiology cannot be evaluated solely on doctrinal coherence but must be judged by its capacity to generate just relationships.[30] From this perspective, *Mulieris Dignitatem* risks functioning as a text of symbolic inclusion that leaves untouched the patriarchal ecclesial imagination inherited from colonial missionary models.

This limitation becomes particularly acute in post-war Angola, where the Church has positioned itself as a moral voice for reconciliation and justice. A Church that denounces social injustice while tolerating internal gender injustice undermines its own prophetic credibility. Feminist theology insists that ecclesial anthropology is never neutral; it either reinforces or resists systems of domination.

Cultural Memory, Women's Identity, and Ecclesial Continuity in Angola

Angolan women's ecclesial presence cannot be understood apart from their cultural identity as bearers of memory, life, and communal continuity. Anthropological and historical studies of Angolan society consistently highlight women as custodians of lineage, ritual knowledge, and moral formation,

29 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, nos. 29–30.

30 Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *The Church as Family: African Ecclesiology in Its Social Context* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), 143–147.

particularly during periods of social fragmentation and violence. During Angola's long civil war, it was women who preserved family cohesion, transmitted values, and sustained religious practice in displaced and traumatized communities.[31]

This cultural role has profoundly shaped the Angolan Church. Women's faith is not abstract or doctrinally detached; it is embodied, narrative, and relational. Yet ecclesial structures—largely inherited from colonial missionary models—have struggled to translate this lived authority into theological recognition. As Laurindo Kiala observes, Angolan Catholicism often reproduces a hierarchical ecclesiology that benefits from women's participation while simultaneously rendering them invisible at the level of deliberation and doctrine.[32] It is precisely here that *Mulieris Dignitatem* enters as both a resource and a provocation.

Toward a Theology of Communion

John Paul II's *Mulieris Dignitatem* profoundly illuminates the concept of communion as the cornerstone of human relationality. Drawing from the Genesis narrative, the Pope underscores that the creation of man and woman signifies individual dignity and a relational call to live in mutual self-giving. The "unity of the two," as articulated in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, reflects Trinitarian communion—a relational reality where equality and distinction coexist harmoniously. This theological vision dismantles patriarchal models by positioning men and women not as hierarchical entities but as co-stewards of creation.[33]

31 Ana Paula Tavares, *O Sangue da Buganvília* (Lisbon: Caminho, 1998), 9–15.

32 Laurindo Kiala, "Igreja, Cultura e Reconciliação em Angola," *Revista Angolana de Teologia* 12 (2016): 41–45.

33 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 30.

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The notion of communion also critiques and transcends the historical subjugation of women. As *Mulieris Dignitatem* emphasizes, the "help" described in Genesis is reciprocal, signifying equality rather than subordination. Women, therefore, embody a distinct but complementary genius that enriches humanity's collective vocation. This theological anthropology demands a shift from domination to collaboration, which resonates with modern feminist theology while remaining rooted in Christian revelation.[34]

John Paul II's interpretation of Ephesians 5 offers a radical re-reading of spousal roles that further enriches this discussion. Mutual submission, a term used to describe the mutual respect and deference that each partner should have for the other, as advocated in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, transforms marriage into a space of shared discipleship rather than dominance. Here, communion becomes both a relational ideal and a moral imperative, challenging men and women alike to embody Christlike selflessness in their interactions.[35]

The Pope's assertion that "the dignity of women is measured by order of love" analyzes systems that reduce women to objects or confine them to utilitarian roles. Instead, he envisions a world in which women's capacity for self-giving love serves as a model for humanity's redemption. This is not a sentimental idealization but a theological mandate for justice and equality, underscoring that women's dignity is inseparable from their agency and autonomy.[36]

Furthermore, as *Mulieris Dignitatem* highlights, the Gospel narratives exemplify Christ's revolutionary approach to women. From the Samaritan woman at the well to Mary

34 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 6.

35 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 24.

36 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29.

Magdalene, the first witness to the Resurrection, women are portrayed not as passive recipients but as active participants in salvation history.[37] This portrayal challenges the Church and society to reimagine structures that marginalize women and embrace their prophetic voices in shaping the future. Finally, the document's eschatological vision, a theological concept referring to humanity's ultimate destiny as revealed in the Scriptures, points toward a redeemed humanity in which the mutual complementarity of men and women reflects God's original plan. As articulated in *Mulieris Dignitatem* (§31), this vision is both a challenge and an invitation: a challenge to confront entrenched injustices and to build a culture of encounter where women's dignity is celebrated, not contested.[38]

Men and women "are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life." John Paul II, therefore, takes up and reaffirms this interpretation of the human couple as being made in the *image* of God, not so much in terms of the rational and spiritual component of the human being, but instead because of their fundamental and radical need for a relationship, just as the relationship between the Divine Persons constitutes the essence of the mystery of the Trinity.[39]

Sexual Differences: A Divine Gift and Mystery

Central to John Paul II's reflections in *Mulieris Dignitatem* is the assertion that sexual differentiation is a divine gift imbued with profound meaning. The creation narrative in Genesis

37 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29.

38 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 29.

39 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 6.

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serves as the theological foundation for this teaching, where humanity is created in the image of God as "male and female" (Gen 1:27). John Paul II interprets this as a revelation of both equality and distinction, emphasizing that sexual difference is not merely biological but encompasses the totality of the human person—body, mind, and spirit.[40] This understanding challenges both reductionist and dualistic approaches to gender. Reductionism, which limits sexual differences to biology or reproductive function, fails to capture its holistic and relational nature. Conversely, dualism, which denies the integration of body and soul, disregards the unity of the human person. For John Paul II, the embodied nature of humanity reflects God's creative intention and invites men and women to live their identities as gifts to one another. He states, "The human body includes right from the beginning...the capacity of expressing love."[41]

Moreover, John Paul II's theology of sexual difference transcends societal constructs of gender, positing instead that masculinity and femininity are essential dimensions of human nature. This insight is particularly significant in contemporary debates surrounding gender identity and roles, providing a theological framework that upholds equality and difference as complementary rather than contradictory.

Beyond Opposites: Celebrating Gender Complementarity

The concept of complementarity in *Mulieris Dignitatem* extends beyond a functional division of tasks to highlight the relational and interpersonal nature of human existence. John

40 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 2.

41 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 7.

Paul II's phrase "a unity of the two"[42] encapsulates this vision, which affirms that men and women are called to a mutual self-gift that enriches their shared humanity. Complementarity is not rigid roles or hierarchical structures but the dynamic interplay of equality and distinction that fosters communion.

By grounding complementarity in the spousal meaning of the body, John Paul II offers a theological response to critiques of gender essentialism, the belief that the differences between men and women are not merely cultural constructs but reflect God's design for relationality and love. This distinction is particularly evident in the nuptial analogy, where the mutual self-gift of husband and wife mirrors the covenantal love of Christ and the Church. This analogy underscores the sacred dimension of complementarity, which extends beyond marriage to all human relationships. Additionally, John Paul II's teaching challenges societal tendencies to stereotype or reduce gender roles. For instance, while traditional roles may reflect cultural practices, the Pope emphasizes that genuine complementarity is rooted in the shared vocation to love and serve.[43]

The Practical Implications of Complementarity

John Paul II's vision of complementarity has significant practical implications for contemporary discussions on gender equality and societal roles. One of the central themes in *Mulieris Dignitatem* is the affirmation of women's equal dignity and their unique contributions to the human community. This affirmation challenges both patriarchal structures that marginalize women and radical feminist ideologies, which are

42 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no.7.

43 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 23.

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extreme and often divisive beliefs that deny the value of sexual difference and seek to eliminate gender roles.

In practical terms, complementarity calls for women's full participation in all aspects of society, including leadership, education, and public life. John Paul II's concept of the "genius of women" highlights the distinctive qualities that women bring to these roles, such as empathy, relationality, and a capacity for nurturing life. This "genius of women" is not intended to confine women to specific roles but rather to enrich the broader human community by emphasizing women's unique contributions to society. Furthermore, the Pope's teaching on complementarity offers a framework for addressing contemporary challenges such as gender-based violence, discrimination, and the objectification of women. By affirming the sacredness of the human person and the relational nature of complementarity, John Paul II provides a moral foundation for promoting justice and equality in personal relationships and societal structures.[44]

A Pastoral Call: Complementarity in Action

John Paul II's vision of complementarity is not merely a theoretical framework but a pastoral call to action. His writings challenge individuals and communities to rediscover the sacredness of human relationships and foster a culture of mutual respect and collaboration. This call is urgent, demanding immediate attention and action in addressing the challenges of contemporary society, where gender conflicts and misunderstandings often undermine the dignity of the human person.

In the context of the Church, the Pope's teaching invites a renewed commitment to promoting women's participation in

44 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 30.

all aspects of ecclesial life. As he writes in *Mulieris Dignitatem,* "The Church desires to give thanks for all the manifestations of the feminine 'genius.'" This gratitude must translate into concrete actions that recognize and celebrate women's unique contributions to the Church's mission. In society, John Paul II's emphasis on complementarity calls for policies and practices that uphold the dignity of men and women. We can build a world that reflects the divine plan for human relationships by fostering a culture of mutual respect and collaboration, which is crucial for a harmonious and just society.[45]

John Paul II's writings on complementarity provide a profound and transformative vision of human relationships. By affirming the equal dignity and distinctiveness of men and women, he offers a theological framework that challenges patriarchal distortions and radical egalitarianism. This vision calls for a rediscovery of the sacred bond of complementarity, manifesting in the vocation to love and communion. Through scholarly engagement and pastoral action, the teachings of *Mulieris Dignitatem* continue to inspire efforts to promote justice, equality, and the flourishing of all humanity.

Essentialism and Feminist Critiques on Gender Complementarity

One major feminist critique of *Mulieris Dignitatem* concerns its essentialist conception of womanhood.[46] The document privileges motherhood and relational roles as defining aspects of women's identity, suggesting that a woman's highest fulfillment derives from her capacity to nurture and complement

45 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 31.

46 Anna Maria Gruenfelder, "Women and the Church: A Critique of *Mulieris Dignitatem*," Concilium 5 (1989): 12–18.

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men.[47] Feminist theologians such as Anna Maria Gruenfelder argue that this framework marginalizes women whose lives and vocations fall outside this model.[48]

Such essentialism reinforces patriarchal structures, promoting fixed, complementary roles for men and women.[49] Consequently, women's potential for leadership, professional achievement, and political participation is often minimized.[50] Critics argue that a theological vision of women should embrace diverse vocations and identities rather than prescribing a singular, biologically derived ideal.[51]

Marian Idealization and the Feminine Model in *Mulieris Dignitatem*

Within the magisterial corpus of Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988) occupies a central position in his theological anthropology of woman. Emerging from the Pope's broader vision of the "theology of the body," it seeks to articulate the ontological and spiritual dignity of women as co-bearers of the *Imago Dei*.[52] In this encyclical, John Paul II identifies the Virgin Mary as the preeminent model of Christian womanhood, the "highest expression of the feminine genius," whose *fiat*—her total and trusting consent to the divine will—embodies the vocation of all women to self-giving love and service.[53] This Mariological anthropology intends to elevate the status of

47 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

48 Maryanne Stevens, "The Human Person, Women, and *Mulieris Dignitatem*," Horizons 17, no. 2 (1990): 276–281.

49 Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands.*

50 Kanyoro and Njoroge, eds., *Groaning in Faith: African Women in the Household of God* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1996).

51 Phiri, "Doing Theology in Community," 68–76.

52 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 1.

53 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* nos. 4–5.

women by inscribing their being within the redemptive history of salvation. Yet, while its purpose is affirming, its theological framework has provoked intense scholarly debate, particularly regarding the relationship between symbolic idealizations and lived female experience in daily life within Angolan society and beyond. From a feminist theological standpoint, this exaltation of Mary operates as a double-edged hermeneutical construct. On one hand, it magnifies feminine dignity; on the other, it confines it to a narrow typology of virginity, maternity, and obedience.[54] As Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes, typological Mariology can both glorify and silence women by projecting an ideal that detaches the theological image from the social realities of women's lives.[55]

Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether extend this critique, arguing that the fusion of virginity and motherhood as a singular ideal of holiness constructs an unattainable standard—one that risks sanctifying passivity and spiritualizing subordination.[56] Consequently, Marian idealization becomes not merely a devotional framework but a theological mechanism that legitimizes hierarchical gender roles in both Church and society. Nevertheless, feminist theologians have not rejected Mary but rather reinterpreted her. Elizabeth Johnson reclaims the *fiat* not as passive submission but as a radical act of prophetic agency and faith within patriarchal structures. In this rereading, Mary emerges not as the silent handmaiden of the patriarchal order of a society but as the courageous disciple who consents freely to God's salvific

54 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* nos. 18–20.

55 Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 45.

56 Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 69–70; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 157–58.

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mission—an act of partnership rather than subordination. This reinterpretation reframes Marian symbolism as an icon of spiritual empowerment and moral courage, capable of inspiring women toward active discipleship and transformative faith.[57] This hermeneutical shift acquires particular significance in the African context, especially within Angola society, where Marian devotion permeates Catholic spirituality and culture. The image of Mary as the humble, devoted mother resonates deeply with local gender expectations that prize maternal sacrifice, domestic virtue, and religious fidelity.[58] Nevertheless, as Angolan theologian Teresa Henda observes, this resonance often reinforces the invisibility of women in decision-making and ecclesial leadership.[59] The Marian ideal, when interpreted narrowly, can therefore perpetuate pastoral structures that revere women's service while resisting their inclusion in governance and sacramental ministry. Julieta Araújo, coordinator of *PROMAICA* (Association for the Promotion of Women in the Angolan Catholic Church), emphasizes that women are the "heart of catechesis and evangelization in local communities," yet remain underrepresented in formal leadership.[60]

Herein lies the pastoral paradox: Mary is invoked to affirm women's worth, yet her idealization can simultaneously constrain their ecclesial agency. A contextual theological response must therefore move from idealization to incarnation—from venerating Mary as a distant exemplar to engaging her as a living symbol of solidarity and liberation. African

57 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 89–91.

58 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 27.

59 Teresa Henda, "Mulheres e Liderança na Igreja Angolana," *Revista Eclesiástica de Angola* 12 (2015): 23–24.

60 Julieta Araújo, "O Papel da Mulher na Igreja Católica em Angola," (public address, Luanda, 2019).

https://publications.lst.edu/

feminist theologians such as Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike and Teresa Okure propose this move precisely, reading Mary not as an abstract moral archetype but as a "woman of liberation" whose discipleship speaks to women's historical struggles against oppression and exclusion.[61] Within this optic, the *Magnificat* becomes not a song of submission but a proclamation of divine justice, exalting the lowly and challenging unjust structures—both sacred and social.

Such a liberative hermeneutic has profound pastoral implications for the Church in Angola. It decouples moral virtue from gendered stereotypes, reframes Mary's holiness as courageous faith-in-action, and situates her as a companion in women's struggle for dignity amid poverty, displacement, and social marginalization.[62] For Angolan women, whose daily resilience embodies the tension between faith and survival, this reinterpretation opens theological space for agency, participation, and leadership. Mary thus becomes not a measure of female conformity but a mirror of divine partnership in history—a call to prophetic discipleship that integrates contemplation and action.

Ultimately, feminist and contextual critiques reveal that while *Mulieris Dignitatem* aims to uplift women, its anthropology risks reifying essentialist categories of femininity—rooted in biological or symbolic determinism—unless reinterpreted through pastoral praxis.[63] The challenge for the Angolan Church, therefore, is to translate Marian devotion into structures of

61 Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Mary in African Christianity," in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 77–78; Teresa Okure, "Feminist Interpretations and African Contexts," *Theology Today* 55, no. 2 (1998): 194–96.

62 Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Mary in African Christianity," 197.

63 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 22.

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inclusion and participation. To honor Mary authentically is not to confine her image within pious abstraction, but to embody her courage, her justice, and her prophetic voice in the lived experience of women who continue to build the Church with unrecognized fidelity.[64] A truly Marian Church does not glorify feminine passivity, but one that incarnates Mary's dynamic faith—her "yes" to God's transforming love—in the social, theological, and pastoral life of the community.

Women's Empowerment: Reclaiming Agency Within Church and Society

Integral human development in Catholic theology is rooted in the conviction that every baptized person participates in Christ's mission. Empowerment is not merely sociological but theological: it expresses the logic of God's self-giving that restores human agency and co-responsibility in the divine mission of communion.[65] However, in the Angolan Church, there remains a persistent disjunction between the indispensable work women do and their structural authority within ecclesial governance and theological formation.

Angolan women sustain liturgical life, catechesis, pastoral care, and family formation, yet they remain underrepresented in formal church councils, theological faculties, and diocesan leadership bodies.[66] This structural gap challenges the Church's integrity, for a theology that proclaims dignity must also institute it. Pope John Paul II's *Mulieris Dignitatem* affirms women's

64 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 31.

65 Catholic social teaching on human dignity and participation; see *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, nos. 160–164.

66 João Vissesse, *Catholic Women Leader in Angola Highlights Women's Mission, Role in Church and Society as 'Crucial'*, ACI Africa, 16 March 2025.

indispensable contributions to the Church and the world.[67] Yet this affirmation becomes vacuous when not translated into institutional structures that grant women genuine authority, visibility, and voice. Scholarly feminist theologians emphasize that true empowerment arises when women's agency is recognized not only in praxis but also in ecclesial decision-making.[68]

Genuine empowerment initiatives might include diocesan women's councils with consultative and deliberative roles, theological education programs for women, and economic empowerment initiatives that foster real autonomy. Empowerment here is not antagonistic toward male leadership but participatory and reciprocal, reflecting the giftedness of all members of the Body of Christ for the common good.

Pastoral Care and Counseling: Healing Women's Wounds Through Prophetic Compassion

Pastoral care in Angola must move decisively from charity to justice-oriented accompaniment. Pope Francis' description of the Church as a "field hospital" compels ministries that address the wounds and structures of suffering.[69] In Angola, women continue to endure genderbased violence, economic vulnerability, and cultural marginalization, often compounded by the legacies of war. These realities call for a pastoral theology that is gendersensitive, trauma-informed, and prophetic.

Clergy and pastoral agents should receive formation in gender awareness, psychological accompaniment, and trauma ministry, such that pastoral responses genuinely support women's healing and empowerment. Recent calls from

67 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, nos. 6–7.

68 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 22–23, 86.

69 Pope Francis, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* (Vatican City: Synod of Bishops, 2021), 8–10.

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Catholic educators in Angola argue that priestly formation must integrate human dignity, gender justice, and contextual social analysis to equip future pastors for authentic accompaniment.[70] Establishing diocesan centers for women's pastoral care and counseling would signify a concrete commitment to addressing women's wounds not as peripheral issues but as central to the Church's mission of healing and justice.

Such ministries embody Christ's incarnational compassion, which heals wounds and confronts the systems that produce them. When the Church listens to women's stories, accompanies their struggles, and advocates for systemic change, its proclamation of human dignity becomes credible and incarnational.

Toward a Synodal, Trinitarian, and Contextual Ecclesiology

The culmination of this research affirms that gender justice in Angola is a theological mandate, grounded in the Trinitarian communion that defines the Church's very being. The liberative rereading of *Mulieris Dignitatem* reveals that anthropology and ecclesiology must converge in the service of relational redemption, in which woman and man reflect the divine image not in isolation but in communion.

This study, therefore, proposes a Trinitarian model of ecclesial renewal in which the Father's justice, the Son's solidarity, and the Spirit's creativity converge to inspire a pastoral conversion of the Angolan Church and beyond. The Father invites the Church to reimagine authority as stewardship for the common good; the Son calls for incarnational solidarity with the marginalized; and the Spirit empowers creative,

70 "Human Rights Must Shape Future Priests: Catholic Official in Angola Calls for Rethinking Seminary Formation," *ACI Africa*, 23 July 2025.

inclusive participation that transcends gender hierarchies.[71] Such a Trinitarian framework grounds Synodality not merely in governance but in spiritual ontology—the being-with of God reflected in the being-with of the Church.

As Bujo contends, African ethics thrives on the principle of "vital participation," a dynamic communion of life where moral responsibility is shared.[72] The same participatory ethos must animate the Church in Angola: a Church that listens, includes, and acts as a family of God in solidarity with the wounded and the excluded. Ultimately, this study stands as a prophetic contribution to African contextual theology, calling the Angolan Church to embody a pastoral imagination that is Eucharistic, liberative, and Synodal. It envisions a Church that does not merely preach about justice but becomes a sacrament of justice itself—a living witness that communion with Christ entails communion with the suffering and the silenced.

In this renewed vision, women are not auxiliary to the mission of the church but integral to revelation; their stories, bodies, and wisdom constitute sacred spaces in which God's Spirit continues to create, redeem, and sanctify. The future of the Church, therefore, depends on her capacity to integrate theological insight with social transformation—to move from *orthodoxy* to *orthopraxis*, from hierarchy to co-responsibility, from exclusion to Eucharistic communion. In the spirit of Pope Francis' Synodal invitation, the Church in Angola is summoned to walk together as a reconciled community of disciples rooted and inspired by the Gospel, and animated by the Spirit to

71 Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 118–123.

72 Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 68–74.

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become, in the words of Orobator, "a Church that smells of Africa's dust and dreams of God's justice."[73]

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that reclaiming and safeguarding women's dignity in the Angolan Church requires a critical theological engagement that is simultaneously contextual, relational, and transformative. Drawing on *Mulieris Dignitatem* and a broad constellation of feminist theological voices, it has argued that genuine complementarity—rooted in Christian communion—must be embodied in ecclesial structures, practices, and relationships rather than confined to doctrinal affirmations or pastoral rhetoric.

Crucially, the integration of African and Asian feminist theological perspectives enriches this ecclesiological task by revealing convergences in the lived experiences of women across the Global South. African feminist theologians such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Isabel Apawo Phiri insist that theology begins with the bodily, social, and historical realities of women, rather than with abstract systems.[74] Their work underscores that ecclesial dignity is not merely ontological but embodied and enacted in struggle, survival, leadership, and resistance.

Parallel insights emerge from Asian feminist theology. Chung Hyun Kyung critiques theological discourses that reproduce imperial and patriarchal structures, calling instead for a theology that resists domination and embraces embodied

73 Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa: Confessions of an Animist* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 172.

74 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 22–23, 86; and Isabel Apawo Phiri, "African Women's Theologies in the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 150 (2014): 4–18.

solidarity with the poor and marginalized.[75] Her notion of "political spirituality" affirms that theological reflection must be grounded in real struggles against violence—structural, cultural, and ecclesial. Likewise, Filipino theologian Virginia Fabella foregrounds the interconnectedness of gender, class, and culture, urging that Christian witness must articulate a feminist praxis of liberation that addresses both personal sin and systemic injustice.[76] These voices resonate deeply with Angolan women's experiences of post-war trauma, economic marginalization, and ecclesial marginality.

Asian feminist theologians also highlight the importance of communal discernment and narrative theology. Elaine M. Fan, for example, emphasizes that theology emerges from the intersection of lived experience, community memory, and spiritual resilience.[77] This resonates with Angolan women whose faith is not merely doctrinal but lived in communities that have endured war, displacement, and social rupture. In these contexts, theological wisdom is not only taught but also constructed through testimony, survival, and communal resilience.

Together, African and Asian feminist analyses illuminate how ecclesial traditions can inadvertently perpetuate gendered exclusion when they fail to take women's lived realities seriously. In Angola, women sustain the Church's life at every level yet remain underrepresented in theological faculties, diocesan

75 Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 33–48; Chung Hyun Kyung, *Globalization and the Recolonization of Asia: Imperialism, Neocolonialism, and Resistance* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 101–123.

76 Virginia Fabella, *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2020), 12–35.

77 Elaine M. Fan, "Reframing Theology as Diasporic and Feminist," *Asian Journal of Theology* 34, no. 1 (2020): 21–45.

https://publications.lst.edu/

councils, and Synodal deliberations. This contradiction reveals not a peripheral pastoral issue but a core ecclesiological problem: a Church that proclaims dignity but limits agency risks diminishing the credibility of its own witness.

Moreover, the ongoing Synod on Synodality (2021–2024) exposes a global ecclesial tension: consultation without co-responsibility. Continental reports from Africa and Asia alike emphasize the persistence of gendered asymmetries in ecclesial participation.[78] A genuinely Synodal Church must move beyond tokenistic inclusion toward co-responsible discernment, in which women's voices shape ecclesial consciousness and decision-making. This is not simply a procedural reform but an ontological conversion of ecclesiology—from clerical hierarchy to baptismal co-responsibility.

The implications of such a conversion extend beyond the Angolan context to the broader Global South, where postcolonial histories, economic inequalities, and entrenched patriarchy intersect with ecclesial life. The integration of Asian feminist theological insights strengthens this project by offering methodological resources that complement African feminist approaches. Both traditions insist that theology must be grounded in lived experience, critical of structures of domination, and oriented toward liberation. Thus, an African–Asian feminist ecclesiology offers a model of Christian witness that is at once prophetic, contextual, and communal.

Therefore, the future of a just and inclusive Church—whether in Angola, the Philippines, or beyond—depends on its capacity to embody theological insight with social

78 General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, *Continental Stage Synthesis Document* (Vatican City, 2023), 14–16; see also Asian continental synthesis contributions in *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* (Vatican City: Synod of Bishops, 2021), 35–42.

transformation. Women are not adjuncts to the Church's mission; they are co-bearers of its identity and creativity. Their stories, bodies, and wisdom constitute sacred archives where the Spirit continues to create, redeem, and sanctify. A Church that listens to these voices and acts on them moves beyond theological abstraction to authentic communion, structural justice, and credible witness. To accomplish this, the Church must commit concretely to:

1. Empowering women in leadership and theological formation at all levels of ecclesial life.
2. Integrating women's perspectives into Synodal discernment and decision-making structures.
3. Developing pastoral practices that accompany, heal, and liberate women whose dignity has been compromised.
4. Cultivating an ecclesiological imagination that affirms baptismal co-responsibility as constitutive of the Church's identity.

Such a Church reflects the Trinitarian communion it proclaims—mutual, participatory, and inclusive—and becomes a sacrament of justice in a world that yearns for credible witnesses of God's love, mercy, and liberation.

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