

Divine Discontent: Betty Friedan and Pope John XIII in Conversation

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Abstract: *This paper is about ideas, values and attitudes in the turbulent times of the 1960s. It brings into conversation the feminist Betty Friedan and Pope John XIII in critiquing contemporary academic disciplines as well as authority, feminism, marriage, relationships between men and women, motherhood, the family, sexuality, and human dignity. It juxtaposes a secular and a Catholic tradition. Though the literary device of the dinner party is used to facilitate the participants speaking in their own words and to highlight their humanity, this essay is essentially an academic exercise. It is designed to challenge readers to reconsider popular perceptions of feminism and the papacy in general and Betty Friedan and Pope John XXIII in particular.¹*

Key Words: Betty Frieden; John XXIII; feminism and Catholicism; *The Feminine Mystique*; gender relations; sexuality; authority; family life

The period of prosperity accompanying post-war reconstruction in Europe, USA and the Pacific area in the late 1940s and into the 1950s brought with it a consumer culture generated by technological advances in industry. Factories churned out the goods and the burgeoning advertising industry, through newspaper, radio and TV, influenced the buying habits and life-style of the public.

The prominent philosophy of atheistic existentialism encouraged an ever-increasing challenging of authority. In the post-war period of prosperity the West was less threatened by the menace of communism at home, but the aggressive foreign policy of Russia generated considerable fear among both secular and Church leaders.

Many women, who had willingly been confined to the domestic sphere following the Second World War, were experiencing 'a divine discontent' with their position. At the same time significant leaders of the Catholic Church, as the long reign of the now ill Pius XII was coming to an end, were hoping for overdue reforms. The time was ripe for action in the areas of feminism and the Church.

In an effort to get a greater insight into this highly charged period, I and my friends Monica and Catherine, invited to a dinner party, the feminist Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*, and Pope John XXIII, who succeeded Pius XII and called the Second Vatican Council.

¹ The following are previous studies published in the series *Feminists and Popes in Conversation*: 'The Disillusioned Existentialist Era: Simone de Beauvoir and Pius XII in Conversation', *Australian Ejournal of Theology* 5 (August 2005); 'In the Age of Dictators: Edith Stein and Pope Pius XI in conversation', *Australian Ejournal of Theology* 3 (August 2004); "Passionately for Peace: Virginia Woolf and Pope Benedict XV in conversation" *Australian Ejournal of Theology* 2 (November, 2003).

Introducing Betty Friedan, up to the 1960s

Born in 1921 into a Jewish family in Illinois, in Midwestern America, Betty Friedan was educated at Smith College for women and won a scholarship for postgraduate study in psychology to Berkeley University. Later she declined another scholarship for doctoral study to marry Carl Friedan. She worked as a journalist until the birth of the first of her three children.

In 1963 Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, which became an instant best-seller and contributed significantly to the Second Wave of Feminism in the twentieth century. She lectured on women's issues throughout the world and wrote for numerous newspapers and magazines. It was clear that John XXIII's dinner companion was clearly highly intelligent, well-educated, has a strong background in the social sciences, and is a committed feminist.

Introducing Pope John XXIII

Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, who succeeded Pius XII as pope in 1958, was born into a peasant family in Italy, north-east of Milan, in 1881. After studying at the Bergamo seminary he took a doctorate of theology in Rome and subsequently was appointed secretary to Radini-Tedeschi, the social-justice minded Bishop of Bergamo. He also taught apologetics, church history and patrology at the local seminary. Roncalli had interrupted his own seminary studies to do his national military training and he was a military chaplain in World War I.

Benedict XV transferred Roncalli in 1921 to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith as an aide, and Pius XI in 1934 gave him a diplomatic mission to Turkey and Greece that lasted for ten years. In 1944 Pius XII made him Apostolic Nuncio to France and Permanent Observer for the Holy See in UNESCO. In 1953 he was created cardinal and appointed Patriarch of Venice.

Of a largely genial disposition Roncalli sought to promote friendly understanding among the rival groups in each of the areas in which he worked. Since he was 76 when elected, Roncalli was popularly perceived as a stopgap pope. Nevertheless he brought to his office marked physical vigour and the will to make important modifications in Vatican policy. He assumed the responsibility of the papacy with extensive pastoral, diplomatic and administrative experience, as well as a deep piety. He immediately expressed his concern for peace and for reunion with separated Christians. By 1961, when Betty Friedan was working on *The Feminine Mystique*, John XXIII had initiated preparations for an ecumenical Church council.

He was also coming to our dinner party with a positive reputation in relation to women. Bishop Radini-Tedeschi had been one among the first to recognise the feminist question as an ecclesiastical question and, as his secretary, John had assisted the Bishop in various pro-woman activities including the establishment in his diocese of the League of Women Workers. We knew, too, that from these early days Roncalli was a lifelong friend of the distinguished Italian Christian feminist, Adelaide Coari.²

Added to these specifically pro-woman activities was the fact that in the journal he kept from adolescence to old age, Roncalli showed a well-developed femininity in his own personality. He was tender-hearted and in his relation to Jesus, which seemed to become

² C. Militello *Il Volto Femminile Della Storia* (Milan: Piemme, 1995), 404; A. Hatch, *His Name Was John* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1963), 46; P. Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII, Pope of the Council* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984), 345.

increasingly mystical during his life, he assumed a spousal stance, speaking of the 'most loving caresses' and 'the embrace' of Jesus. As he reflected upon his ministry as a bishop, he did not hesitate to urge himself, among other things, to be 'a mother to all'. He had a very deep affection for his own mother and for Mary, the Mother of God.³

It was against this promising background that Betty Friedan met with Pope John XXIII on the appointed evening for our dinner party.

After the introductions were over and pre-dinner drinks had been served, in response to an enquiry from John, Betty explained to us how she had come to publish *The Feminine Mystique*.

Background to the Feminine Mystique

Betty informed us: 'Progressively during the 50s I was experiencing a profound discontent, becoming increasingly conscious of the limitations of my narrow domestic world. Finally I revolted. As a wife and mother of three small children, half-guiltily I took up again my profession of journalism. My research indicated that there was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image I came to call "the feminine mystique." I found that many women shared my discontent.'⁴

John smiled encouragingly and she continued: 'Having established that there was a problem I set out on a full scale investigation. I used the techniques of the reporter and interviewed practitioners, researchers and theoretical experts ranging from the publishing world in the area of women's magazines to the fields of psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology and family-life education. I also carried out extensive interviews of a wide range of women who were full-time housewives.'⁵

Responding to our obvious interest she elaborated: 'I found that women's magazines generally contained almost no mention of the world beyond the home and that the stories and articles in them were written mainly by men and contrasted significantly with comparable ones written in the pre-war years.'⁶

Catherine asked: 'How?'

Betty replied: 'In the pre-war publications the women in the stories perceived themselves as moving into an improved future and, although with positive relations with men, they were much less aggressive in pursuit of men than their post-war sisters. This was in contrast to the post-war dependent, young women whose lives were romantically centred on winning a husband and settling into life-long domestication.'⁷

Betty had our complete attention and we looked at her expectantly as 'the plot thickened'!

She continued: 'I noted that by 1949 the women's magazines were echoing Farnham and Lundberg's *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, which came out in 1942, with its warning that careers and higher education were leading to the masculinization of women with enormously dangerous consequences to the home, the children dependent on it and to the ability of the woman, as well as her husband, to obtain sexual gratification.'⁸

³ Pope John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, trans. Dorothy White (London: New English Library & Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), 78, 112, 177, 276, 195.

⁴ B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 9.

⁵ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 9, 10.

⁶ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 32, 33, 34, 37.

⁷ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 34-42.

⁸ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 37.

Warming to her topic, and not without a sense of drama, Betty easily held our interest as she placed before us graphically the evidence for the spread of 'the feminine mystique,' the setting apart of women, throughout the land, 'grafted on to old prejudices and comfortable conventions, which so easily give the past a stranglehold on the future.'⁹

John frowned in concentration as he followed Betty's story.

She elaborated: 'Light was thrown on "the feminine mystique" phenomenon for me by a senior woman journalist. She explained that as the young men returned from the war, a great many women writers dropped out of the field. The young women started having a lot of children and stopped writing. The new writers were all men, back from the war, who had been dreaming about home, and a cosy life. Many of the remaining women journalists, under the influence of the current psychoanalysis, in fear of losing their own femininity promoted "the feminine mystique".'¹⁰

John said that this all made sense.

Betty observed; 'It was understandable that "the feminine mystique" took hold in America after the loneliness of war and the unspeakableness of the bomb, which made the comforting reality of home and children attractive to both women and men.'¹¹

She added reflectively: 'The needs of sex and love are undeniably real needs in men and women ... but why at this time did they seem to so many the ONLY need?'¹²

John nodded his head in sympathy but offered no answer.

Betty commented: 'The edging of women out of their war time work by returned men was another aspect of the situation which led to the development of "the feminine mystique."¹³ She summed up the situation: 'Women went home again just as men shrugged off the bomb, forgot the concentration camps, condoned corruption and fell into helpless conformity; just as thinkers avoided the complex, larger problems of the post-war world. It was easier, safer to think about love and sex than about communism, McCarthy and the uncontrolled bomb. It was easier to look for Freudian sexual, roots in man's behaviour, his ideas and his wars than to look too critically at his society and act constructively to right its wrongs.'¹⁴

Sadly John agreed.

Betty went on: 'It was inevitable that American women would eventually feel cruelly frustrated. My research testified that many a woman who felt this frustration as she made the beds, shopped for groceries, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children and lay beside her husband at night, was afraid to ask even herself the silent question: "Is this all?"'¹⁵

John supported Betty's 'divine discontent' though in less concrete language than she had used. He declared: 'The natural law gives every person the right to share in the benefits of culture and therefore the right to a basic education and to technical and professional training in keeping with the stage of educational development in the country to which he or she belongs.'¹⁶

⁹ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 37.

¹⁰ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 47, 49.

¹¹ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 160.

¹² Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 160.

¹³ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 163.

¹⁴ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 164.

¹⁵ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 13.

¹⁶ Pope John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, Encyclical Letter (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1963), 10.

He added: 'Every effort should be made to ensure that persons be enabled, on the basis of merit, to go on to higher studies, so that, as far as possible, they may occupy posts and take on responsibilities in human society in accordance with their natural gifts and the skills they have acquired.'¹⁷

Betty then enunciated the conclusion which was the fruit of her research. Looking around the dinner company she stated: 'It is my thesis that as the Victorian culture did not permit women to accept or gratify their basic sexual needs, our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfil their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role.'¹⁸

John nodded.

Catherine informed John that though the initial print run of her book in 1963 was just 3000, there was something in its thesis which touched the lives of millions. It went on to sell 600,000 in hardback and 2 million in paperback.¹⁹

At this point Monica succeeded in moving the dinner company into the dining room.

The Dinner Conversation Commences

Betty queried John concerning his pre-1960s experience. He said that he, too, had studied this period and contemporary times but from the perspective of a Church with universal responsibilities. Betty was interested in his findings.

As John settled back in his chair he declared: 'Our age has three distinctive characteristics. First of all, the working classes have gradually gained ground in economic and public affairs ... Secondly it is obvious to everyone that women are now taking a part in public life. (Here he smiled at Betty.) This is happening more rapidly perhaps in nations of Christian civilisation and more slowly, but broadly, among peoples who have inherited other traditions or cultures.'²⁰

John accepted some red wine from Catherine while explaining: 'Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life.'²¹

Betty raised her glass to that and encouraged John to go on.

He continued, referring to the emergence of the smaller independent nations: 'No one wants to feel subject to political powers located outside his own country or ethnic group. Fortunately for many human beings the inferiority complex which endured for hundreds and thousands of years is disappearing, while in others there is an attenuation and gradual fading of the corresponding superiority complex which had its roots in social-economic privileges, sex or political standing.'²²

Betty nodded appreciatively.

Optimistically John declared: 'The conviction that all men are equal by reason of their natural dignity has been generally accepted. Hence racial discrimination can in no way be justified, at least doctrinally or in theory.'²³

¹⁷ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 10.

¹⁸ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 68.

¹⁹ M. Coultan, 'Friedan lifted the lid on Suburbia's problem that had no name', *Sydney Morning Herald* (6 February, 2006).

²⁰ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 18-19.

²¹ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 18-19.

²² John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 19.

²³ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 19, 20.

Betty stated emphatically that this equality was highly relevant to the situation of women.

The conversation went off at a tangent as John confided to Betty that one thing he really felt very strongly about in contemporary times was disarmament. Looking uncharacteristically downcast, he explained: 'It is with deep sorrow that I note the enormous stocks of armaments that have been and still are being made in more economically developed countries, with a vast outlay of intellectual and economic resources.' He applauded negotiation as a means of settling disputes and expressed the fear that continual nuclear testing would have fatal consequences for life on earth.²⁴

John was concerned for the common good, which he explained, was 'intimately bound up with human nature' and could never be realised unless 'the human person is taken into account.'²⁵

Betty supported this strongly.

He declared: 'An act of the highest importance performed by the United Nations Organisation was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, approved in the General Assembly of Dec. 10, 1948.'²⁶

Never one to miss an opportunity, Betty expressed unhappiness with the implementation of this Declaration in relation to women.

John acknowledged: 'Some objections and reservations were raised regarding certain points in the Declaration. There is no doubt, however, that the Document represents an important step on the path towards the juridical-political organisation of the world community.'²⁷

Looking around the company he elaborated: 'In it, in most solemn form, the dignity of a person is acknowledged to all human beings. Many consequences flow from this such as the right of free movement in the search for truth, the attainment of moral good and of justice and the right to a dignified life.'²⁸

He stressed the reciprocity of rights and duties between persons: 'Those who claim their own rights, yet altogether forget or neglect to carry out their respective duties, are people who build with one hand and destroy with the other.'²⁹

Both Betty and John seemed to be enjoying their meal, and Monica topped up their wine glasses.

The conversation moved into the area of the challenge posed by the need to do relevant and adequate research in order to promote peaceful resolutions to the often complex problems that beset the human family. Both our guests recognised the service and the limitations of the various academic disciplines in helping to throw light on contemporary problems.

Philosophy et al

Betty informed us: 'In seeking to understand "the problem with no name" from which the women victims of "the feminine mystique" were suffering, I was helped by a variety of specialists such as suburban doctors, gynaecologists, child guidance clinicians, high-school

²⁴ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 41-2.

²⁵ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 24.

²⁶ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 52.

²⁷ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 52.

²⁸ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 52.

²⁹ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 15.

guidance counsellors, marriage counsellors, psychiatrists and ministers. I was not interested in their theories but in their actual experience in treating American women.'³⁰

She continued: 'As a result of my encounters with such specialists I become aware of the stranglehold that modish thought can have in the academic and professional world. I found that, because it did not fit the current theory, there had been suppression of evidence which threw into question the standards of feminine normality, feminine adjustment, feminine fulfilment and feminine maturity by which most women are still trying to live.'³¹

As she continued we became aware that Betty was critical of the anthropologist, Margaret Mead, who originally supported the development of the various overlapping talents of boys and girls but then moved subtly 'into a glorification of women in the female role - as defined by their sexual biological functions.' This, Betty considered, contributed significantly to the development of 'the feminine mystique'.³²

Monica offered us another helping of an interesting Italian dish, which had met with John's approval.

Betty declined, intent on setting forth her preferred philosophical and psychological stance: 'I favour the new psychological thinking, which seeks to understand what makes men human and defines neurosis in terms of that which destroys man's capacity to fulfil his own being.'³³

John responded approvingly: 'This approach would logically lead to people becoming more consciously aware that they are members of a world community.'³⁴

With considerable passion Betty went on: 'The American frontiers are of the mind and of the spirit. Love and children and home are good, but they are not the whole world, even if most of the words now written for women pretend they are.'³⁵

With an encouraging smile John told Betty that she reminded him of his feminist friend, Adelaide Coari.

Betty then confided that she had taken exception to the teachings of 'functionalists' in the field of the social sciences. She explained with considerable rancour: 'Functionalism began by trying to make the social sciences more "scientific" by borrowing from biology and studying institutions as if they were muscles or bones in terms of their "structure" and "function" in the social body. The "functionalists" have been most influential in the fields of anthropology and sociology and consequently have affected adversely the situation of women.'³⁶

John nodded more in sympathy, I thought, than with real understanding.

In relation to his analysis of women, Betty was critical of Freud: 'The fact is that to Freud women were a strange inferior, less-than-human species. He saw them as childlike dolls, who existed in terms only of man's love, to love man and serve his needs.'³⁷ (FM 96)

With a burst of rhetoric she summed up the situation: 'The feminine mystique, elevated by Freudian theory into a scientific religion, sounded a single, overprotective, life-restricting, future-denying note for women.'³⁸

³⁰ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 28.

³¹ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 28.

³² Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 121.

³³ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 269.

³⁴ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 52.

³⁵ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 59.

³⁶ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 112, 113.

³⁷ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 96.

Although Betty really meant what she had declaimed, both she and John burst into laughter at the dramatic tone with which she had proclaimed her thesis and we laughed with them. Betty did not take herself too seriously.

She rarely mentioned religion during the evening, we noted, but she did comment at this stage: 'Even the traditional resistance of religious orthodoxy is masked today with the manipulative techniques of psychotherapy. Women of orthodox Catholic or Jewish origin do not easily break through the housewife image; it is enshrined in the canons of their religion, in the assumptions of their own and their husbands' childhoods and in their church's dogmatic definitions of marriage and motherhood.'³⁹

John did not jump to the defence of the Church but listened closely.

Betty seemed to cheer up as she moved on to speak enthusiastically about the psychologist Maslow. Among other things she informed us: 'The findings of Maslow have shown the inaccuracy of labelling various qualities as masculine and feminine. His "self-actualising" people, men or women, invariably have a commitment, a sense of mission in life that makes them live in a very large human world, a frame of reference beyond privatism and preoccupation with the petty details of daily life.'⁴⁰

John was clearly interested. Betty stressed that, as Maslow put it: 'Capacities clamour to be used and cease their clamour only when they are well used. That is, capacities are also needs. Not only is it fun to use our capacities but it is also necessary. The unused capacity or organ can become a disease centre or else atrophy, thus diminishing the person.' She saw this as being very relevant to the 'problem without a name' of women who were victims of 'the feminine mystique'.⁴¹

Then Betty and John discussed the pain which necessarily accompanies psychological and spiritual growth in the human person. John referred to his journal, *Journey of a Soul*, which, as he explained to us, documents his own spiritual growth.⁴²

He informed us that like Betty, while he appreciated scholarship, he was aware of its limitations. He confided: 'As a young man I acknowledged to myself that I had a restless longing to know everything. I was conscious of all the books, periodicals and newspapers I had read in the course of my studies, in vacation time and during my military service. And I remember asking myself (he grimaced): "How much do you remember of all this? Nothing, or almost nothing!"'⁴³

Betty laughed and said she thought many people could identify with that.

John recalled: 'I was given excellent advice by my Professor of Church History, Umberto Benigni: "Read little but read well."⁴⁴

We knew from our research that John XXIII had scholarly tendencies and had carried out some original historical research when serving in the diocese of Bergamo. We knew, too, that he followed with interest the significant social thinkers of his time. Such a one was Pietro Parvan, who had been influenced by the democratically-inclined thinkers around Jacques Maritain and the early Christian Democrats. Indeed Parvan had had a

³⁸ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 111.

³⁹ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 305.

⁴⁰ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 277-9.

⁴¹ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 274.

⁴² Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 274-5.

⁴³ John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, 164.

⁴⁴ John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, 164.

major hand in drafting John's social writings, especially *Pacem in Terris*, the encyclical on peace.⁴⁵

As John and Betty discussed the pros and cons of the sciences as a means of promoting peace, John lamented: 'Despite his great scientific achievements modern man admires his productions to the point of idolatry.'⁴⁶

Betty's rueful nod signalled her agreement.

John then smiled infectiously, confiding: 'I am a natural optimist. The Creator of the world has imprinted in man's heart an order which his conscience reveals to him and enjoins him to obey.'⁴⁷

He explained: 'This law, the natural law, is the law for inter-personal and inter-state relations. This is the law which is being urgently demanded today by the requirements of the universal common good.'⁴⁸

Betty seemed to like this perspective.

Monica proceeded to serve dessert as the conversation, on John's initiative, moved into the area of authority for he saw it as the protector of the natural law.

Authority

John argued: 'Human society can be neither well-ordered nor prosperous unless it has some people invested with legitimate authority to preserve its institutions. These must work and care for the good of all. They derive their authority from God.'⁴⁹

It was not easy to discern what Betty thought of this, but she listened politely.

John explained: 'I am not saying that individual rulers are appointed by God but that God has made human beings social by nature and therefore it is essential that there be someone in authority directing the common effort of all to work for the common good.'⁵⁰

Looking earnestly around the group he added: 'Authority is not to be thought of as a force lacking all control. Rather it is the power to command according to right reason. Authority must derive its obligatory force from the moral order. This order in turn has God for its first source and final end.'⁵¹

We were all listening attentively; John was obviously making a point that he thought was important: 'It must not be concluded that, because authority comes from God, men have no right to choose those who are to rule the State or to decide the form of government or to determine the way in which authority is to be exercised and its limits. True authority is fully consonant with any truly democratic regime.' He referred to the Book of Wisdom (6:2-4) to emphasise the serious responsibilities and the ultimate divine judgment that the person in authority has to face.⁵²

John was clearly pleased to have this off his mind. Betty had no quarrel with his position but she pointed out that there were too many times when authority shamefully neglected to protect the interests of women. The following conversation focussed on the issue of feminism.

⁴⁵ Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII*, 470.

⁴⁶ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 7; Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, Encyclical Letter (Sydney: St Pauls, 1961), 63, 64..

⁴⁷ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 8.

⁴⁸ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 8.

⁴⁹ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 20-1.

⁵⁰ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 21.

⁵¹ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 21.

⁵² John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 23, 33.

Feminism

Somewhat sadly Betty explained: 'It has been popular in recent years to laugh at feminism as one of history's dirty jokes: to pity, sniggering, those old-fashioned feminists who fought for women's rights to higher education, careers, the vote. It is said now that they were neurotic victims of penis envy who wanted to be men.'⁵³

John recalled that Adelaide Coari, whom he had mentioned before, was one of these early feminists in Italy.⁵⁴

Betty observed: 'Running like a bright and sometimes dangerous thread through the history of the feminist movement is the idea that equality for woman is necessary to free both man and woman for true sexual fulfilment.'⁵⁵

John received this comment with a questioning look.

Betty attempted to explain: 'The degradation of woman also degraded marriage, love, all relations between man and woman. Robert Dale said: "After the sexual revolution then will the monopoly of sex perish with other unjust monopolies; and women will not be restricted to one virtue and one passion and one occupation."⁵⁶

John still had a questioning look.

Betty assured him: 'The early feminists knew that marriage and motherhood are an essential part of life but not the whole of it.'⁵⁷

The conversation seemed to move naturally from there into the area of marriage.

Marriage

Betty referred to the widely used 1942 publication *Marriage for Moderns*, which accentuated the complementarity of men and women. It cautioned: 'When men and women engage in the same occupation or perform common functions, the complementary relationship may break down.'⁵⁸

John confessed that he was convinced of the complementary nature of men and women.

Betty observed: 'From my research I found that married women were generally less happy than unmarried ones. I saw the state of marriage as being in a perilous state and a breeding ground for serious social problems. It is well documented that many young men and women marry for immature selfish reasons, which gives rise to such tragic results as child abuse.'⁵⁹

Not surprisingly John emphasised the religious dimension of marriage: 'Marriage is not just a natural contract; for Christians it is a great sacrament, a great sign of grace and of something sacred - Christ's espousal with His Church.'⁶⁰

Betty listened respectfully but made no comment.

John observed: 'Preparation for marriage is vital to the welfare of the couple and therefore of society. I consider this preparation to be vital in the light of the general degradation of marriage by the media.'⁶¹

⁵³ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 71.

⁵⁴ Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII*, 135, 345.

⁵⁵ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 76.

⁵⁶ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 76.

⁵⁷ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 330.

⁵⁸ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 114.

⁵⁹ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 23, 262-3.

⁶⁰ O.M. Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality: Official Catholic Teachings* (Wilmington, NC: McGrath, 1978), 2.

John could not help deploring the efforts to remove marriage and the family from the 'maternal vigilance of the Church' and reduce them to the level of merely human institutions.⁶²

As Monica prepared to serve coffee, this consideration of marriage led the table talk into an exploration of a related problem central to society.

Relationships between Men and Women

Betty informed us: 'Sociologists report that divorce in America in almost every instance is sought by the husband even if the wife ostensibly gets it. There are of course, many reasons for divorce, but chief among them seems to be the growing aversion and hostility that men have for the feminine millstone hanging around their necks, a hostility that is not always directed at their wives, but at their mothers, the women they work with - in fact women in general.'⁶³

John looked pained and pointed out that human beings, women as well as men, have the right to choose freely the state of life which they prefer and therefore the right to set up a family, with equal rights and duties for man and woman.⁶⁴

Betty agreed that the theory was fine but the reality was something else.⁶⁵

John indicated his sympathy for the situation of women, and made it clear that he saw political rights as belonging to all persons, including women. He stated categorically: 'The dignity of the human person involves the right to take an active part in public affairs and to contribute his or her part to the common good of all citizens.'⁶⁶

Naturally Betty strongly supported this stance.

As Monica served coffee, John spoke about his encouragement of the Italian Catholic Women's Movement. We knew that this movement had not lived up to the expectations of his Italian feminist friend, Adelaide Coari.⁶⁷

John pointed out: 'Certainly, one result of the dynamic rhythm of technological and social progress in the last fifty years has been to take women outside the four walls of their homes and to place them in direct contact with public life.'⁶⁸

He acknowledged, however, that modern social structures often did not allow woman, in the exercise of her profession, to achieve the fulfilment of her personality as well as the contribution which the Church and society expect from her. He realised that there was a pressing need to find new solutions.⁶⁹

He stressed: 'Woman is as necessary as man to the progress of society, especially in all those fields which require tact, delicacy and maternal intuition.'⁷⁰

Betty was clearly pleased to hear this.

While John appreciated the desire of women for economic independence, he was obviously uneasy about the time and energy left to working married women for the

⁶¹ Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality*, 252-3.

⁶² Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality*, 252-3.

⁶³ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 237.

⁶⁴ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 11.

⁶⁵ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 268.

⁶⁶ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 14.

⁶⁷ Militello *Il Volto Femminile*, 412, 416.

⁶⁸ Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality*, 264-5.

⁶⁹ Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality*, 266.

⁷⁰ Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality*, 267.

religious development of themselves and their families. Such development he saw as central to the happiness of all concerned.⁷¹

Betty listened attentively. She seemed worried about the implications of John's concern.

Without any more pussyfooting around John stated clearly one of his concerns: 'When a man comes back to his home after being away for long hours and sometimes after having completely spent his energies, is he going to find in it a refuge and a source for restoring his energies and the reward that will make up for the dry, mechanical nature of the things that surrounded him?'⁷²

Betty argued that, as her research had indicated, the husband does not necessarily find this solace in the full-time housewife.

John's reply showed how he had agonised over the dilemma besetting women: 'There is a great task waiting for women: Let them promise themselves that they will not let their contacts with the harsh realities of outside work dry up the richness of their inner life, the resources of their sensitivity ...' He wanted them to go to 'the founts of prayer and sacramental life to maintain themselves on a level with their matchless mission.'⁷³

He stated categorically: 'A man's salary should be sufficient to support his wife and family so that his wife is not forced to work outside the home by economic necessity.'⁷⁴

Betty questioned some of John's assumptions, such as the limited contribution of men to the nurturing of the family. Monica and Catherine served more coffee as the conversation moved into the area of the family.

Motherhood and the Family

With a thinly-disguised contempt, Betty observed that under the Freudian microscope in the era of the 'feminine mystique' every different concept of family began to emerge. She elaborated: 'Oedipus conflict and sibling rivalry became household words. Frustration was as great a peril to childhood as scarlet fever. And singled out for special attention was the "mother". It was suddenly discovered that the mother could be blamed for almost everything. The Second World War revealed that millions of American men were psychologically incapable of facing the shock of war, of facing life away from their "moms". Clearly something was "wrong" with American women.'⁷⁵

It was hard to tell whether John was bewildered or bemused but whichever he was interested in Betty's assessment of the situation.

She explained that 'Momism' was a well-recognised phenomenon by 1960 in USA. It referred to the situation where women sought their reason for being and recompense for their disappointments in life in the emotional exploitation of their children, whose maturity was consequently retarded. Betty saw this as a product of the 'feminine mystique.'⁷⁶

⁷¹ Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality*, 260.

⁷² Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality*, 261.

⁷³ Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality*, 261.

⁷⁴ Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality*, 266.

⁷⁵ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 165-6.

⁷⁶ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 168-9.

Betty informed us: 'Family life during the dominance of "the feminine mystique" tended to produce youngsters who found it difficult to endure discomfort or to make an effort to postpone present pleasure for future long-term goals.'⁷⁷

John nodded his head in understanding.

As Betty accepted another cup of coffee, she asked with an edge of exasperation in her voice: 'Why is it never said that the really crucial function, the really important role that women serve as housewives is *to buy more things for the house?* In all the talk of femininity and woman's role one forgets that the real business of America is business. But the perpetuation of housewifery, the growth of "the feminine mystique", makes sense (and dollars) when one realises that women are the chief customers of American business. Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that women will buy more things if they are kept in the underused, nameless yearning, energy-to-get-rid-of state of being housewives.'⁷⁸

Although we knew she felt strongly about all this, we laughed with Betty at her homespun rhetoric.

John felt obliged to caution: 'Although the equality of sexes justly extends to all the claims of personal and human dignity, it does not in any way imply equality of functions. God has endowed woman with natural attributes, tendencies and instincts, which are strictly hers, or which she possesses to a different degree from man; this means that woman, like man, has been assigned specific tasks.'⁷⁹

He stated with concern in his voice: 'To overlook this difference in the respective functions of men and women or the fact that they necessarily complement each other, would be tantamount to opposing nature: the result would be to debase woman and to remove the true foundations of her dignity.'⁸⁰

Betty was interested in the latter part of this statement being spelt out in concrete detail.

John spoke unambiguously: 'The end for which the Creator fashioned woman's whole being is motherhood. This vocation to motherhood is so proper to her and so much a part of her nature that it is operative even when actual generation of offspring does not occur. If women are to be assisted in their choice of an occupation it is necessary that, in the practice of their profession, there be some means of continuously developing a maternal spirit.'⁸¹

Betty pointed out that this analysis can easily be debased into 'the feminine mystique' situation.

John was much more optimistic and suggested: 'What a contribution to society it would be if woman were given the opportunity to use her precious energies especially in the fields of education, social work and religious and apostolic activity and so transform her occupation into a form of spiritual motherhood!'⁸²

He added: 'Today's world has need of maternal sensibilities to dispel the atmosphere of violence and grossness in which men are struggling.'⁸³

Betty said that she could not argue with that.

⁷⁷ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 244.

⁷⁸ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 181.

⁷⁹ Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality*, 255, 265.

⁸⁰ Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality*, 265.

⁸¹ Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality*, 265-6.

⁸² Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality*, 266.

⁸³ Liebard (ed.), *Love and Sexuality*, 266.

Sexuality

With her thoughts obviously still on John's last remark, Betty said: 'We are living through a period in which a great many of the higher human needs are reduced to, or are seen as, symbolic workings-out of the sexual need.'⁸⁴

John nodded encouraging her to continue which she did: 'If woman's needs are not recognised by herself or others in our culture, she is forced to seek identity and self-esteem in the only channels open to her: the pursuit of sexual fulfilment, motherhood and the possession of material things. Chained to these pursuits, she is stunted at a lower level of living, blocked from the realisation of her higher human needs.'⁸⁵

John frowned a little but said nothing.

Betty went on: 'Generally psychologists gave their professional approval to this current "permissive" attitude to sex, seeing it as a healthier state of affairs than the previous hypocritical denial of sex. But even the professionals at times express concern at the growing trend and wonder what the next step in salaciousness will be.'⁸⁶

With genuine concern vying with contempt in her voice, Betty declared: 'The image of woman in another era required increasing prudishness to keep denying sex. This new image seems to require increasing mindlessness, increasing emphasis on things: two cars, two TVs, two fireplaces ...'⁸⁷

John looked rather sad as he listened attentively. He then commented: 'I did not have to wait until the 1960s to become painfully aware of sexual promiscuity. As a seminarian I was called up for service in the army and there I encountered much debasement.'⁸⁸

Betty did nothing to cheer up John when she informed us that the pitiful, debilitating effect of sexual permissiveness on young girls had been documented and that she herself had witnessed such cases.⁸⁹

John was appalled. He pointed out the importance of the virtue of chastity. It was clear that from his earliest days as a seminarian he had worked hard to be chaste. With all simplicity he confided to us: 'As a young man, shortly after my army experience, I recorded in my journal: "From now on I intend to be even more scrupulous about this matter of purity, even if I become the laughing stock of the whole world. In order not to touch upon impure subjects I think it is better to say very little, or hardly anything at all, about purity. 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels.' I have reason to tremble. Is my flesh bronze?'"⁹⁰

Betty listened respectfully.

With touching openness John recalled that during a retreat on the Bosphorus, when he was the papal representative in Turkey and Greece, he had reflected upon the Miserere psalm. He said that he was then in his sixties and in the course of his reflection upon the verse: 'Deliver me from blood, O God, thou God of my salvation, and my tongue shall extol thy justice' he had noted in his journal: 'Looking at this from my own angle I choose to see in this firstly the internal impulses of carnal desire, the result of our "natural infirmity."'

⁸⁴ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 273-4.

⁸⁵ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 274-5.

⁸⁶ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 230.

⁸⁷ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 58.

⁸⁸ John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, 146.

⁸⁹ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 246.

⁹⁰ John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, 147.

He said that he had also noted in his journal in relation to this reflection: 'Advancing years, when one is in the sixties like me, decrease the impulses to some extent, and it is a real pleasure to observe the silence and tranquillity of the flesh, which has now become old and irresponsive to the temptations which disturbed it in the years of my youth and vigorous maturity.' He smiled and said that he had added: 'However, one must always be on the alert. The Bible speaks also of the foolish, doting old man ...'⁹¹

At this stage, since the time was getting on we plied our guests with a few last questions concerning matters on which we knew they held strong views.

Final Words: Housework and Human Dignity

Betty spoke laughingly about the topic of housework: 'I am truly appalled at the amount of time that women spend on housework. I have observed that the more a woman was deprived of her proper function in society at the level of her own ability, the more her housework, motherwork, wife-work, expanded - and the more she resisted finishing her housework or mother-work, and being without any function at all.'⁹²

Monica asked Betty what suggestions she would make concerning the improvement of the situation of women who were victims of 'the feminine mystique.' She replied: 'It would be wrong for me to offer any woman an easy how-to answer to this problem. There are no easy answers in America today; it is difficult, painful and takes perhaps a long time for each woman to find her own answer. First she must say 'no' to the housewife image. This does not mean, of course, that she must divorce her husband, abandon her children, give up her home.'⁹³

John laughed and said that was a relief.

Betty was not to be thrown off course and continued: 'She does not have to choose between marriage and career; that was the mistaken choice of "the feminine mystique". In actual fact, it is not as difficult as "the feminine mystique" implies, to combine marriage and motherhood and even the kind of lifelong personal purpose that once was called "career." It merely takes a new life plan - in terms of one's whole life as a woman. The first step in that plan is to see housework for what it is - not a career but as something that must be done as quickly as possible.'⁹⁴

Monica, who is no lover of housework, could not resist a supportive: 'Hear! Hear!'

John was listening closely but not, as it were, 'showing his hand'.

In full flight Betty hastened to point out: 'But a job, any job, is not the answer - in fact it can be part of the trap. Women who do not look for jobs equal to their actual capacity, who do not let themselves develop the lifetime interests and goals which require serious education and training, who take a job at twenty or forty to "help out at home" or just to kill extra time, are walking - almost as surely as the ones who stay inside the housewife trap - to a nonexistent future.'⁹⁵

Monica queried how this could be avoided.

⁹¹ John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, 315.

⁹² Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 211.

⁹³ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 297.

⁹⁴ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 297.

⁹⁵ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 300.

Betty explained: 'Educators must see to it that women make a lifetime commitment to a field of thought - to work of serious importance to society. Women must be educated to integrating a serious lifelong commitment to society with marriage and motherhood.'⁹⁶

John protested: 'I think that being a companion to a husband and raising a family is for a woman "a work of serious importance to society".'

Betty responded: 'I cannot concede that these important duties absorb all of a woman's energy for all of her life.' And she let it go at that.

When we asked John for his final word he said: 'For my part I am concerned about the integration of faith and action in the lives of Christians. I cannot but lament that many secular institutions are not imbued by Christian principles though so-called Christians are working in them. Such people are lacking an interior unity.'⁹⁷

Then with a look of deep concern, he confided: 'I also feel strongly that we must never confuse error and the person who errs, not even when there is question of error or inadequate knowledge of truth in the moral or religious field.' He explained: 'The person who errs is always and above all a human being, and he retains in every case his dignity as a human person; and he must be always regarded and treated in accordance with that lofty dignity.'⁹⁸

Betty heartily agreed.

John commented with conviction: 'In every human being there is a need that is congenital to his nature and never becomes extinguished, compelling him to break through the web of error and open his mind to the knowledge of truth.'⁹⁹

Betty added with equal conviction: 'It is a fact, documented by history, if not in the clinic or laboratory, that man has always searched for knowledge and truth, even in the face of the greatest danger. Further recent studies of psychologically healthy people have shown that this search, this concern with great questions, is one of the defining characteristics of human health.'¹⁰⁰

John continued: 'Truth is a transcendent virtue which enters into all well-ordered human affairs and, according to the diversity of these, assumes different names. This truth in various circumstances is called by such terms as science, veracity, frankness, sincerity, righteousness, honesty, justice'¹⁰¹

He added as a final note: 'There is an immense task incumbent on all men of good will - the task of restoring the relations of the human family in truth, in justice, in love and in freedom.'¹⁰²

Betty said that she could not agree more and that women were to be very much part of this challenging task. And on this idealistic note our dinner party concluded and with warm farewells our guests departed.

After the Party

As we were discussing the evening, Catherine commented that both Betty Friedan and John XXIII had experienced 'divine discontent.' Hers with the situation of women and his

⁹⁶ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 320, 322.

⁹⁷ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 54-5.

⁹⁸ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 57.

⁹⁹ John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 57.

¹⁰⁰ Friedan, *Feminine Mystique*, 274.

¹⁰¹ John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, 309.

¹⁰² John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, 59-60.

with the situation in the Church. Both had responded to these stirrings within them with decisive action: she through the researching and publishing of *The Feminine Mystique* and he through the calling of the ecumenical council of Vatican II. Both, we suspected, had not realised what repercussions their initiatives would have on society.

Catherine also pointed out that John had created a new secretariat for promoting Christian unity and, in 1961, appointed the first Catholic representative to the Assembly of the World Council of Churches. His interest in the worldwide extension of the faith and its continued growth among non-Western peoples was seen in his elevation to the cardinalate of an African, a Philippino and a Japanese as well as the consecration of fourteen bishops for Asia, Africa and Oceania.¹⁰³

We recalled that the International Balzan Foundation awarded John XXIII its Peace Prize in 1962. Monica reminded us that when he died in 1963 the testimony of the world was aptly expressed by a newspaper in which there was a drawing of the earth shrouded in mourning with the simple caption: 'A Death in the Family'.

We concluded that Betty Friedan¹⁰⁴ and John XXIII had provided one another and us with a challenging evening. There was obviously tension between their thinking concerning the role of woman in society. While both agreed on the importance of woman and motherhood, Betty saw it as vital that the woman be involved in a challenging occupation beyond the home. John, while acknowledging that the world stood in need of woman's nurturing powers, was fearful of the consequences, especially in relation to woman's primary role as religious educator in the family.

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¹⁰³ Hatch, *His Name Was John*, 63-4.

¹⁰⁴ Betty Friedan went on to critique *The Feminist Mystique* in her publication *The Second Stage* (London: Michael Joseph, 1981).