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1. The opening sections of *Paternal Tyranny*.

THE CRIME OF ENFORCED ENCLOSURE¹

Men's depravity could not have devised a more heinous crime than the wanton defiance of God's inviolable decrees. Yet day in and day out, men never cease defying them by deeds dictated by self-interest.

Among their blameworthy excesses, pride of place must go to enclosing innocent women within convent walls under apparently holy (but really wicked) pretexts. Men dare to endanger free will, bestowed on men and women alike by the Divine Majesty; they force women to dwell in life-long prisons, although guilty of no fault other than being born the weaker sex and consequently more deserving of compassion, assistance, and support, rather than being locked up forever in dungeons. The pagan philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus, flourishing at the time of the sixty-ninth Olympiad, lived continually in deep gloom. People observed him most of the time with his eyes brimming with tears and his head bowed down with sad thoughts; he was a bundle of suffering and melancholy bemoaning the degree and extent of human wretchedness. Following Heraclitus's example, every Christian's eyes should gush with streams or turn into fountains of perpetual tears as they meditate on the doubtful salvation of so many women put behind convent walls under the pseudonym of "nuns."

But these men do not weep; on the contrary, the most Catholic and spiritual of them - or rather the most hypocritical - consider it their right to offer up young creatures to God in unlawful sacrifice for the sake of preserving their own advantages. (Unlike the Blessed *Virgin Mary*, the young girls have been conceived in original sin; and unlike John the Baptist they have not been sanctified in their mothers' wombs. They *come* into the world tainted by sinful dispositions. What a gross abuse, what an unforgivable error, what a wicked decision, and what sheer audacity is this *deed* when Divine Providence, after all, has granted free will to His creatures, whether male or female, and bestowed on both sexes intellect, memory, and will! By means of these three faculties they are able to shun avoidable evil and pursue the good of their choice by their own voluntary inclination, not servile fear.

In the Garden of Eden, Divine Providence created both Adam and Eve in a state of innocence with choice and free will - and the woman did not lack such a matchless gift. Both sexes were endowed with this precious treasure of free will without distinction. Dante himself esteemed it so highly that he says in *Paradiso*:

*"The greatest gift the magnanimity
of God, as He created, gave, the gift
most suited to His goodness, gift that He
[M]ost prizes, was the freedom of the will."*

¹ These headings have been added to the text 'as an aid to the reader' by the translator: Letizia Panizza. The original text is in Italian (with some Latin quotes within it).

We read that the first man and woman enjoyed the Garden's delights for only seven hours before they contended with one another in disobeying the divine command. The Divine Maker could have created them free from guilt and established them from the start in the state of grace, but He did not do so. Rather, He wished to show how much a voluntary act pleased Him; thus His beloved prophet declares, "I will freely sacrifice to thee" (Ps 53:8). But lest it seem that I wish to enter into debates unsuitable to my state in life, I put aside the subject of free will, which has been disputed by the most serious and respected authorities, to say only this: When that ineffable Goodness and incalculable Splendor fell in love with the sacred Idea of God-made-man in His own divine mind, He wished, before actually shaping this person, to prepare a stage, or theater, where all the worldly delights enjoyed daily could be displayed. So God began with consummate divine skill to design the world: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth" (Gn 1:1). In six days, He adorned it with all perfection: He separated the waters, created fish, birds, and plants; and He did this for the sole purpose of His creature admiring and enjoying the work of His divine hands and finding it both useful and pleasant.

Woman, the compendium of all perfections, was the last to be created. I speak of material creation; otherwise, she existed from all eternity, the firstborn of all creatures generated by the breath of God Himself. This is conveyed by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of Solomon, where the author introduces the Most Holy Virgin to sing of herself, "I came out of the mouth of the Most High, the firstborn before all creatures" (Sir 24:5). Mary, a woman like all others, was not obliged to beg for her existence from a man's rib! She was born before time itself as well as before other men who, blinded by ambition to rule the world on their own, pass over this infallible truth in silence: that in the divine mind, woman was created *ab eterno*. "I was set up from eternity, and of old before the earth was made. The depths were not as yet, and I was already conceived" (Prv 8:23-24).¹⁹

Men's perversity will not allow them to confess the following truth with their own words, so we will force them to admit it with the words of Holy Scripture: woman gave perfection to man, and not vice versa as certain rather dim-witted preachers would have it. After the Lord had created the universe and all the animals - as I have just said - it is written, "And God saw all the things that He had made, and they were very good" (Cn 1:31). He then set about shaping the proudest animal of all; but when He had finished, He did not deem His work perfect and so did not recognize it as good. For this reason, Genesis does not add the same words as before; but foreseeing that without woman man would be the compendium of all imperfections God said after some thought, "It is not good for man to be alone, let us make him a help like unto himself" (Cn 2:18). Thus, He willed to bring forth a companion for man, who would enrich him with merits and be the universal glory of the human race.

If the Maker of the Universe, as He was creating such a beautiful machine, had first of all created man, and then all the other delights - that is the animals and the plants - and woman last, truth's enemies would say that she had been created from a coarser matter, so to speak. With great disdain, they would then bring the above Scripture verse to bear against women. But since they cannot prove by this argument that women are less because of when or where they were made, they turn to blaming her time and again as the guilty party for the sin of our

first parents. They continue to lie, of course, since the fault was man's, and he sinned to the detriment of the innocent woman, just as one reads in the book *To Peter on Faith*, "If the man had not sinned, the woman would give birth without pain and still remain a virgin." I shall discuss below which sex caused the fall from grace and which one has the greater reason for remorse.

SUPERIORITY OF WOMAN IN GOD'S CREATION

Since the omnipotent Lord had kept the creation of such a beautiful work as woman to the end, He willed to single her out, bear witness to her blessings, and make the whole world rejoice in her splendor. The Supreme Craftsman's power, wisdom, and love for us shine forth in all His other works; but with her, the finishing touch to such a wonderful fabric, He willed that all those catching sight of her should marvel. He thus ordained that she would have the power to dominate and subdue the fiercest, wildest hearts to willing service by virtue of her glance and restrained modesty.

God made proud man in the Damascene field, but from one of his ribs He made woman in the Garden of Eden. Even if I were not a woman, I would infer that on account of the quality of the matter from which she was made, and also of the place where she was made, woman is nobler, more refined, stronger, and worthier than man. I do not wish to set sail on the open sea with such contrary winds blowing; on the other hand, nor must I pass over in silence men's folly when they extol their own strength to Heaven and cast our own "weakness" into the deepest abyss. What liars you men are! True strength lies in conquering one's own passions. Which sex is stronger than the female one in this respect - forever virtuous, resistant to every push and pull of ill-conceived thoughts and desires? You are formed from the earth's dust is there anything less solid? On the other hand, consider the strength of a rib - hard bone - from which we women were made, and you will come to remain dissatisfied with yourselves. Besides, everybody knows how much stronger women are in conceiving and bearing children, whom they carry for nine months without tiring.

You cruel, inhuman men, forever preaching that evil is good and good is evil, glory in your strength just because you wage war among yourselves, killing one another like wild beasts. This is where your strength lies! On the other hand, you do not have the power to resist a caress or a tear or a flutter of a pair of eyes glancing at you by chance, not choice. You always fall, overcome by the weakness of your own senses. If fortitude lies in bearing misfortunes and insults, in what ways are you strong when you spill others' blood without reason, when you take innocent lives inflamed by a word or some groundless suspicion? As Horace said,

*"For this very reason, live bravely
And, when adversity comes,
may you front it with hearts full of courage."*

And Cato gave the following precept:

"Do not surrender your spirit in adversity."

Swaggering is not the same as strength; one needs to resist, to persevere and to remain constant in Christian fortitude. How can it be that you can boast of such a virtue when you are nothing but inconstant? You have mistakenly attributed fortitude to yourselves, you liars. For those who destroy humankind with arms cannot be called strong; but, those who fill the world with children and good works just as we do can be. Listen to Solomon speaking about women; he agrees with me: "Strength and beauty are her clothing" (Prv 31:25). With unspeakable courage women conceive you, bear you in their wombs, bring you into the world, nourish you with their milk, and teach you-even if once grown up you turn to vice under the influence of your own evil genius.

NO EVIDENCE IN GENESIS FOR RELIGIOUS VOWS

So go on complaining against women; I'll leave you to croak and return to weaving the thread of my argument: "On the seventh day God ended his work which he had made: and he rested ... from all his work which he had done" (Gn 2:2). God rested, not because He was tired-since at a nod He could bring forth everything from nothing, but as a sign that the works made with His hands were complete, although His favors remain without measure as we see daily how He grants ever new ones.

Gazing at the perfections of this great edifice, or into these deep mysteries, I do not find literally or symbolically a hint of a shadow that God wished there to be women enclosed in convents against their wills. Thee edifices exist because of human - or rather, inhuman - contrivance and nothing else. The blessed Creator, in whose mind the numerous future procreation of the human race was as present, could have entrusted to our first father Adam the task of founding religious orders of women dedicated to His service. But He did not do so, as He could foresee the resulting mistakes and Injuries brought about in His church by men's attempts to erase His gift of free will, men would rather submit women to their own mainly wicked and depraved wills.

What we see daily taking place, practiced more than anything else in this corrupt age, I count as an abuse, for nowhere in Genesis and nowhere at all in the length and breadth of Holy Scripture is it recorded even fleetingly by His Divine Majesty that He is served by the closeting of women involuntarily. It is, in short, an impious, malicious invention of men who bestowed the name of *monache* ("nuns") on those unhappy souls perhaps to play the fool - thereby mocking God who wanted Adam to name all things. For the name I derived from that foul beast said in fabulous stories to be the devil's making. He tried to mimic the heavenly Creator in attempting to create a being like man. Nuns who are forced to be so are truly like apes; but even more lacking in reason than apes are those men who, full of guile and without any spirit of truth, want to bend women's opinions to their own. Mimicking what they have seen other men do, they use violence to force women into the cloister or, as the saying goes, "to drown themselves in a glass of water". On the other hand, women who voluntarily withdraw to a solitary cell after experiencing the world's vanities and men's deceptions are truly

praiseworthy and full of prudence. They contemplate the Godhead and the loftiness of their own souls created in the likeness of God and then rise with the mind's eye to contemplate His grandeur and gaze upon His immensity.

Here more is gained by silence than can be expressed by the spoken word. Stunned and blinded by this holy and awesome ecstasy, the soul finally leaves the senseless body and, one can say, is transformed into its beloved. These are the nuns worthy of our praise and admiration, but in our age such privileges are granted to few and only to those brought up by their families to exercise their free will and who have therefore chosen such a life prompted by the breath of the Holy Spirit alone.

FREE WILL BELONGS EQUALLY TO MEN AND WOMEN; THERE IS NO SUBORDINATION

Let me now return to my main point: any attempt to remove free will from a woman is a direct contravention of the Almighty's decision when He ordained that all living things should reproduce themselves, but to man and woman He commanded "Increase and multiply" (Gn 1:22) as if to make clear that He did not wish anything from them without their common consent. Man's foolishness is nonetheless so great that he would attribute to himself alone all the graces, favors, and privileges dispensed by divine goodness equally and impartially to one sex as much as to the other.

Let me add that if woman had been deprived of freedom's bounty, God would not have given her to man, since she is "A help like unto himself (*adiutorium simile sibi*)" (Gn 2:18). God furthermore did not give woman to man as a help inferior to himself; woman's creation was one of parity - indeed its circumstances were marked by greater excellence - in which both were made similar in knowledge and with equal claims to eternal glory. As soon as His Majesty said the word "help," He immediately added "like unto himself", implying that woman is of just as much value as man. So do not boast about your superiority; remember that just as from one good work is drawn an even better one, so woman drawn from the first beautiful work of the divine hand turns into a creature of higher excellence, grace, and beauty than you are! Remember that she must be alike in ruling: the mistress of your possessions and the family. "They shall be two in one flesh" (Gn 2:24), said the Lord. You exchange souls reciprocally, crossing the boundaries, as it were, of mere human nature: your soul is hers, and hers is yours. You cannot then oppress her without sinning.

Do you not recall that the apostle Paul obliges you to honor your wife: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the Church" (Eph 5:25). What arrogant presumption is yours, then, you liars, when you repeat time and again that woman serves man as a help only with respect to reproduction; and that for the rest, she is an imperfect animal meant, fittingly, to live in subjection to him as the unstable, weak, and frail sex. With all your lies in this matter and in others, you contradict the commands of your very Maker and reveal yourself as the devil's offspring: "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you will do" (Gn 8:44). You cannot deny your sonship, you evil sorcerers, whose words have seduced the whole world into believing that women must be excluded from ruling. In this way you have made them subject to your ruses: a simple woman of dim intellect is taken in by your insinuations and

imagines she is weaker than you and an inferior being, although God Himself, by saying that woman is a "help like unto himself" has resolved all doubts about the equality of the sexes.

If she is similar to you, O proud one, she is not inferior. If she has been given to you as your help, she ought not serve you like a slave, as you repeat endlessly when you employ false reasoning on your side contrary to Holy Scripture and to the words of God who cannot lie. The Creator of all things said to both man and woman, "Increase and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures that move upon the earth" (Gn 1:28). He established both sexes as rulers of the world, without discrimination. He did not tell Adam "You will rule over woman". Both male and female were born free, bearing with them, like a precious gift from God, the priceless bounty of free choice.

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ADAM MAINLY TO BLAME FOR THE FALL, NOT EVE

God's greatest gift to the nobler sex cannot be taken away, that is, woman cannot be subject to man because even before Adam ate of the apple, she showed that her will was not tied to his. If he alone had the grace of free will and was superior to Eve, she would not have sinned at all, despite the serpent's promptings and insinuations, for the simple reason that she could not have made choices without her husband's consent. And even though the sin committed by Eve is reported by all men (as interested parties, to free Adam from blame) as the source of our mortality, it was nothing more after all than a simple mistake she made, deep in thought, upon hearing, "And you shall be as gods" (Cn 3:5).

The same Holy Scripture that cannot lie proves the contrary, to the confusion of those men who assert that our loss of immortality was the fault of our first mother. The Prime Mover, just and perfect in His every operation, cannot be *in* error. After Eve's disobedience in eating the forbidden fruit, He did not first call the woman to reproach and blame her as the main guilty party, the prime source of sin. He said instead, "Adam, where art thou?" (Gn 3:9) for no other reason than to advertise Adam as the principal source of our woe, The Highest Wisdom, to whom are revealed our thoughts, words and deeds, could not have been mistaken in naming the first sinner.

Forever slanderers, forever false, forever seducing women: you were barely in the world and you blame your help whom – you say – you love so tenderly and at whose tears, pleadings, attractions, and wiles you cast yourself into disobeying the Most High.

What kind of constance can one hope for from such monsters? He falls for a woman's simple and natural charm and then immediately condemns her as guilty before the divine tribunal. The woman, on the other hand, who loves her husband sincerely and wants truly to help him become a god, suggests, all lovingly, the ingenue, that he eat of the tasty fruit. Oh, the depravity of these blasphemers! Eve is deceived by the serpent's cunning, and you place all the blame on her. Adam falls for a charming request, and you excuse him. He knew he was offending his God, he was not deceived by cunning but beseeched by an innocent and sincere creature. Have you ever heard of greater wickedness than shielding yourself against your own faults with another's innocence?

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FALSE VIEWS ABOUT THE NEED FOR WOMEN'S CHASTITY

But maybe one of these men would argue the other side, namely, that the human race would multiply to such an extent that one may no longer make use of that first command of Genesis, "Increase and multiply and fill ... the earth" (Gn 1:22). I reply that this does not justify the arbitrary authority of cruel men to dispose of thousands of innocent lives at whim by thrusting them in prisons and barbarically sacrificing them to Pluto, for they are souls in despair, rather than to God. Let us be clear: Christ did not desire the virginity of an imprisoned body with the contradiction of freely roaming desires. Only once in all the Gospels did Christ exhort our sex to a life of chastity, not an enclosed life, and even then in the form of a parable and as a counsel of perfection. Saint Paul said, likewise, "Concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord, by I give counsel" (1 Cor 7:25). On the other hand, he preached magisterially to men on how pleasing it was to God whenever they led celibate and pure lives.

Some men with little understanding of Christian precepts make it appear that laws about virginity and temperance are necessary only for women almost as if they are obliged to keep these laws even by force. Nor do these false investigators of the Gospel realize that when blessed Jesus explained to His disciples His desire for their perfection and gave them the counsel of virginity, He was speaking to men and did not include women of any sort. The opinions of the male sex have gone so far that they make all kinds of obscenity and depravity lawful, yet hold as just the subjection of women in every walk of life. They also practice continually vilifying them, accusing them of "frailty" and calling them infirm, weak, and fickle in all they do Whence it is that a Latin poet once sang with all the usual malice of his sex

"Woman: forever a variable and fickle thing!"

Many others, contradicting such falsity, have truly confessed the instability of their own sex. Most suitably, Lodovico Ariosto's wisdom dictated:

*"Oh the weak, inconstant minds of men!
How ready we are to vacillate,
how ready we are to change our ideas!"*

Despite men's malign propensities, that blessed tongue exposes without prejudice the defect of men as well as women in various parts of his truthful poem and gives us to understand that we are all subject indiscriminately to frailty - although his being a man may have led him to keep silent about women's greater merit. The same men who accuse women of instability and levity should not therefore oblige them to perpetual vows, for I do not think that one can find a greater madness than wishing a spirit born free to bind herself by an irrevocable decision,

yet that is precisely what men contrive. Why did the same Ariosto say, "*femina, cosa mobil per natura*" ("woman, a fickle thing [*mobile*] by nature")? He was mistaken, of course, and meant to say "a noble [*nobile*] thing by nature".

IF WOMEN ARE FICKLE, WHY FORCE THEM TO BE CONSTANT?

God does not wish to interfere with or oppose the will of His creatures; indeed, He permits us all to dispose of our wills as we please. It is male fool-hardiness that grants itself the right to violate women's free wills and then re-gale them with unjust invectives against their "fickleness" and "inconstancy." If wise King Solomon affirms that we are all as fickle as leaves and more unstable than the wind - although he himself displays a fragility greater than glass! - why do you cruel men wish to sentence women irrevocably and unjustly to perpetual imprisonment, tied down by indelible sacraments with the knots of oaths made on sacred altar stones under pain of ecclesiastical censure and excommunication? At this point one needs the voices of all Catholic and secular writers, of moderns and ancients, and of believers and heretics to join with mine in describing fully men's profound madness. They are the ones in need of a new Astolfo who would ascend beyond the clouds to the moon in search of their wits!²

And just how, if you please, can these extreme opposites be matched together: natural fickleness and an immutable state of life, shifting sense of purpose and firm commitment, inconstancy of mind and a fixed dwelling place in a convent? And that not through their own choice but through another's determination, imposed on those bodies and souls that you say have inconstancy as their proper attribute. How is it, you cruel men - I am tempted to say butchers - can assign dwellings to women, and confined ones at that, which they may never change? It is further presumption to imagine that you can rein in the varied sentiments of a sex that - if one is to believe what you say - draws its unstable temperament from the maternal womb and that is therefore deemed, as if by natural inheritance, to have inconstancy at the heart of all things amorous as well as furious. But fathers, too, should recall that when they gave life to their offspring, they also passed on their own defects, as men are much more fickle in their sentiments than women

SOLOMON: A FINE EXAMPLE OF MALE INCONSTANCY

Let that embodiment of wisdom, King Solomon, be my clear proof, for although he reproached women for their fickleness and levity with endless zeal, he allowed himself to be led astray a thousand times. He changed his mind from one moment to the next, harboring as many desires as there were objects of his gaze. I am amazed that a king endowed with divinely infused wisdom could err in accusing women of instability and blame them for his own faults; that he could be so little wise in knowing himself - the quality that defines the truly wise man,

² Astolfo is a character in Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* who is given the task of seeing mad Orlando's lost wits on the moon.

and is valued not only by the greatest sages of this world, but by God Himself, as the perfection needed for understanding this microcosm of ours: "Know thyself," as the saying goes.

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CONDEMNATION OF TYRANNICAL FATHERS

Let us now return to the original depravity. How can you deceivers harbor in your breasts hearts so cruel as to inflict torment on the bodies of your own daughters, made of your flesh and blood? How can you suffer the loss, perhaps, of their souls? They are of such noble natures that Christ would descend once more from Heaven to earth and suffer death on the cross were it necessary to save any one of them. And how can you risk casting into Hell's abyss your own souls along with theirs, for you are guilty of grievous mortal sin having done violence to the wills of young girls, which was granted freely to them by God with such abundant generosity? You deserve eternal torment, along with the greatest tyrants in history, more, I say, than all the Nero and the Diocletians. Persecuting and slaughtering the holy martyrs so ruthlessly, they harmed their bodies, not threatening in any way their souls. Indeed, as many drops of blood shed by the martyrs are transformed into as many sparkling rubies in their crowns of glory! These tyrants did not have the light of Christian faith; they therefore fell into savagery and presumed to increase their own religion with an impious piety.

But you, you are tyrants from Hell, monsters of nature, Christians in name, and devils in deeds. You presume to take part in executing God's will at the very moment you deeply offend it. You presume, I say, to examine hearts seen only by God's eyes; your mad presumption disposes of the free choice of creatures still in their mothers' womb, without waiting for them to tell you toward which state in life their talents incline them. Dante understood this well; in the following verses he denounced the folly of fathers who abused the natural inclinations of their sons:

*"But if the world below would set its mind
on the foundation Nature lays as base
to follow, it would have its people worthy.
But you twist to religion one whose birth
made him more fit to gird a sword,
and make a king of one more fit for sermoning,
[S]o that the track you take is off the road."*

It would be better for these innocents whom you deceive and incarcerate if their days of birth were also their days of death! Whenever I see one of these hapless young girls, betrayed by their very own parents, I am reminded of what happens to a pretty little bird: from within the tree's foliage or along riverbanks, it delights the ear with sweet chirping and charming song, soothing the hearts of its audience - when suddenly it's trapped in a treacherous net, robbed of precious liberty. The same befalls these unhappy creatures: born under a star of ill omen, they spend their childhoods crying and cooing with their tongues still wet with milk,

moving their delicate limb in charming gestures. They bring delight to the ears and joy to tune hearts of their savage parents, who think of nothing else but hiding their faces as soon as possible and burying them alive in the cloister for the rest of their lives, bound by indissoluble knots. If they still draw breath, their words may well be, "The sorrows of death surrounded me" (Ps 17:51). His Divine Majesty never conjured up, I say, nor ordained this excess; and even if He permits other sins and errors, He neither advises nor orders them. Only men's rashness makes such foul sacrilege permissible.

IF MARRIAGE VOWS CAN BE DISSOLVED, WHY NOT RELIGIOUS VOWS?

When there are just reasons, the sacrament of marriage itself may be dissolved by divorce, although it was established in Paradise in the age of innocence, practiced and thus confirmed by Old Testament patriarchs and prophets, recognized by Christ Himself, and given the final seal of approval by the very Blessed Virgin Mary (although her marriage was exceptional, for her virginity was left intact). So the knot of matrimony, despite its sanctity, may nevertheless be dissolved under certain conditions-or at least come to an end with the death of a partner. Why, then, must nuns be condemned to keep their vows forever by the sacrament of their religious profession, with no appeal whatsoever? Your ambition alone, added to your overweening insolence in taking no account of God's will, allows you to damn your own flesh to a monastic hell, where these innocents remain in spite of beatings, insults, and torments. Christ Himself, on the other hand, gave His disciples the following precept: "And when they shall persecute you in one city, flee into another" (Mt 10:23).

For private individuals to commit such enormity through self-interest - cursed be self-interest! - is an abominable abuse of power, but for religious superiors and rulers to allow it makes one reel in horror at their insensitivity. The prince's eye, we know, guards not only the "interests of state," but the salvation of souls as well; he ought not to allow so many to perish wretchedly by thus subordinating their salvation to these same interests.