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*The Veritas Series*  
*“Proclaiming the Faith in the Third Millennium”*

# **The Gift of Woman**

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Printed in the United States of America

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## INTRODUCTION

The human person is a being of extraordinary dignity. All of creation reflects God, revealing in some small way His majesty, His goodness, His beauty. The human person is not only a reflection of God, revealing Him in a distant and weak way, but has been created in His very “image and likeness.” This means that man glorifies God incomparably more than any other of His creatures. How so? All other creatures glorify God simply through the gifts that God has given them; all that they have comes directly from Him. In the case of the human person, however, something extraordinary takes place: the human person has the privilege of contributing to God’s glory – with his understanding and especially with his freedom.

The glory that God receives when man becomes *good* far exceeds the glory He receives from the brightness of sun, or the loveliness of the flower, or the majesty of the mountains. Nothing in creation is more beautiful than a person shining with *virtue* – that dazzling jewel which comes to be only in the soul that has *cooperated freely* with God’s gifts.

With this in mind, we turn to considering “the gift of woman” – a phrase which, for us, takes on a double meaning: we will consider what it is that the woman has received from God as a gift entrusted to her, which she then returns to Him as a gift, by developing and bringing it to perfection – for God’s glory, for the good of those whose lives she touches, and for her own happiness.

We find the following striking passage addressed to women in the Second Vatican Council’s closing speech:

As you know, the Church is proud to have glorified and liberated woman, and in the course of the centuries, in diversity of characters, to have brought into relief her basic equality with man. But the hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence,

an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women impregnated with the spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid mankind in not falling.<sup>1</sup>

These stirring words cannot fail to touch, in the depth of her being, the woman who reads them. We find here expressed the great dignity of the woman: she is a creature whom “God has willed for its own sake,” in the words of *Gaudium et spes*.<sup>2</sup> This means that her dignity is so great that it does not come from being useful for some purpose beyond herself. Her dignity is found in her *simply because of who she is* – a creature who reflects God in her own completely irreplaceable way. This means that she must never be used as an instrument by others, who would use her for their own ends, taking away her freedom. She has the privilege and the duty to direct herself *freely* to her destiny.

But this passage is also saying something else, something that shows us how mysterious and paradoxical the human person is: it is telling us that the woman will become fulfilled *only if she makes a gift of herself to others*. Above we saw *Gaudium et spes* telling us that “man is the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake.” It then immediately adds, “and man cannot fully find himself *except through a sincere gift of himself*.”<sup>3</sup> We hear echoed Christ’s words, that “unless a seed fall to the ground and dies, it will not bear fruit.” What is true in the world of nature is even more true in the world of persons: it is only when we live for others, in a sense “forgetting” ourselves, that we become

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<sup>1</sup> Second Vatican Council Closing Speech, December 8, 1965.

<sup>2</sup> *Gaudium et spes* §24. This is one of the central documents of the Second Vatican Council, called in English “the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”. The Latin title is translated as “The joys and hopes”, which are simply the first words of the document. The first sentence of the document reads: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”

<sup>3</sup> *Gaudium et spes* §24. This sentence is perhaps the one most often quoted by Pope John Paul II in his writings.

fulfilled. It is only then that we shine with virtues, which are the truest adornment of the human soul.

The encyclical *Mulieris dignitatem* – translated as “The Dignity of Woman” – discovers every woman’s vocation by looking to the greatest woman, the Blessed Virgin Mary. John Paul II writes: “the special presence of the Mother of God in the mystery of the Church makes us think of the exceptional link between this ‘woman’ and the whole human family.”<sup>4</sup> Mary plays a central role in her service to the Church, which forms all of humanity for its destiny in God. Reflecting Mary’s role, all women are called to give themselves to others, thereby playing a crucial role in the formation of humanity.

## MALE AND FEMALE: TWO WAYS OF BEING, TWO VOCATIONS

### *Male and female*

All persons are made in the image and likeness of God, but we find, mysteriously, that humanity is divided into two kinds: man and woman. Let us think about this for a moment. We could say that every person is “three dimensional,” with 1) the dimension of human nature, 2) the dimension of being male or female, and 3) the dimension of individuality. On the deepest level, all persons are identical, simply by having a human nature. On the third level, in their individuality, each person is *entirely unique*, entirely different from every other person, and therefore completely irreplaceable. We could say that between these two dimensions, there exists a third one, a dimension in which humanity is divided into two “modes:” every human person exists as *masculine* or as *feminine*, as a man or as a woman. These are often referred to as the two genders.

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<sup>4</sup> *Mulieris dignitatem* §2

What are masculinity and femininity? Contemporary culture tends to think of these only as physical attributes. It is true that masculinity and femininity are found also in the bodies of men and women, but even before we think about masculinity and femininity in human persons, we see that they are above all *spiritual* characteristics found united in God Himself: for everything about the human person reflects God.

When God created man and woman, these spiritual characteristics became “translated” into ways of being a human person. They also become two distinct ways for human persons to reflect the being of God. Masculinity and femininity go to the very roots of every human person’s being. This means that the soul, the psyche, and the body of each person are “colored” by the person’s masculinity or femininity. The division of human persons into two modes is as glorious as it is mysterious.

While masculinity and femininity may at first seem to be opposites, we have a hint that they cannot be, since they reflect perfections in God – and what would be the “opposite” of a perfection in God? Rather than being *opposites*, the difference between them is *complementary*. We could call it a “friendly difference,” like two notes that are different yet harmonious. One result of this difference is that man and woman each give joy to the other, simply by being different in this way. The world is a more wonderful place for men because of the presence of women in it, and a more wonderful place for women because of the presence of men.

The difference between men and women has another side to it: each is an *enrichment* for the other. The gifts of men and women are different – and these gifts enrich not only the one possessing them, but others as well, as man and woman give of themselves in service. The strengths that each gender has equip them for different forms of service to those around them – for it is for *service* that their gifts were given. This means that men and women, both of whom are called to live all of the virtues, each become a witness to the other of the virtues that come from their gifts, and reminds the other that he is called to live these virtues as well. It also means that they are each called to different tasks or roles – the tasks that require the special strengths that each has been given.

## *Different gifts reveal different vocations*

What, then, are the different ways in which men and women serve humanity? To discover them, we look to the deepest service that man and woman can offer to God and to other persons: the service of *fatherhood* and the service of *motherhood*. These, in turn, are inseparably connected to the state of being *husband* and *wife*. Let us look at this more closely.

However it is lived, whether physically in marriage, or spiritually in consecrated virginity, *married love* – the love between husband and wife – is what brings the person to his highest fulfillment. This is because married love is the *total self-gift* of one person to another – and as we saw, self-giving is the vocation of every person.

If we reflect on this, we see that the love between husband and wife comes to its fulfillment when they become *parents*. What happens when the two become parents, and why is this a fulfillment of their love? The coming to be of the child is an overflow of the parents' love for each other. It is as if this love is so deep and so great, that it cannot contain itself, and wants to share itself with a totally new being, to draw that new being into the love! It is here, when love reaches its end point in the child, that the different roles of man and woman are revealed.. The father and the mother are both to care for the child, but each does so in a way that is proper to his gifts.

And so it is in reflecting on motherhood, the highest expression of femininity, that we discover the special gifts and the vocation of women. This is true, whether the woman is a mother biologically or only spiritually; motherhood is an attitude of the heart to which all women are called. We will reflect on motherhood to discover the qualities unique to the woman, and by which she will serve humanity.

## THE SPECIAL GIFT OF THE WOMAN

### *How we discover the woman's vocation*

We saw that the human person is the only being in nature created in the image and likeness of God. When we encounter a being with such great dignity, what is the response that we should give to this precious being? Is respect enough? Is admiration enough? Esteem? Reverence? John Paul II tells us that none of these is sufficient. There is only one response that does the job – and that response is *love*. “The person must be loved,” writes the former pope, “since love alone corresponds to what the person is.”<sup>5</sup> Next to love, all other responses are partial and feeble; none can compare with the completeness, the totality and the depth of love. Love seems to include in itself all of these other attitudes, but goes far beyond them; without love, all of these other responses remain “cold.”

In the case of the human being, God so willed it that the person enters the world *totally dependent on another*. No other being in creation is as completely helpless as is the human infant. The one to whom the human person in his infancy is first entrusted, and that in a most radical way, is the *woman*, the mother. We see this first on a physical level: the woman gives the child her own body, her own physical energy, without which the child could not survive. The woman is fashioned by God for this service to another; the structure of her body is “equipped” for this service. But this physical dependence of the child on the woman is a weak reflection of a much more important dependence: *a dependence of the child on the mother not only as a physical being, but as a being with a spiritual soul*.

What is the “nourishment” that the child, as more than a physical being, needs? What is the “food” that enables the child to survive as a person? At this early stage, the child is in need of a *deeply attentive, unconditional, and ever-present love*. This kind of love is an absolute condition for the child to survive and to flourish as a person. Both parents

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<sup>5</sup> *Mulieris dignitatem* §29

are called to love the child with a total love, but each has a special role in how they live that love. The special love of the woman as mother has often been called a “nurturing love,” while the love of the father is referred to as a “protective love.” It is the child’s need to be nurtured in this way that calls out the woman’s specific gifts when it comes to loving, and shows us her special vocation.

### *“Receptivity” as the key to the nature of the feminine*

This unique ability to love is rooted in the key feature of femininity, namely, *receptivity*. The feminine soul – which is reflected in the woman’s psyche and in her body – is fashioned by God to be uniquely open and receptive to what is beyond it, ready to *accept* and *affirm* everything simply as it is. This is contrasted with the masculine soul, which reflects God’s creativity, and which has been fashioned to take initiative-- to “make” and to “do.” Women witness to men the call of every human person to be receptive to others, and especially to God; while men witness to women the call of every human person to be active participators in the world around them, especially in the work of their own salvation.

### *The special qualities of a mother’s love*

Receptivity is the special quality that explains why the child has been entrusted to woman in the earliest stages of its life, depending on her for the love that it needs. What then are the characteristics of a mother’s love?

#### *a. Special sensitivity of the woman to the person simply as person*

Firstly, the woman has a unique capacity to receive the person in all of his dignity as a person and as an individual. The woman is able to recognize a person as one who has a value apart from his “usefulness” and even apart from his specific gifts; the woman is able to see the person as one who is infinitely precious simply by being the irreplaceable person whom God has made. The child does not have to “do” or to “accomplish” anything to be loved by the mother. The mother’s affirmation is offered

unconditionally – because her gaze is fixed on the child’s deepest center, which always remains valuable beyond measure.

This is what John Paul II means when he writes: “The unique contact with the new human being developing within her gives rise to an attitude towards human beings – not only towards her own child, but every human being – which profoundly marks the woman’s personality. It is commonly thought that *women* are more capable than men of paying attention *to another person*, and that motherhood develops this predisposition even more.”<sup>6</sup>

The mother’s unconditional welcome of the child lays the basis for what we call “self-esteem” – a person’s fundamental sense of self-worth. A person cannot, on their own, experience their preciousness; just as we need a mirror to see our own eyes, so only in the loving gaze of another is our own, inherent value reflected.

Everything that happens in the child’s early life becomes like a root which anchors him for the rest of his life. When the child who has been truly loved by his mother enters into the ups and downs of adulthood, he will still feel his value in the midst of failures, but also will realize that successes are not the measure of his worth. Schooled in this way by his mother’s love, the child will also be prepared to treat others in the same way: to always recognize their basic worth as persons, and to affirm them according to this worth.

*b. The woman gives herself in a total way*

There is a second important characteristic of love typical to the feminine nature. The woman has a special readiness to give of *herself*, and in a *total way*. The woman does not just give *things* to the child out of love, or just a *part* of herself, her time or her services. Instead, she stands ready *at every moment* to give what the child needs; and when she gives it, she gives *her very self* along with that service.

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<sup>6</sup> *Mulieris dignitatem* §18

In this way, the woman is the first to teach the child that love involves the giving of one's self to the beloved. Faced with this self-giving of the mother, the child learns the other essential aspect of love: receptivity. In love, one must stand ready to receive the other unconditionally, just as one is accepted unconditionally. We will see, in the next point, how the intimacy of the mother's love, its immediate and concrete presence to the child, is so important in learning this dimension of love.

*c. Tender closeness: another gift of the mother*

The final important quality to a mother's love is *tender intimacy* or *closeness*. All love requires intimacy; without it, love is not fully love. There are two sides to the intimacy of love: a spiritual side, found in the emotions, and a physical side, found in touch. There is, in the woman, a unity of body, mind, and heart that makes it possible for her to live easily and naturally this characteristic of love.

Firstly, the woman has a special capacity for love that is rich with the *warmth of emotion* or *affectivity*.<sup>7</sup> Emotions contribute to the completion of love; without them, love may be known by the *mind*, but it is not *felt*. Without being felt, love does not really hit home. How many people have suffered, because, while their mothers may have performed many actions that may point to love – such as cooking for them, seeing to their physical needs, seeing to their education – these mothers did not convey love to their children with the glowing warmth of emotion. Somehow, without emotion, we do not feel that we are being “seen” with the eyes of love, and, therefore, are not being seen as the precious individual that we are.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Affectivity” is another word for the emotions. It comes from the idea that when we feel emotions is it because we have been “affected” by something.

<sup>8</sup> This is what John Paul II seems to mean when he says that, “Perhaps more than men, women acknowledge the person, because they see persons with their hearts.”

The second side of the intimacy of love is *physical touch*. Physical contact is important for conveying the warmth of love, because emotions have a “spiritual radiance” to them. For the infant, who is still totally immersed in the physical, touch plays a very important role in the experience of love. The child is completely dependent on the mother for all of his physical needs. It is beautiful to recognize that the physical touch involved in caring for a child then becomes, for the mother, a way of loving. Because of the close unity between body and soul in the woman, love flows easily from the mother’s heart into her body, spontaneously communicating itself physically to the child who has been given to her. Love has really hit home.

### *Summary of motherly love*

Entrusted with the human person in the most formative stage of his life, the woman has received the gifts that allow her to fulfill this task. John Paul II writes, “The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way. Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being, but this trust concerns women in a special way – precisely by reason of their femininity – and it determines their vocation.”<sup>9</sup> Theodore Ratisbonne, in his biography of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, captures in a beautiful way the unique gift of the mother to the child:

Blessed is the man whose infancy has been watched over, kindled, penetrated by the eye of a tender and holy mother. That glance has a magical power over the soul of the child; it beams forth sweetness and life; and, as the sun’s rays mature the fruits of the earth, and sweeten them by the communication of its own substance, so does the mother

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<sup>9</sup> *Mulieris dignitatem* §30

deposit, in the soul of the child, the sacred character of love. St. Bernard had this inestimable blessing.<sup>10</sup>

### *The vocation of all women to a “nurturing” love*

Just as love is the most important element in a child’s life, and is provided for in a unique way by the mother, so love is always the most important reality of human existence. Every woman, whether a physical mother or not, has the special gift and calling to keep the paramount importance of love vibrantly, even if discreetly, present in whatever sphere she finds herself. In doing this, she preserves the truth that in all of our earthly endeavors, the human person must remain at the center.<sup>11</sup> Whether in business, education, technology or in any other area, nothing has meaning if it does not safeguard the dignity of the human person, respect his rights, and contribute to his flourishing. Only the reality of love keeps the person at the center of our vision, and it is love alone which stands fully at the service of the person. John Paul II speaks of this particular contribution of woman as her “genius:”

In our own time, the successes of science and technology make it possible to attain material well-being to a degree hitherto unknown. While this favors some, it pushes others to the margins of society. In this way, unilateral progress can also lead to a gradual loss of sensitivity for man, that is, for what is essentially human. In this sense, our time in particular awaits the manifestation of that “genius” which belongs to women, and which can ensure sensitivity for human beings in every

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<sup>10</sup> Theodore Ratisbonne, *The Life and Times of St. Bernard* (Trans. H.E. Mannin. New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1902), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Edith Stein writes of the decisive role that woman can play in society, if only she retains her uniquely feminine way of being: “Thus the participation of women in the most diverse professional disciplines could be a blessing for the entire society, private or public, precisely if the specifically feminine ethos would be preserved.” “The Ethos of Woman’s Professions”, in *Essays on Woman* (trans. Freda Mary Oben, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1996), 50.

circumstance: because they are human! – And because the greatest of these is love (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:13).<sup>12</sup>

The woman is the one to whom God gave the special gift of being receptive to persons, of seeing persons as *persons*, and not simply as objects which intersect with her own needs and projects. There is a unity between the woman's heart, mind, and body that allows her to keep a proper order in the relationship between her undertakings and the importance of persons. She has been given the "talent" of warmth and suppleness of heart in order that she may radiate the acceptance and affirmation of unconditional love to those around her.

### *Compassion – another gift and call of the woman*

This vocation to love is inseparable from another specific gift of the woman: her sensitivity for the suffering of others and a willingness to join in that suffering. In his encyclical on suffering, called *Salvifici dolores*, John Paul II included a major section on the call for *compassion* in the face of suffering. He is clear that *every single person* – whether man or woman – has a solemn obligation to live compassion. But the woman, in light of her gifts, can be a special "witness" to this virtue, helping men to develop compassion within themselves. This is one of the ways in which the complementarities between male and female become fruitful.

Suffering is a great mystery – we could say that, in a way, it is the greatest puzzle of human life. It has no natural resolution, and is, in itself, unbearable. But there is a kind of solution to the mystery, insofar as something wonderful happens because of suffering. A new intensity of love comes into being, which changes suffering, if not by taking it away, then by surrounding it with its opposite: deep consolation and even happiness. John Paul II writes, "...we could say that suffering, which is present under so many different forms in our human world, is also present

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<sup>12</sup> *Mulieris dignitatem* §30

in order to *unleash love in the human person*, that unselfish gift of one's 'I' on behalf of other people, especially those who suffer."<sup>13</sup>

To be compassionate does not mean simply to do something that eliminates suffering or makes it easier to bear; in most cases, we are not able to do that. Compassion is a "suffering with" the one who suffers. What a consolation, when someone in the dark loneliness of suffering suddenly finds with him, in that dark place, a sensitive heart – a heart that is hurting because he is hurting, and is suffering with him out of love! As Mother Teresa said, "suffering is unbearable only when one suffers alone."

The woman's vocation to an intimate and deeply personal love goes along with her ability to be, in this deeply consoling way, with and for the one who suffers. In her receptivity of the other, in her great sensitivity of heart, the woman is able to be a witness to the need for courage in remaining vulnerable to the pain of another; she is a witness to the call for selflessness in taking on another's wounds.

## WOMAN AS SPIRITUAL BRIDE AND MOTHER

Many women live their gifts within the family; many live it without having had their own children, but by being available to those around them in a womanly way. There is yet another way for a woman to live her vocation: in a supernatural way, as a consecrated spouse of Christ. This grace of a special call does not do away with the deepest makeup of the woman, but, on the contrary, takes it up and perfects it.

There is a great mystery in the call of a woman to become a bride of Christ. To be invited to enter into an exclusive and total self-giving as the *bride* of the omnipotent God, creator of heaven and earth, the one who is Holiness Itself, is a mystery that we will not understand in this life. Needless to say, it is pure gift, something we could never have imagined on our own.

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<sup>13</sup> *Salvifici dolores*, §29

To the extent that we can understand it, we will do so only in the light of *love*. If we understand that this all-powerful God is *Himself* love, and that He, therefore, not only wishes the salvation of His creatures, but thirsts for a close union with them, we will catch a glimpse of what is at the heart of this mystery: God invites some of His creatures to live in an exclusive relationship of love with Him. Consecrated virginity can, in fact, be summed up as “a state of love.” Its very heart is love; without love, the religious state is like a body without a soul.<sup>14</sup> So the state of consecrated life becomes another way for the woman to live her vocation to a deep, tender, and intimate love.<sup>15</sup>

It is easy to see that in consecrated virginity, the vocation of the woman to motherhood is greatly expanded. The woman’s love is now directed to God Himself, and through Him, to all of humanity. Just as an earthly husband or wife enters into everything that the other loves and holds dear, so, too, the consecrated virgin enters into God’s love of all persons. Love for humanity becomes the way in which the consecrated woman exercises the gift of motherhood: she becomes supernaturally fruitful through the love of Christ. John Paul II writes, “Spousal love – with its maternal potential hidden in the heart of the woman as a virginal bride – when joined to Christ, the Redeemer of each and every person, is also predisposed to being open to each and every person.”<sup>16</sup>

Finally, in her femininity, the woman religious plays a unique role in being a “sign” to all lay persons of their ultimate vocation. God ultimately calls all to a spousal relationship with Him. Since He chose to reveal Himself to us as masculine, this means that, in relation to Him,

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<sup>14</sup> We find in *Mulieris dignitatem*, §20: “One cannot correctly understand virginity--a woman's consecration in virginity--without referring to spousal love. It is through this kind of love that a person becomes a gift for the other.”

<sup>15</sup> John Paul II writes in this regard: “The naturally spousal predisposition of the feminine personality finds a response in virginity understood in this way. Women, called from the very ‘beginning’ to be loved and to love, in a vocation to virginity find Christ first of all as the Redeemer who ‘loved until the end’ through his total gift of self; and they respond to this gift with a ‘sincere gift’ of their whole lives.” *Mulieris dignitatem*, §20

<sup>16</sup> *Mulieris dignitatem* §21

every human soul is a bride. John Paul II says to consecrated women, “You help the church and all mankind to experience a ‘spousal’ relationship to God, one which magnificently expresses the fellowship which God wishes to establish with his creatures.”<sup>17</sup>

## SPECIAL CHALLENGES THAT WOMEN FACE

All persons wanting to live a virtuous life in a fallen world will face innumerable challenges, many of which are common to both men and women. However, a number of the difficulties we encounter will be a direct result of our vocation as men and as women, respectively, and so they will be different in each case. While there are countless difficulties we could consider, we will look at a few that seem most universal and most common, though not every reader will be able to relate to all of them, and some will wish that others had been included. We will first focus on some of the difficulties related to motherhood, and then examine some of the more general challenges that women face.

### *Difficulties surrounding the vocation of biological motherhood*

#### a. Modern society’s downplaying of motherhood

One of the most serious attacks of secular society on the family is the attack, not just on motherhood itself, but on the *image* of motherhood. Even for the woman who knows that there can be no greater natural vocation than motherhood, it can be a great effort for her to resist, within herself, a negative sense that as a mother, she is “just a housewife.” Modernity would have us believe that one becomes a mother only if one has no talents, no interests, no gifts: one “defaults” into tending a family full time.

Our reflections on the gifts of the woman lead us to see the great importance of motherhood. There is no more important task in earthly

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<sup>17</sup> *Letter to Women* §2

existence than to love the child, to lay the foundation for his life – both earthly and eternal – in its most important aspects.<sup>18</sup> The mother has in her care the most precious and most fragile of creatures – the child – and the family as a center of love. Once we understand how important motherhood is, and how important love is, we no longer wonder that the enemies of God would attack motherhood. This is one of the most efficient ways the enemy has of causing deep suffering for the person in his earthly existence, and threatening his salvation – by weakening the foundations of his spiritual, emotional, and psychological life.

b. What of the woman without a natural disposition to love?

When we say that women are “by nature” disposed to love in this way, this does not mean that every individual woman has the same capacity for love. There are many factors that affect a person’s capacity to love – everything from the “talent” they have from God, to their formation within the family of origin, to the influence of the wider society, to their individual free choices. This brings us to an important question. What about the woman who finds herself without a deep natural capacity for the vocation to which she is called?

No matter how much or how little a particular woman is naturally disposed to love, we can still speak of the vocation to motherhood which is universal. In being “mother,” the woman plays a role which only she can play; and this role requires certain things of her. If she keeps this always in mind, she will, at every moment, freely commit herself to giving what only a mother can give. And this free commitment *is* love! Even if it doesn’t flow spontaneously from a “full” heart, this commitment to love will make all the difference for the atmosphere within the family. The woman who simply “gives up” because she is not good at loving is completely different from the woman who commits herself to loving,

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<sup>18</sup> In his *Letter to Women* John Paul II thanks women who are mothers, saying that through motherhood “[they] become God’s own smile upon the newborn child.” *Letter to women* §??

despite her deficiencies. The woman who perseveres will, over time, grow in her ability to love.

- c. All love must be freely given, because the tasks of motherhood are not easy

This leads us to see that all love must be *freely* given; it must come from a solid commitment of the will. Freedom is like the root of a tree that is the hearty and dependable source of what grows on that tree. Even the woman who is “very feminine” by nature should not simply love “automatically,” as if her nature “makes her do it.” Love is a *gift*, coming from one person to another, and so must be freely given.

This is also important because even the most naturally disposed to love will, at times, find their hearts dry, or empty, or unable to give because of their own neediness. And even more: it is well known to every mother that in its day-to-day demands, motherhood can be difficult in the greatest degree. The woman may long for the life of motherhood; she may long to give love to a child and to receive the love of a child; but none of this means that she longs for the hardships that come with motherhood.

The greatest love will be tested by the burdens of the daily life of the mother, and the woman will wonder how she is supposed to love in the midst of them; she may, in fact, find that she is not able to. It is in these moments, where there is still much left for the woman to do, that the commitment of her will to her child and to her family will radiate through her way of being, and will, in some way, provide for the love that she cannot give at that moment. As we said above: this *will* be her way of loving in these moments.

- d. Does mothering conflict with other gifts of the woman?

What of the mother who has some talents which might seem to stand in competition with mothering? Our thoughts up to this point will be important for the woman who has natural gifts besides mother-love or perhaps some gift in greater abundance than the gift of loving. Should this woman give herself entirely to her family, or should she also pursue the

development of her other “talents” or lend herself to a service which she is capable of giving? If the woman discerns that she is called to become a mother, and responds to this call, then she can be sure of her first calling: *to live motherhood*. As we saw, the child has a right to her love, and so long as she has brought a child into the world, she has an obligation to commit herself to that love.

Would God give abilities to the woman that seem to be a real part of who she is – and then not allow her to use them? This cannot be. The woman can be sure that, in giving herself to her family, she will be able to use and develop these gifts. In the beginning, this is not easy to see; the young mother may, at first, feel as though many of her special talents have to be put aside for the sake of her family. In time, however, she will see that this is not so. The openness of heart she turns towards her children will be the openness through which God places in her ideas for new and creative ways of exercising her gifts.

There may, of course, be some special cases where a woman finds herself unable to exercise her talents and pursue her interests, at least for a time. This woman is surely being asked to make a sacrifice. But a sacrifice made in the service of love will never limit her fulfillment and her happiness. If she makes this sacrifice freely, and asks often for the grace that comes with her state in life, she will soon discover the treasures of living for love.

### *More general challenges that women face*

- a. To love well, the woman must have a relationship with Christ

We have seen that the woman’s calling includes being available for persons in a unique way, providing a “home” where the person can dwell secure. This vocation to love others means that the woman herself has a great desire for love, for intimacy, for another heart to be a home for her. Only God, in the person of Jesus, can meet the woman in her profound desire for love.

It is through a sincere and faithful spiritual life that the woman will draw close to the Heart of God, who is at every moment offering the infinitely deep, tender, personal love for which she longs. He waits for her, at every moment inviting her to drink more and more deeply from love's spring in Him. Prayer, therefore, must be the bedrock of her life. She should receive the Sacraments as frequently as possible, especially the Eucharist, "the sacrament of love." In spiritual reading, she will find a support and a defense against her own insecurity, worldly pressures, passing fads, and other influences that would threaten her ability to love well.

Her relationship with Christ will then become the cornerstone for her human love-relationships, both deepening them and purifying them. If her love for others is an overflow of the intimate love between her and Christ, this will guarantee that her love is truly selfless. If she is anchored in God's unconditional love, revealed in Christ on the cross, she will have the courage to remain vulnerable in the face of the difficulties surrounding earthly love, instead of becoming closed and resentful. If she knows herself to be forgiven by God in His love, she will be able to forgive those who offend her love.

- b. Desire for love and communion could also create the danger of settling for counterfeits

The readiness of the woman to be available for others carries with it the danger of allowing others to use her. For her to avoid this, she must have an inner sense of her own worth – she must know that she has been "willed by the Creator for her own sake," and may not be used by another. If the woman's heart is not centered in God, there will always be a danger that her great thirst for love will mislead her into counterfeits – into false and superficial substitutes for love.

Once again – the woman must have a genuine spiritual life. As she reflects, for example, on the Gospel accounts of Christ's dealings with women, she will discover a God Who respects the equal dignity of women, Who shows reverence for their freedom, Who never does violence

to their hearts. She will find a God Who always exercises an infinite sensitivity in all of His dealings with them, Who shows them the most tender forgiveness, and Who calls them to the full dignity of the sons of God through repentance. By contemplating God's reverence for her, by experiencing her own responsibility in the light of His calling her by name, she will become ever more filled with a living knowledge of her own worth.

This inner sense of her own dignity will then naturally translate into how she carries herself in her external behavior. Others will be called upon to respect her personal dignity by her manner and by the way she speaks and moves. How she presents herself to others should be a "call," and, if necessary, a challenge to them to reverence her and not to attempt to use her as a means for their own pleasure and purposes.

c. Modesty in dress

Modesty in clothing for women has always been part of the Christian tradition. For a woman living in the contemporary culture, living the spirit of Christian modesty is particularly challenging. The woman wants to keep up with fashion, but this is becoming increasingly difficult. It is very important that, in her striving to go against the cultural current, the woman understands why modesty in dress is so important.

Did the Christian tradition come about because of a fear of the body or because of a fear of sexuality? No, Christianity has a totally different reason for covering certain parts of the body. Since the Incarnation, the importance and goodness of the body came to light with new clarity. Why, then, this tradition of modesty?

Man and woman are unique among intelligent beings: unlike God and the angels, they are made up of body and soul – of matter and spirit. These two come together to form *one single being*. The body is not like an outer shell, completely removed from the soul. Instead, the body *expresses* and *reveals* the soul; in some way, we can say that the body has the soul present in itself. Think of how a smile, a hug or a frown are not just

physical postures, but convey the spiritual realities of happiness, affection, and anger. What one does with the body, then, is not disconnected from the soul. Think of how it hurts our heart when someone slaps us in the face; think of how our heart is filled with warmth when someone gives us a sincere smile.

Modesty is based on the truth of the connection between the body and the soul in the human person. There are parts of the body that are meant to convey *love*, and make possible a gift of self, in love, which is *total, permanent, exclusive*, and of the *deepest intimacy*. Because of their unique connection with love and total self-gift, these parts of the body call for a kind of special veiling. These parts of the body, since they are linked to the intimate “secret” of sexuality, should not be flaunted, any more than one would want to make public the intimate thoughts of her heart.

With the elevation of marriage to a Sacrament, the body is taken up into the life of the spirit in another way: the body becomes a sacrament of the grace of Christ. And so the Christian has yet another reason to preserve the dignity of the sexual sphere by modest clothing.

d. Self-mastery and self-discipline purify the woman’s gifts

Finally, if the woman is truly to stand in service to others, there is a need for self-mastery and self-discipline in her life. One of the many mantras of today’s culture is, “Let yourself go!” Indulge your desires, indulge your cravings and indulge your whims – because, as we’re often reminded, “You deserve it!” But a woman who lives in this way becomes controlled by these desires – and eventually comes to belong to *them*, and not to *herself*. How can she then “give herself away” in the self-gift of love if she doesn’t belong to herself to begin with? The many gifts of the woman– everything from her physical beauty, to her rich emotional life, to her ability and desire to relate to other persons --can become her enemies and imprison her.

To give herself to others, the woman must first possess herself – and this she attains through *self-discipline and sacrifice*. She must always ask herself: What does the present moment require of me? Not: What do I

feel like doing, or having? Often, to do the right thing, she will have to die to herself. By means of these many small deaths, she will free herself from the captivity of her own tendencies, subjective desires and drives, and become truly sovereign over her own being, so that when she chooses to give herself to another, in any form of service or self-gift, she is ready to do so – and is not enslaved by her own self-centeredness.

## CONCLUSION

As we aim for becoming genuine women through the gift of self to others, let us look to Mary, the virgin-mother and most perfect of all women:

The church sees in Mary the highest expression of the 'feminine genius,' and she finds in her a source of constant inspiration. Mary called herself the 'handmaid of the Lord' (Luke 1:38). Through obedience to the word of God she accepted her lofty yet not easy vocation as wife and mother in the family of Nazareth. Putting herself at God's service, she also put herself at the service of others: a service of love.<sup>19</sup>

The woman becomes perfect when she becomes the "handmaid of the Lord," ready to serve Him and those to whom He calls her. In the words of John Paul II, the pope who had such sensitivity for women – for their dignity, for their special sufferings, for their unique calling:

Therefore the Church gives thanks for each and every woman: for mothers, for sisters, for wives; for women consecrated to God in virginity; for women dedicated to the many human beings who await the gratuitous love of another person; for women who watch over the human persons in the family, which is the fundamental sign of the human community; for women who work professionally, and who at times are

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<sup>19</sup> *Letter to women* §10

burdened by a great social responsibility; for “perfect” women and for “weak” women – for all women as they have come forth from the heart of God in all the beauty and richness of their femininity; as they have been embraced by his eternal love; as, together with men, they are pilgrims on this earth, which is the temporal “homeland” of all people and is transformed sometimes into a “valley of tears”; as they assume, together with men, a common responsibility for the destiny of humanity according to daily necessities and according to that definitive destiny which the human family has in God himself, in the bosom of the ineffable Trinity.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Mulieris dignitatem* §30