



SPIRITUAL MOTHERHOOD

*The Essence of
Spiritual Motherhood*



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FROM THE WRITINGS OF POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II (THE “FEMININE GENIUS”) AND AT THE REQUEST OF THE VATICAN’S CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, THE **SPIRITUAL MOTHERHOOD SODALITY** (SMS) HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED TO AID THE CHURCH IN HER TEACHINGS REGARDING THE DIGNITY AND VOCATION OF WOMEN AS WELL AS THE IRREPLACEABLE VOCATION OF THE ORDAINED PRIESTHOOD.

THE MISSION OF THIS SODALITY IS TO EDUCATE WOMEN REGARDING THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUAL MATERNITY AND ITS CONNECTION WITH THE HOLY EUCHARIST AND THE PRIESTHOOD. THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY IS ESTEEMED AS THE ULTIMATE MODEL TO HELP INFORM WOMEN ABOUT ANSWERING THEIR CALL TO HOLINESS, THEIR DIGNITY AND VOCATION AND ALSO, THEIR LOVE FOR CHRIST’S MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD.



"Jesus confirms the meaning of motherhood in reference to the body, but at the same time he indicates an even deeper meaning, which is connected with the order of the spirit: it is a sign of the Covenant with God who "is spirit". [...]

The motherhood of every woman, understood in

the light of the Gospel,
is similarly not only
"of flesh and blood": it
expresses a profound
"listening to the word of
the living God" and a
readiness to "safeguard"
this Word, which is 'the
word of eternal life'."

—Pope St. John Paul II,
Mulieris Dignitatem, 19

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL MOTHERHOOD?

Being a Spiritual Mother is a supernatural way to care for souls, especially priests. It is a type of maternity that nurtures divine life in others by doing God's will.

Theologically speaking, Spiritual Motherhood is a type of maternity women experience by grace, within their call to holiness, in imitation of Mary, Mother of Priests.¹ This type of motherhood "according to the Spirit" is made possible by participating in Mary's universal Spiritual Motherhood.²

WHEN WAS SPIRITUAL MOTHERHOOD ESTABLISHED?

The Blessed Virgin Mary's Spiritual Motherhood (that women can participate in) started with our Lady's *Fiat* (her "yes" to God's will) at the Annunciation, continued even at the Foot of the Cross when Christ entrusted Mary, Mother of the Church to St. John the Apostle, and "lasts until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect."³

1) cf. Pope St. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 19

2) cf. Pope St. John Paul II, *Mary has universal Spiritual Motherhood*, 2; Congregation for the Clergy, *Eucharistic Adoration for the Sanctification of Priests and Spiritual Maternity* (2nd Edition), Page 13

3) Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 62



“AND MARY SAID, ‘BEHOLD, I AM THE HANDMAID OF THE LORD;

LET IT BE DONE TO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD.’”

—LUKE 1:38

“You cannot understand

Mary without her

motherhood; you cannot

understand the Church

without her motherhood,

and you are icons

of Mary and of the

Church.”

*—Pope Francis to Heads of
Women's Religious Communities,
May 8, 2013*

WHY SPIRITUAL MOTHERHOOD?

“For whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister and **mother**.” –Matthew 12:50

What lies at the heart of Spiritual Motherhood is *faithfulness to the Gospel*, that is, *doing the will of God*. After a woman on the streets of Palestine praised the Mother of Christ with the words, “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!”⁴, Jesus exclaimed in response, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!”⁵. Thus, in referring to His Mother, our Lord not only confirmed the importance of physical motherhood⁶, but in essence, pointed to a greater reality, *fidelity to the plan of God*⁷, which may be categorized as “Spiritual Motherhood.”

Thus, in imitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who was the greatest disciple of our Lord, the emphasis of Spiritual Motherhood for women is important because it draws attention to:

- Authentic Marian Femininity and Maternity: “The Feminine Genius”
- Devotion and Love for the Holy Eucharist
- Spiritually Adopting a Priest as *Alter Christus* (“Another Christ”)

WHO CAN BECOME A SPIRITUAL MOTHER?

Any woman can become a Spiritual Mother regardless of her age, state of life and vocation. “This type of motherhood is not only for mothers of families, but is just as possible for an unmarried girl, a widow, or for someone who is ill.”⁸

4) Holy Bible, Luke 11:27 (Revised Standard Version)

5) Holy Bible, Luke 11:28 (Revised Standard Version)

6) cf. Pope St. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 19

7) cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 58

8) Congregation for the Clergy, *Eucharistic Adoration for the Sanctification of Priests and Spiritual Maternity*, (1st Edition), page 11



“SPIRITUAL MATERNITY IS LIVED OUT
IN MANY DIFFERENT WAYS...”

*"If the desired renewal
of the Church depends
for the most part on its
priests, then it will also
depend to a large degree
on the families and in
particular women
and mothers."*

*—Pope St. John Paul II,
Address, May 4, 1987*

WHAT DO SPIRITUAL MOTHERS 'DO'?

It is important to note, Spiritual Motherhood is not a vocation in itself. It does not replace the married state, the consecrated life, or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom. Rather, Spiritual Motherhood is a type of maternity experienced "within a vocation" for women who desire to help the people of God, especially of priests. The first and foremost duty for any Christian is to answer the universal call to holiness within their particular vocation and state of life.⁹

The practice of Spiritual Maternity is lived out in many different ways. Numerous women, both married and unmarried alike, have spent much time caring for children and people in general, whether related to them or not. Some examples of acts of spiritual motherhood can include a woman or a consecrated sister: teaching students in a classroom, walking children to the bus, cooking a meal for a priest, washing the sacred linens for Mass, cleaning the Church, etc. And although the good works of Spiritual Mothers can be expressed in many different ministries, prayer, especially within the celebration of the Eucharist, is one of the greatest ways Spiritual Maternity can bear fruit and be effective. Some prayerful recommendations for Spiritual Mothers are:

- Full and Active Participation at Mass and the offering up of Holy Communion
- Eucharistic Adoration before the Most Blessed Sacrament
- Praying the Liturgy of the Hours, especially Morning Prayer (Lauds) and Evening Prayer (Vespers)
- Praying the Holy Rosary
- Making Spiritual Communions (throughout the day)
- Offering up work and sacrifices
- Doing penance and mortification (prudently)

⁹) cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 40.



THE ESSENCE OF SPIRITUAL MOTHERHOOD IS EUCHARISTIC!

"And does not physical motherhood also have to be a spiritual motherhood, in order to respond to the whole truth about the human being ...? Thus there exist many reasons for discerning in these two different paths — the two different vocations of women — a profound complementarity, and even a profound union within a person's being."

—Pope St. John Paul II,
Mulieris Dignitatem, 21

WHAT DOES SPIRITUAL MOTHERHOOD HAVE TO DO WITH THE HOLY EUCHARIST?

Spiritual Motherhood cannot be separated from the Paschal mystery of our Lord.

The Institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper and the Sacrifice of Christ on Calvary are both connected and are one and the same mystery in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Although all of Christ's apostles were present at the Institution of the Eucharist, all but one fled the scene of the Crucifixion.

The only priest (besides Christ Himself) present at the Foot of the Cross was St. John the Apostle. According to Sacred Scripture, the rest of those present could be identified as Spiritual Mothers:

John 19:25 *But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.*

Matthew 27:55 *There were also many women there, looking on from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him; among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.*



“...LET US SAVE ESPECIALLY THE SOULS OF PRIESTS...”

HOW DO SPIRITUAL MOTHERS SUPPORT THE PRIESTHOOD?

*"Let us live for souls,
let us be apostles, let us
save especially the souls
of priests. . . . Let us
pray, let us suffer for
them, and, on the last day,
Jesus will be grateful."*

—St. Therese of Lisieux

The main duty for priests is to offer sacrifice, namely the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross and to consecrate bread and wine into the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ. The Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross is being re-presented at every Mass and requires the constant "yes" of an ordained minister. Hence, one of the main roles of Spiritual Mothers is to support the priest by her prayers, so the priest can persevere in his duty to offer the Holy Sacrifice as a priest of Jesus Christ. "Jesus completes His perfect Sacrifice by entrusting our Lady to St. John the Apostle."¹⁰

It is evident, the type of maternity that Spiritual Mothers practice, reaches its apex when it is united with the Holy Eucharist, the re-presentation of Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross.

Spiritual Motherhood bears much fruit and is sustained when the Holy Eucharist is the center of a Spiritual Mother's life.

¹⁰ Pope St. John Paul II, quote from *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, 30 April 1997, page 11



“THE LOVELIEST MASTERPIECE OF THE HEART OF GOD
IS THE HEART OF A MOTHER.”

—ST. THERESE OF LISIEUX

*“The hour is coming,
in fact has come, when
the vocation of women is
being acknowledged in
its fullness, the hour in
which women acquire in
the world an influence,
an effect and a power
never hitherto achieved.”*

*—The Closing Message of the Second
Vatican Council*

WHAT IS THE “ORDER OF GRACE” AND “MARY’S SPIRITUAL MOTHERHOOD”?

“The Order of Grace” can be explained by recalling the Blessed Virgin Mary’s life.

The Second Vatican Council document *The Light of the Nations* (*Lumen Gentium*) explains the order of grace through the Blessed Virgin Mary in this way:

“Predestined from eternity by that decree of divine providence which determined the incarnation of the Word to be the Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin was on this earth the virgin Mother of the Redeemer, and above all others and in a singular way, the generous associate and humble handmaid of the Lord. She conceived, brought forth and nourished Christ. She presented Him to the Father in the temple, and was united with Him by compassion as He died on the Cross. In this singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the work of the Savior in giving back supernatural life to souls. Wherefore she is our mother in the order of grace. This maternity of Mary in the order of grace began with the consent which she gave in faith at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the Cross, and lasts until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect.”¹¹

The Motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary was not only physical to Jesus, but also spiritual to the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ.¹² At the Foot of the Cross, our Lady received her *pangs of birth* spiritually, when the Church was born from the side of Christ.¹³

11) Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 61-62

12) cf. Pope St. Pius X, *Ad Diem Illum Laetissimum*, 10

13) cf. Sacramentary of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Votive Mass in honor of Mary at the Foot of the Cross II, Preface II



“MOTHERHOOD CONCERNS THE WHOLE PERSON,
NOT JUST THE BODY...”

— POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II, *MULIERIS DIGNITATEM*

HOW CAN SPIRITUAL MOTHERS “BEGET” SPIRITUAL CHILDREN?

“Yet woman will be
saved through bearing
children, if she continues
in faith and love and
holiness, with modesty...”

— 1 Timothy 2:15, Revised Standard
Version, Second Catholic Edition

By the grace of God in their conformity to God’s will, and through participation in Mary’s Spiritual Maternity¹⁴, Spiritual Mothers can bear children in the order of grace. Because we, as human beings, are composed of body and soul all women are capable of bearing spiritual children.¹⁵ As seen in the life of our Lady, Mary’s “yes” to God’s will precedes her role as the physical mother of Christ.¹⁶ Her fidelity of conforming her will to God’s exceeds her physical motherhood of Jesus.

Consequently, for women who are not capable of physically begetting children, for those who are not called to married life (i.e. those who are consecrated or *celibate for the sake of the kingdom*), and for those who are widows, they also not *only* practice outward “maternal care” toward their brothers and sisters, but in a real sense, are capable of *bearing children in the order of grace*.

Cloistered Nuns who do not have a physical spouse are the primary example of women who bear children in the order of grace. By their conformity to the will of God and their faithfulness to the Gospel, they have many spiritual children outside the monastery walls!

And so, by acts of faith and by doing the will of God, women are able to “beget”, “engender” or “bear” spiritual children. St. Catherine of Siena would describe this experience as “giving birth to souls”¹⁷ and St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross would express it as one striving to “win human beings for God, to carry Him into souls, to beget and secure His children.”¹⁸

14) Congregation for the Clergy, *Eucharistic Adoration for the Sanctification of Priests and Spiritual Maternity* (2nd Edition), Page 13

15) cf. Pope St. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 21; cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 62, 64; cf. Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 16; cf.

Pope St. Gregory the Great, quoted in the *Catena Aurea on Matthew* 12:50; cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on St. Matthew*, 12, 49-50

16) cf. St. Augustine, *Sermon* 25, 7-8: PL 46, 937-938; cf. Pope Paul VI, *Signum Magnum*

17) *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, 4 vols. trans. Suzanne Noffke, p. 105

18) Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, Second Edition, Revised, p. 117



“EVERY PRIESTLY VOCATION COMES FROM THE HEART OF GOD BUT
PASSES THROUGH THE HEART OF A MOTHER.”

—POPE ST. PIUS X

“In the great Christian tradition the woman is recognized as having her own dignity and — following the example of Mary... — her own place in the Church which, though not coinciding with the ordained priesthood, is equally important for the spiritual growth of the community.”

*—Pope Benedict XVI,
Address, October 27th 2010*

WHY SHOULD SPIRITUAL MOTHERS ADOPT A PRIEST?

Although it isn't an absolute necessity to spiritually adopt a priest as a Spiritual Mother, the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy has requested this been done throughout the entire Church.¹⁹ In other words, it is by obedience, we as a sodality recommend and are assisting women in their adoption of an ordained priest.²⁰ Spiritually speaking, it is fitting for a woman to adopt a priest because it is done in direct imitation of Mary, who was the physical mother of the Eternal High Priest, Jesus Christ. Thus, in spiritually adopting a priest, women are simply following in the footsteps of our Lady.

What the Blessed Virgin Mary is by nature (the physical mother of the Great High Priest), women can do by grace (spiritual adoption of an ordained priest, "the Alter Christus").

19) cf. Congregation for the Clergy, *Eucharistic Adoration for the Sanctification of Priests and Spiritual Maternity*

20) N .B. – Women who request to be a spiritual mother can choose their own priest to spiritually adopt. If they don't have a specific priest they want to adopt, the Spiritual Motherhood Sodality assigns a priest to them anonymously. This sodality has lists of priests given to them directly, or has received a priest from a "public prayer list" freely available to the community. The Spiritual Mother has no real contact with the priest assigned to her and only knows of his first name.



“AND WHEN THEY HAD ENTERED, THEY WENT UP TO THE UPPER ROOM, WHERE THEY WERE STAYING, PETER AND JOHN AND JAMES [...]. ALL THESE WITH ONE ACCORD DEVOTED THEMSELVES TO PRAYER, TOGETHER WITH THE WOMEN AND MARY THE MOTHER OF JESUS, AND WITH HIS BROTHERS.”

—ACTS 1:13-14

“Within Christianity, more than in any other religion, and since its very beginning, women have had a special dignity, of which the New Testament shows us many important aspects...; it is evident that women are meant to form part of the living and working structure of Christianity in so prominent a manner that perhaps not all their potentialities have yet been made clear...”

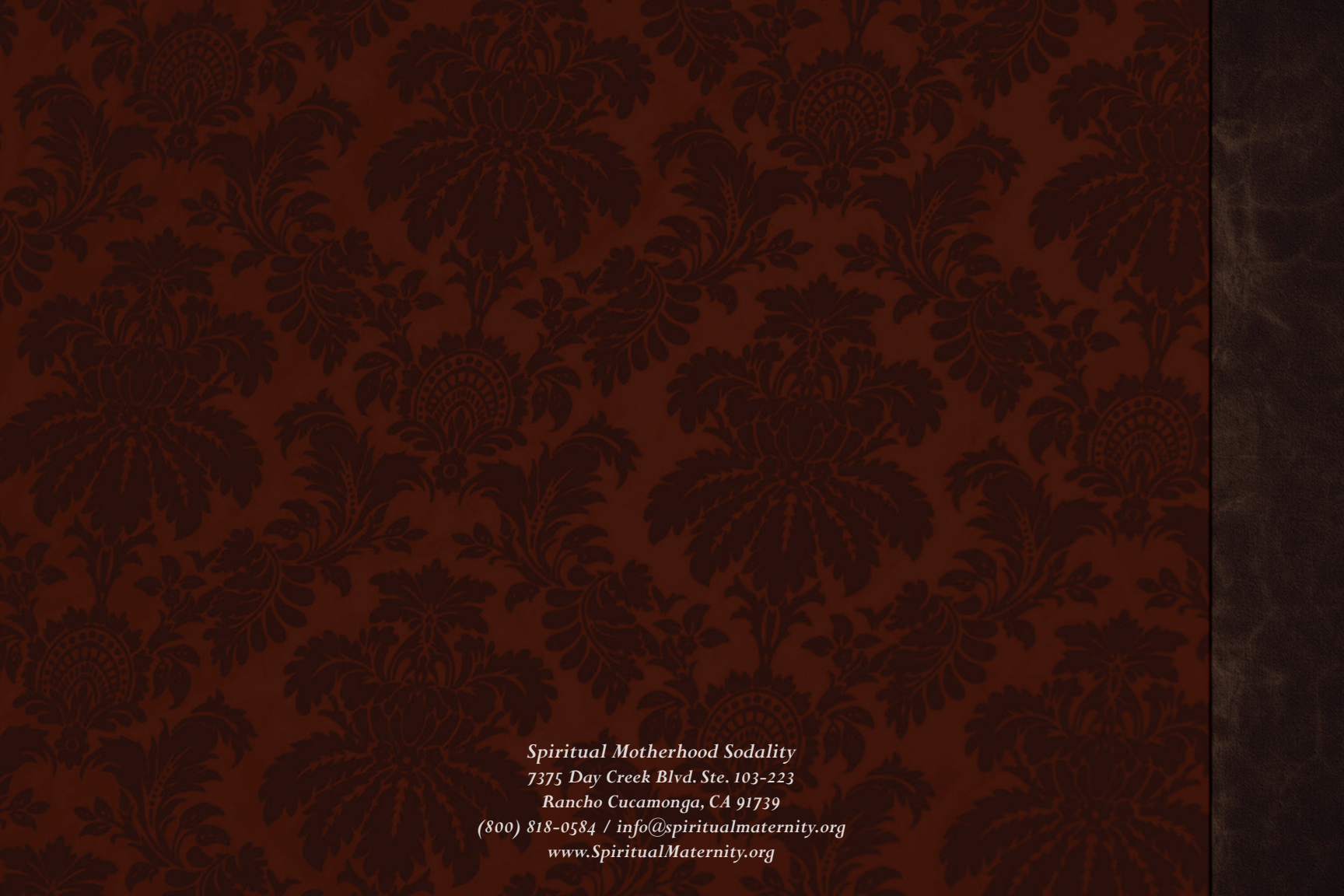
*—Pope Paul VI from *Mulieris Dignitatem* by Pope St. John Paul II, 1*

WHY JOIN OR FORM A CENACLE PRAYER GROUP?

Although Spiritual Motherhood can be done individually, the Sodality of Spiritual Motherhood recommends women join a Cenacle Group.

“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” - Matthew 18:20

The Cenacle Group makes it easier for women that share this common goal to live out their call to holiness, to share their experiences, and give moral support to one another. The fraternity, formation and assistance within the group is important for one to flourish in the apostolate and contemplation. Also, praying is sometimes easier when there is a set time to do it, especially when other people are present for community and accountability.



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