



SPIRITUAL MOTHERHOOD

The beauty of being Woman



BY FR. JOSEPH AYTONA, CPM



*“But when the fullness of time had come,
God sent his Son, born of a woman.”*

Galatians 4:4

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A WOMAN?

“God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27)

Men and women were created by God *for each other*.¹ Both were made in the image and likeness of God and thus are equal in dignity.² God did not will them to be “half-made” or “incomplete”³ but He created them for a communion of love, a charity that reflects the love between the three Persons of the Holy Trinity.⁴ With this in mind, “Everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity.”⁵ Out of humility, men and women should recognize the specific gifts God has given them and live them fruitfully as His adopted sons and daughters.

A Woman is a person created by God and for God to bring about life.

To be a woman is to be life giving. The inherent difference a woman possesses that a man does not is *her empty space in the womb*. The capacity to conceive and bring forth a child was entrusted to *women alone*. With that special gift, a woman is endowed with unique characteristics of motherhood so her children can experience joy, peace, and ultimately, perpetual union with God. As Pope St. John Paul II states, “the history of every human being passes through the threshold of a woman’s motherhood; crossing it conditions ‘the revelation of the children of God’” (cf. Rom 8:19).⁶ Furthermore, he elaborates on this same subject saying:

The maternal mission is also the basis of a particular responsibility. The mother is appointed guardian of life. [...] It is here that the history of every human being begins. Each one of us, retracting this history, cannot fail to reach that moment when he began to exist within his mother’s body, with an exclusive and unmistakable plan of life. We were “in” our mother, but without being confused with her; in need of her body and her love, but fully autonomous in our personal identity.⁷

1) cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 372

2) cf. *idem*, 369

3) cf. *idem*, 372

4) cf. *idem*, 2331

5) *idem*, 2333

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

7) *idem*, *Angelus Address*, “Mission of Motherhood makes woman a guardian of life who must encourage child’s dialogue with world”, 2, July 16, 1995



“Blessed are you among Women.”

Luke 1:42

LIFEGIVING RECEPTIVITY!

Human life starts not within a man, but within a woman.

Women have been entrusted to human beings in a very unique and unrepeatable way. All people, boys and girls alike, are nurtured, nourished, and loved directly by their mothers while they are in the womb.

We cannot think of life without thinking of Motherhood; we cannot think of existence, without thinking about women and their cooperation with God.

Note well, the womb of a woman is not just for a “physical baby”; the womb is a place where God infuses a soul within a human being, that is, a soul and body destined for eternity in Heaven.⁸ In his writings, Pope St. John Paul II describes this “soul and body” combination as a *human person with incomparable worth*.⁹ Therefore, the essence of motherhood and the empty space in the womb of a woman were both meant for a unique, precious and unrepeatable relationship between two human persons. For this reason, Pope St. John Paul II stated:

Of the essence of motherhood is the fact that it concerns the person. Motherhood always establishes a unique and unrepeatable relationship between two people: between mother and child and between child and mother. Even when the same woman is the mother of many children, her personal relationship with each one of them is of the very essence of motherhood. For each child is generated in a unique and unrepeatable way, and this is true both for the mother and for the child.¹⁰

With that in mind, being a mother constitutes more than simply caring for “bodily needs,” but should also be concerned for the salvation and moral life of children. Thus, women contribute to the Church and society their ability not only to provide for the temporal needs of children, but also in aiding them in their moral and spiritual life directed toward Heaven. This approach is truly life giving, and this type of maternity can be described as *spiritual motherhood*.

8) cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 366

9) cf. Pope St. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 2

10) *idem*, *Redemptoris Mater*, 45

WHAT IS THE VOCATION TO BE A WOMAN? WHAT IS THE DIGNITY OF WOMANHOOD MEASURED BY?

Everyone has a vocation to holiness.¹¹ Whether you are male or female, all are called to sanctity. But with this in mind, the vocation to be a woman is different than man's because a vocation is lived in a gender specific manner.¹² It is done this way precisely because we were created "male and female" with distinct characteristics.¹³ Thus, according to Papal writings, the vocation to be "woman" is a vocation "to give love to others."¹⁴ Pope St. John Paul II describes the vocation of woman in this way after calling to mind the beginning of creation when God made Adam and Eve and also by mentioning the "Bridegroom and the Bride" analogy in St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Pope St. John Paul II says:

The calling of woman into existence at man's side as "a helper fit for him" (Gen 2:18) in the "unity of the two," provides the visible world of creatures with particular conditions so that "the love of God may be poured into the hearts" of the beings created in his image. When the author of the Letter to the Ephesians calls Christ "the Bridegroom" and the Church "the Bride," he indirectly confirms through this analogy the truth about woman as bride. **The Bridegroom is the one who loves. The Bride is loved: it is she who receives love, in order to love in return.**¹⁵

Rereading Genesis in light of the spousal symbol in the Letter to the Ephesians enables us to grasp a truth which seems to determine in an essential manner the question of women's dignity, and, subsequently, also the question of their vocation: **the dignity of women is measured by the order of love, which is essentially the order of justice and charity.**¹⁶

Hence, women who receive love are called to give that love to others. Because of their unique gift of receptivity, women have the blessing to *receive* love (or to be *the one loved*) and then to *love* in return. This is in accord with one of the chief teachings of the Second

Vatican Council which states that man “cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”¹⁷ With that being said, Pope St. John Paul II is clear in his description of a woman’s dignity and vocation when he affirms:

A woman’s dignity is closely connected with the love which she receives by the very reason of her femininity; it is likewise connected with the love which she gives in return. The truth about the person and about love is thus confirmed. With regard to the truth about the person, we must turn again to the Second Vatican Council: “Man, who is the only creature on earth that God willed for its own sake, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self.” This applies to every human being, as a person created in God’s image, whether man or woman. This ontological affirmation also indicates the ethical dimension of a person’s vocation. Woman can only find herself by giving love to others.¹⁸

Thus, woman’s vocation is to be “a giver of love.” But not just any love, a love based on the love received from God; a love this is expressed in a total gift of self; a love based on *true femininity*. Just as our Lady stood unwavering at the Foot of the Cross, women are called to mirror that love based on the vocation and dignity God has granted them.

*“And a great sign appeared in heaven:
A woman clothed with the sun, and
the moon under her feet, and on her head
a crown of twelve stars.”*

Revelation 12:1

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

12) cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2335

13) cf. *idem*, 2333

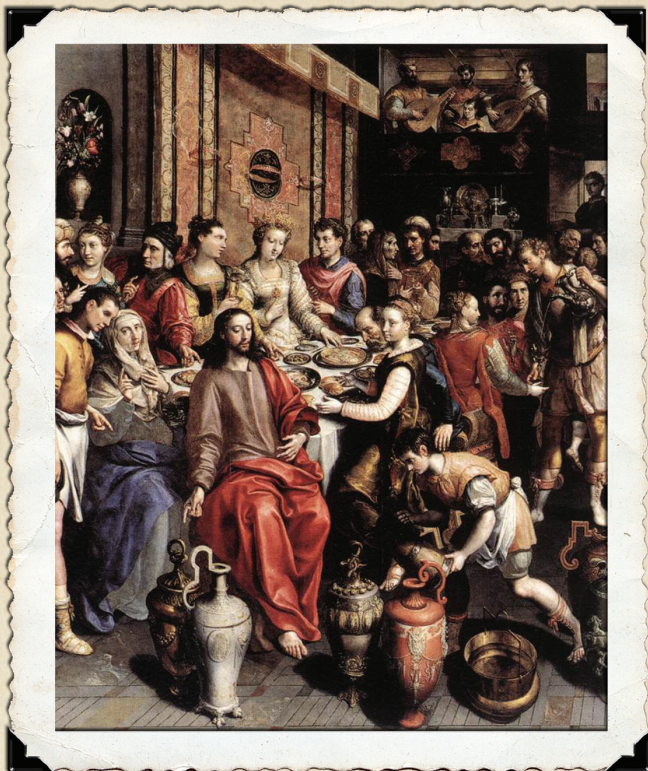
14) cf. Pope St. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 30

15) *ibid*, 29

16) *ibid*

17) Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 24

18) cf. Pope St. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 30



*“And Jesus said to her, ‘O woman, what have
you to do with me? My hour has not yet come.’
His mother said to the servants,
‘Do whatever he tells you.’”*

John 2: 4-5

FEMININITY AND THE BEAUTY OF BEING WOMAN

Femininity defines women for who they are and their essential qualities.¹⁹ With that being said, the full meaning of *femininity* and *the true significance of womanhood* can only be found in one woman, and one woman alone, the Blessed Virgin Mary. She, as the New Eve,²⁰ embodies the complete meaning of femininity and the truth of womanhood because Mary was always “full of grace” and was without any stain of sin.²¹ She was blessed with a perfection beyond all other women because of her divine motherhood and her cooperation with the eternal plan of God.²² Thus, our Lady is the supreme model of women for all females to follow. In light of Mary’s exalted importance and holiness, any woman can share in her “dignity within the divine plan.”²³

Here I simply wish to note that the figure of Mary of Nazareth sheds light on womanhood as such by the-very fact that God, in the sublime event of the Incarnation of his Son, entrusted himself to the ministry, the free and active ministry of a woman. It can thus be said that women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own true advancement. In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement.²⁴

Thus, the *Beauty of being Woman* means: “*the self-offering totality of love.*” Which indicates:

- the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows
- the limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work
- the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement²⁵

19) cf. Pope St. John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 10

20) Catechism of the Catholic Church, 511

21) cf. Pope St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 10

22) cf. *ibid.*, 9

23) *idem*, “Mary shows us God’s respect for women”, *L’Osservatore Romano* (English Edition), December 6, 1995, Page 15

24) *idem*, *Redemptoris Mater*, 46

25) *ibid.*, 46

IS MATERNITY ESSENTIAL TO A WOMAN'S VOCATION?

Maternity is so vital and necessary to a woman's vocation, it has now entered into an order of **covenant** with God. A covenant with God is not like a secular "contract" which is common in society. A covenant is a solemn agreement with God to be faithful to Him and His commandments.²⁶

This "maternal" covenant was revealed when God became man in the person of Jesus Christ. Hence, Pope St. John Paul II states, "Motherhood has been introduced into the order of the Covenant that God made with humanity in Jesus Christ. Each and every time that motherhood is repeated in human history, it is always related to the Covenant which God established with the human race through the motherhood of the Mother of God."²⁷

The saintly Pope elaborates more on the subject by stating:

Woman's singular relationship with human life derives from her vocation to motherhood. Opening herself to motherhood, she feels the life in her womb unfolding and growing. This indescribable experience is a privilege of mothers, but all women have in some way an intuition of it, predisposed as they are to this miraculous gift.²⁸

*"I will put enmities between thee
and the woman, and thy seed and her seed:
she shall crush thy head, and thou
shalt lie in wait for her heel."*

Genesis 3:15

26) cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, "covenant" in Glossary

27) Pope St. John Paul II, *Mulieres Dignitatem*, 19

28) *idem*, Angelus Address, "Mission of Motherhood makes woman a guardian of life who must encourage child's dialogue with world", 1, July 16, 1995



WHAT ABOUT WOMEN WHO ARE NOT CALLED TO BEAR CHILDREN OR THOSE WHO ARE INCAPABLE OF HAVING PHYSICAL CHILDREN?

Not all women are called (or capable) to be physical mothers, but all women are called to practice Spiritual Maternity.²⁹

Sacred Scripture states: “*Yet woman will be saved through bearing children*”—1 Timothy 2:15

In His providence, God calls some women to be single for the sake of the Kingdom, or to be consecrated to Him by vows, and thus not have physical children. Also, and unfortunately so, some women are not capable of bearing children. But, although having physical children is a wonderful blessing from God, spiritual motherhood, and the characteristics of motherhood in general, can be practiced and lived fruitfully in a woman’s life without the gift of physical children.

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

PRACTICALLY SPEAKING, WHAT DO SPIRITUAL MOTHERS DO, REGARDLESS OF THEIR STATE OF LIFE AND VOCATION?

Spiritual Maternity can be practiced in many different ways within a woman's life. Many women who do not have physical children live the maternal gifts God has given them in areas of education, community service, nursing, babysitting, and more. The affection and acts of spiritual maternity can be done anywhere, at any time, regardless of your state of life. Whether it is lending someone your car, providing an "ear" and listening to a friend's troubles, or simply helping with the "miniscule tasks" around the house, women have transformed society by "little acts of motherly love." Pope St. John Paul II clearly describes this in his own words:

Here I would like to express particular appreciation to those women who are involved in the various areas of education extending well beyond the family: nurseries, schools, universities, social service agencies, parishes, associations and movements. Wherever the work of education is called for, we can note that women are ever ready and willing to give themselves generously to others, especially in serving the weakest and most defenseless. In this work they exhibit a kind of affective, cultural and spiritual motherhood which has inestimable value for the development of individuals and the future of society.³⁰

Accordingly, one aspect of spiritual maternity means to assist and foster in others their moral, cultural, and spiritual lives. For that reason, Pope St. John Paul II especially emphasizes this attribute directed toward consecrated persons as he states:

Virginity according to the Gospel means renouncing marriage and thus physical motherhood. Nevertheless, the renunciation of this kind of motherhood, a renunciation that can involve great sacrifice for a woman, makes possible a different kind of motherhood: motherhood "according to the Spirit" (cf. Rom 8:4).³¹

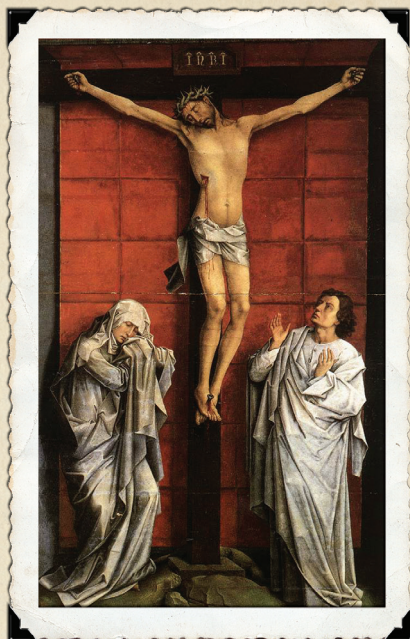


Spiritual motherhood takes on many different forms. In the life of consecrated women, for example, who live according to the charism and the rules of the various Apostolic Institutes, it can express itself as concern for people, especially the most needy: the sick, the handicapped, the abandoned, orphans, the elderly, children, young people, the imprisoned and, in general, people on the margins of society. In this way a consecrated woman finds her Spouse, different and the same in each and every person, according to his very words: “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40).³²

30) *idem*, “Letter to Women for Beijing Conference”, July 10, 1995

31) *idem*, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 21

32) *ibid*



*“When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom
he loved standing near, he said to his mother,
‘Woman, behold, your son!’”*

John 19:26

THE ENTRUSTMENT OF HUMAN PERSONS BELONGS TO WOMEN

God entrusts human persons wholly to women; that is, when a child is in a mother’s womb, that baby is completely dependent on his or her mother. God has willed the conception, the infusion of the soul, and the formation of a human person in its beginning stages, all to happen within a woman’s body. With that in mind, God has endowed women

with a special capacity to conceive and nurture a child physically speaking, but similarly important, has also given her the blessing to be the first one to provide the indispensable love, care, and affirmation children need during the beginning stages of life. Although this is very apparent externally speaking on a biological level, this “entrustment of a human being” to women goes beyond the physical and can reach the heights of “spiritual entrustment” which is a characteristic of spiritual maternity.³³ Thus, whether a physical mother or not, all women are predisposed to have human beings entrusted to them as “mother.”³⁴ According to Pope St. John Paul II’s writings, this “entrustment of the human being” is the source of each woman’s strength and dignity:

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 entrusting concerns women in a special way—precisely by reason of their femininity--and this in a particular way determines their vocation.³⁵

A woman is strong because of her awareness of this entrusting, strong because of the fact that God “entrusts the human being to her,” always and in every way, even in the situations of social discrimination in which she may find herself. This awareness and this fundamental vocation speak to women of the dignity which they receive from God himself, and this makes them “strong” and strengthens their vocation.³⁶

Even this singular feature which prepares her for motherhood, not only physically but also emotionally and spiritually, is inherent in the plan of God who entrusted the human being to woman in an altogether special way. The woman of course, as much as the man, must take care that her sensitivity does not succumb to the temptation to possessive selfishness, and must put it at the service of authentic love. On these conditions she gives of her best, everywhere adding a touch of generosity, tenderness, and joy of life.³⁷

33) *ibid*, 31

34) *ibid*

35) *ibid*, 30

36) *ibid*

37) *idem*, “Society and Church needs genius of woman”, July 23, 1995

WHAT DOES THE PRIESTHOOD HAVE TO DO WITH SPIRITUAL MATERNITY?

The practice of true spiritual maternity, that is, women being faithful to the will of God (and the works connected with it), cannot be separated from the Sacrifice of the Mass. All good works done by anyone, spiritual mothers included, find their ultimate meaning and purpose when offered in union with the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross.³⁸ Jesus is the one Mediator between God and man; He accepts our good works and presents them to the Father.³⁹ Therefore, the understanding of motherhood in general, both the conception of human life (body and soul) in the womb of a woman, and people being *born in the order of grace*, cannot be separated from the Mass and, with that in mind, the priesthood. Only validly ordained priests continue the representation of the Sacrifice of Christ at every Mass.

Since our Lord now sits at the “right hand of God”⁴⁰, He can no longer die, and thus His priesthood will last forever. As the Letter to the Hebrews states, “but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever.” (7:24)

Alongside Christ’s Eternal Priesthood, Mary’s Motherhood *in the order of grace* will last until the end of time. As Pope St. John Paul II states, “In fact the Council teaches that the ‘motherhood of Mary in the order of grace...will last without interruption until the eternal fulfilment of all the elect.’”⁴¹

In conclusion, the good acts and qualities of spiritual maternity such as empathy, passion, and caring, find their fulfillment by offering them up to the Eternal Father in union with His Son’s Passion on the Cross. Pope St. John Paul II expands by saying:

Here we perceive the real value of the words spoken by Jesus to his Mother at the hour of the Cross: “Woman, behold your son” and to the disciple: “Behold your mother” (Jn. 19:26-27). They are words which determine Mary’s place in the life of Christ’s disciples and they express as I have already said the new motherhood of the Mother of the Redeemer: a spiritual motherhood, born from the heart of the Paschal Mystery of the Redeemer of the world. It is a



motherhood in the order of grace, for it implores the gift of the Spirit, who raises up the new children of God, redeemed through the sacrifice of Christ: that Spirit whom Mary too, together with the Church, received on the day of Pentecost.⁴²

Her motherhood is particularly noted and experienced by the Christian people at the Sacred Banquet the liturgical celebration of the mystery of the Redemption at which Christ, his true body born of the Virgin Mary, becomes present. [...] Mary guides the faithful to the Eucharist.⁴³

38) cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 34; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 48

39) cf. Vatican II; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 5, 6

40) Holy Bible, Hebrews 10:12

41) Pope St. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 40

42) *ibid*, 44

43) *ibid*



“All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.”

Acts 1:14


THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY IS THE MODEL OF WOMANHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD

Women become who they are called to be in their fidelity to Christ and their imitation of His Holy Mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary. Womanhood and Motherhood find their true significance in the example of the Mother of God. Women are called to participate in Mary's Spiritual Maternity while they answer their call of being true women dedicated to Christ. Therefore, as St. John Paul II so eloquently states:

Given Mary's relationship to the Church as an exemplar, the Church is close to her and seeks to become like her: "Imitating the Mother of her Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, she preserves with virginal purity an integral faith, a firm hope, and a sincere charity." Mary is thus present in the mystery of the Church as a model. But the Church's mystery also consists in generating people to a new and immortal life: this is her motherhood in the Holy Spirit. And here Mary is not only the model and figure of the Church; she is much more. For, "with maternal love she cooperates in the birth and development" of the sons and daughters of Mother Church. The Church's motherhood is accomplished not only according to the model and figure of the Mother of God but also with her "cooperation." (*Redemptoris Mater*, 44)

*"Many are the women of proven worth,
but you have excelled them all."*

Proverbs 31:29



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