

IN PRAISE OF THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN

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OF THE
VIRTUOUS WOMAN**



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In this short writing, I give a few reflections about the great mystery that surrounds woman. From Eve, “the Mother of the Living,” to Eve, “Door through which the Serpent enters into the world of men,” to Mary, the “New Eve,” the “Dawn of Salvation,” and “Co-Redemptrix,” woman is enveloped in a great mystery that the devil hates and fights against with singular strength and passion. Mystery, then, is her natural setting. Woman is a being who is *naturally veiled*. Very wisely did Gertrud von Le Fort write: “All the great forms of woman’s life show her as concealed. The bride, the widow, and the nun are the bearers of the same symbol. The outer gesture is never without meaning; for, as it issues from a thing, just so does it represent that very thing. From this point of view certain fashions become monstrous traitors; in fact, they contribute to the dismantling of woman in the actual sense of the word. To unveil her means to destroy her mystery.”¹

¹ Von Le Fort, G., *The Eternal Woman*, San Francisco (2010), 16. This volume of the *Virtus* series contains three conferences that I have given on the topic of woman on different occasions. The first was given to Catholic teachers from San Rafael in 1999; the second at the 8th Family Day, in the same city, in 2004; and the third at the Woman’s Forum in Catamarca in 2011.

Pondering this great mystery, Saint John Paul II wove a beautiful thanksgiving to all women, to whom the world is a huge debtor:

“Thank you, *women who are mothers!* You have sheltered human beings within yourselves in a unique experience of joy and travail. This experience makes you become God’s own smile upon the newborn child, the one who guides your child’s first steps, who helps it to grow, and who is the anchor as the child makes its way along the journey of life.

Thank you, *women who are wives!* You irrevocably join your future to that of your husbands, in a relationship of mutual giving, at the service of love and life.

Thank you, *women who are daughters* and *women who are sisters!* Into the heart of the family, and then of all society, you bring the richness of your sensitivity, your intuitiveness, your generosity and fidelity.

Thank you, *women who work!* You are present and active in every area of life - social, economic, cultural, artistic and political. In this way you make an indispensable contribution to the growth of a culture which unites reason and feeling, to a model of life ever open to the sense of ‘mystery,’ to the establishment of economic and political structures ever more worthy of humanity.

Thank you, *consecrated women!* Following the example of the greatest of women, the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, you open yourselves with obedience and fidelity to the gift of God’s love. 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.

IN PRAISE OF THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN

Thank you, *every woman*, for the simple fact of being *a woman!* Through the insight which is so much a part of your womanhood you enrich the world's understanding and help to make human relations more honest and authentic."

(Saint John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, June 29, 1995).

1.

In Praise of the Virtuous Woman

*The Formation of Women in a Catholic School
Based on a Text from the Book of Proverbs
(31:10-31)*

1. School and Virtues

It is very well known that education should be aimed at the formation of virtues. Such is the task that must be proposed both to the family as well as to the school. All must be convinced that, if virtuous people are not being formed, then nothing is being formed, because “to form” means “to give form,” and it is precisely the virtues that are “human forms” of action. An institution, be it a school or a family, that does not form virtuous people ends up deforming them, because there are not a lot of alternatives if they are not forming virtues: (a) either they are forming vicious people, something that often happens in today’s schools, or, (b), in the best of cases, the school neither forms

virtues nor infuses vices. In that case, though, we are not much better than in the first, because this setting is the primordial soup of future vices. This is because, as Aristotle and Saint Thomas explain, the person who in a particular realm (we could think, for instance, of the realm of sexuality) has neither vices nor virtues, is able to guide themselves by reason “always and only” when their reason is not disturbed by unexpected and tempestuous movements. In those moments of tumult, however, their soul is stirred up like a little boat inside of a typhoon. When these hurricanes come up time and again, dragging the heart on the crest of their waves, they end up disposing the heart to act such as to always follow the direction of the disordered passion; that is, precisely, a vice (more concretely, a “vice that originates in the passions”).

2. A Biblical Poem

Since my concern here is to deal with the end towards which the education of women in Catholic schools should be directed (which is also true of the education of women in general: in the family, in the convent, etc.), I can find nothing better than to look for an answer in Sacred Scripture. In the Bible, there are extraordinary passages dedicated to women, especially in the Gospels. However, there is a canticle in the book of Proverbs that bears the suggestive title, *In praise of the virtuous woman* (Prv

31:10-31).² In fact, this 21-verse canticle closes this wisdom book, and it seems to me that in it some principal feminine virtues can be found.

The canticle reads as follows:

“Who can find a woman of worth?³

Far beyond jewels is her value.

Her husband trusts her judgment;

he does not lack income.

She brings him profit, not loss,

all the days of her life.

She seeks out wool and flax

and weaves with skillful hands.

Like a merchant fleet,

she secures her provisions from afar:

She rises while it is still night,

and distributes food to her household,

a portion to her maidservants.

She picks out a field and acquires it;

² The title in Spanish is *Elogio de la mujer fuerte*, from which the book takes its title. It seems that almost no English version of the Bible presents the canticle with a separate title – Translator’s note.

³ In Spanish she is called *una mujer fuerte*. In English the phrase has been rendered in any number of ways: “woman of worth” (NABRE), “valiant woman” (Douay-Rheims), “a virtuous wife” (NKJV), “a capable wife” (NRSVCE), and more. Generally I use the NABRE, unless the exegesis requires a different version. This is noted by (DRV) following the citation – Translator’s note.

from her earnings she plants a vineyard.
She girds herself with strength;
she exerts her arms with vigor.
She enjoys the profit from her dealings;
her lamp is never extinguished at night.
She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her fingers ply the spindle.
She reaches out her hands to the poor,
and extends her arms to the needy.
She is not concerned for her household when it snows—
all her charges are doubly clothed.
She makes her own coverlets;
fine linen and purple are her clothing.
Her husband is prominent at the city gates
as he sits with the elders of the land.
She makes garments and sells them,
and stocks the merchants with belts.
She is clothed with strength and dignity,
and laughs at the days to come.
She opens her mouth in wisdom;
kindly instruction is on her tongue.
She watches over the affairs of her household,

and does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and call her blessed;
her husband, too, praises her:
'Many are the women of proven worth,
but you have excelled them all.'
Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting;
the woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
Acclaim her for the work of her hands,
and let her deeds praise her at the city gates."

3. What is a "woman of worth"?

The Septuagint translated the Hebrew expression *jése chayil* with the Greek phrase *gynaika andreian*, a manly woman, since *chayil* means strength, efficiency, riches, and courage. In the Latin version, Saint Jerome translated it as "mulier fortis," strong woman. In his work, *The Perfect Wife*, which is a commentary on this Biblical poem applied to the wives of his day, Friar Luis de León used the expression "*mujer de valor*" ["woman of value" or "woman of valor"]: "value" in the sense of "courage, which moves to resolutely undertake great enterprises and to face dangers." Some exegetes are not satisfied by this translation, preferring to use another word that, in any case, is not far from these earlier ones. They prefer to say "a complete woman." I think that this is the same idea since Friar Luis explains his translation by saying: "It means a virtuous spirit and a strong

heart; industry and riches and power and advantage, and finally, perfection and completeness with regard to these things in the person to whom this Word is applied. All this treasure the good wife stores within herself, and she cannot be thought good if she does not thus treasure it.”⁴ It should not be understood, however, as valor or strength as in physical strength, but rather as the cardinal virtue of fortitude. *Andréia* or manliness has nothing to do with mustaches or muscles, but rather with virtue, firmness, and effort of soul, that is, in exactly the same sense in which Saint Teresa liked to use it when she asked her nuns to be like “strong men.”⁵

Let us not think that the term is inadequate to define a woman, but rather entirely the contrary, since Friar Luis himself says: “with great truth and intention to praise, the Holy Spirit did not call the good wife [simply] *good* without reason . . . rather He called her a *woman of worth* and He used for this a word as rich and significant . . . to tell us that the good wife is more than good, and that to talk of good is to talk in half measures, for it does not encourage that excellence which the good wife ought to have, and has, within her.”⁶

⁴ Friar Luis de León, *The Perfect Wife*, ch. 1. English trans. from “A Bilingual Edition of Fray Luis de León’s *La Perfecta Casada*: The Role of Married Women in Sixteenth-Century Spain” edited and translated by John A. Jones and Javier San Jose Lera (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), 31.

⁵ Saint Teresa of Jesus, *Way of Perfection*, 9. [The phrase is actually found in Chapter 20 – Translator’s note].

⁶ “A Bilingual Edition of Fray Luis de León’s *La Perfecta Casada*,” 35. Emphasis added.

Hence, we can take this concept of “strong woman” in different ways, but what is clear is that the idea of the inspired Author is to speak of the “perfect” woman. To speak of the “perfect woman,” is, when everything is said and done, to speak of a “woman’s woman”: a woman who really is such. It does not refer so much to one role or another (a housewife, mother, teacher) but rather to her very feminine essence.

To aim to form strong women is, in terms of education, to teach them to be “women”: to be what they should be.

Therefore, here we already have the good end towards which the education of women should be directed: to form strong women, women of value, and not simply “good” women which, although not a bad thing, gives the impression that it “settles for too little.”

Now then, what are the virtues that turn a woman into a “strong woman”?

4. A trustworthy woman

Of this perfect woman, the first virtue that the poem points out is that she is a trustworthy person: “*The heart of her husband trusts in her*” (DRV). Here, “trusts” has an intensive meaning, understood as “to place his trust.” The husband can rest his heart in his wife.

This is true not only if we interpret the poem with respect to a married woman, but also with respect to the virgin and

consecrated woman. It is enough to understand the husband as an earthly one or as the Divine Spouse.

To be a “trustworthy” person is something very important in life. The dictionary of the *Real Academia Española* gives three definitions of that word: it is said “of a person with whom one has an intimate or familiar relation,” “of a person in whom one can confide,” and “of things that possess the qualities recommendable for the end to which they are assigned.”

A trustworthy person is one whom we know seeks our good and, above all, has our backs and will not abandon us in danger. They are someone willing to take risks for us, and will not abandon us when we need them.

This is a virtue, and an eminent one at that; if a family or a school is able to form people who are trustworthy, that family or that school is outstanding.

In order to be able to place trust in a person, that person must, as the third definition of the word states, be imbued with the qualities that make them trustworthy.

A person becomes trustworthy first and foremost by “truthfulness,” that is, they have a respect and love for the truth. How rare has become the expression: “That person simply cannot lie!” Together with this, a person becomes trustworthy because of their respect for justice, honesty, the reputation of their neighbor and for their goods, sincerity, etc.

On the contrary, a person who uses doublespeak, or has recourse to half-truths or lies, who is not transparent, who is gossipy or slanderous, cannot be trusted. Even less trustworthy is the one who sticks their hand into what has been entrusted to them (as Judas did with the money held in common by the Apostles).

A trustworthy person is an honest, upright, and responsible person. They are a person with whom we could entrust the most precious and valuable things we have, with the assurance that they would care for them just as much as we do. We all judge that a person we trust is someone who would do things “as we ourselves would do them, or even better.”

In order to form trustworthy people, it is essential to know how to delegate with trust, to entrust things and then supervise without being invasive. If we do not trust, then we will never form trustworthy hearts.

5. Industrious

Another virtue that the poem emphasizes is industriousness. The poem says it many times and in many different ways:

*“She seeks out wool and flax
and weaves with skillful hands. . . .
She rises while it is still night,
and distributes food to her household,
a portion to her maidservants.*

*She picks out a field and acquires it;
from her earnings she plants a vineyard.
She girds herself with strength;
she exerts her arms with vigor.
She enjoys the profit from her dealings. . . .
She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her fingers ply the spindle. . . .
She makes garments and sells them,
and stocks the merchants with belts. . . .
She watches over the affairs of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.*

Laziness is the mother of all vices. In the spiritual order, laziness is the daughter of acedia, and it wreaks havoc, as the Desert Fathers noted.

What must be formed is the virtue of industriousness, which is not easy. This does not mean simply to make people work, but rather that work be done with delight, that is, that work be loved. This is what “with skillful hands” means, or, as another translation has it, “her hands work at ease.” It is interesting to note the number of times the poem makes reference to work, to what the good woman “does,” and likewise those parts of her body that are sung about and praised: her hands (v. 19, 20, and 31), her palms, (v. 13, 16, 19, and 20), her arms (v. 17). The woman who is praised is a person who is never inactive: she sits

in order to spin, she knits what she has spun, and sells what she has knit; she knows how to sell and how to plant vines or orchards.

Girls must be taught to work and to love to work. They must be taught to work well. The world cannot be transformed without good work, and we are called to transform the world for Christ. Work is not only human law, but rather something that dignifies man; it humanizes and perfects him. Not only must people work in order to survive, but rather work must be done *even if* we did not have the need to earn our wages and survive with our own hands. We must work in order to grow in perfection and in dignity, which only happens when what must be done is done *well*. Nowadays, what has notably been lost is the *culture of work*, such that now work is done only in the measure that it is an indispensable means for obtaining money, that is if a person is not being “subsidized.” When people can obtain the same without exerting themselves, they prefer to be *maintained* from above. This is simply inhumane.

Moreover, now the woman often suffers from an injustice that is deeply harmful to her and to the whole of society, an injustice in which she is often not only the victim but rather the victimizer, that is, she accepts *the ideology of said injustice*. I am referring to the false idea that a woman only works when she is employed outside of her house. The tasks of being a “housewife” or “stay-at-home mom” are not considered work today, and many women *ask* to “leave” in order to work, not

because of any necessity (which would make the request understandable), but rather in order *to become themselves*, thus revealing that they are unaware of the work that really *becomes* them in accord with the female gender. Indeed, the industriousness that the sacred poem praises is that which the woman exercises in the marvelous setting of the domestic world that she is called to transform into a *paradise for the family*.

6. *Prayer and eschatological hope*

“Her lamp is never extinguished at night.”

Who would not connect this expression with the parable of the wise and the foolish virgins (Mt 25:1-13)? The wise virgins kept their lamps lit. In other words, they were awake in prayer, awaiting the arrival of the Heavenly Bridegroom. With that parable, Jesus urges us to pray constantly and to be prepared, living in grace, because in any moment, “The Lord who is to come” might present Himself at our door.

We must aim to educate in prayer and in watchful waiting for the Lord.

What does this mean? It means that the people we form must have eyes that are raised towards the horizon and a little above it, like one who is waiting for another who is to come from far away and from on high. Hence, we must form people stretching out towards eternity, people who are aware that there will be a final judgment, and who are convinced that this world, with its appearances, will quickly pass away and that the real and true life will begin after this one.

If we do not achieve this, we will, rather, be forming people anchored to this world, men and women “settled” on this temporary shore, citizens of the earthly city; in a word, they will be “worldly.” And, if all we will do is form worldly people, then there is no point at all to have or maintain a Catholic school.

7. *Merciful*

*“She reaches out her hands to the poor,
and extends her arms to the needy.”*

We must form people who are charitable with the poor and needy. In other words, we need to form hearts given to mercy. The world in which we live is a world against solidarity or, to use a Biblical expression, of hard hearts. In the face of the suffering of another, confronted with misery and marginalization, the world does not react well. Either it passes by indifferent, moved by egoism, or it sheds some sentimental tears but does nothing effective to help.

We must form women who can “reach out their hands” and “extend their arms.” That is, we need to form women who can deprive themselves of what is theirs in order to help others, women who are able to sacrifice their time, their goods, their things, in order to become good Samaritans. Let us remember that Jesus Christ has taught us that the judgment that awaits us at the end of our lives is a judgment regarding mercy (cf. Mt 25:31-46).

Formation, then, must include formation in mercy. For this, education should be directed to fostering charity with the poor, the handicapped, the sick in hospitals, the abandoned in nursing homes, with orphans, and those who have no family. It would not be too much to here recall the great work of charity that is *adoption* in its only real meaning, that is, to give a home to a child who doesn't have one. There are admirable families that understand this and live it out heroically. However, it is regrettable that the majority sees adoption backward: as the search for a child in order to fill the void of the child that never came or who left early. This second perspective, focused on one's own needs and not on those of the other, seeks the child according to one's desires: the child that we would like to have. This is the mentality that is very often hidden behind artificial insemination that prefers to "make" children according to the parents' tastes, and not to adopt those who are already in the world, lacking a home. This is also behind the claim of homosexual couples to the "right" to adopt, or in the adoption of children who are small and healthy, but not those that are sick, handicapped, or problematic. In this regard, there are many shady concepts in our egotistic society.

8. The one who "makes her own look good"

"Her husband is prominent at the city gates."

Sacred Scripture deeply praises the woman who makes her husband look good. On the contrary, greatly lamented is the poor husband who cannot even show himself in public because

everyone makes fun of him on account of the wife he has. It is to this that this verse of the poem refers.

Many times, we too make Christ and the Church look bad. A priest, writing once to a person who had publicly sinned, told him: “How bad Christ looks!”

The book of Sirach tells the sons of God (Sir 39:14): “*Send up the sweet odor of incense, break forth in blossoms like the lily.*” Many times we have read in Saint Paul that phrase: “*For we are the aroma of Christ for God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to the latter an odor of death that leads to death, to the former an odor of life that leads to life*” (2 Cor 2:15-16).

The “aroma of Christ” means our works should smell “like a Christian,” just as a gardener’s clothes should smell like roses. It is an odor that, as Saint Paul says, leads the good to eternal life, meaning, it draws them to God. For the evil, however, it makes them sense their own odor of death, meaning, they might feel ashamed of their sins so that, with the odor of death, they might desire life and thus ask it from God.

Let us, then, form men and women who make the Church look good. May they be the first to live out what they profess.

Jesus Christ said that the world would be converted by “seeing” Christians: seeing their unity, their mutual love, and the coherence of their faith (cf. Jn 17:21).

9. Wise

“She opens her mouth in wisdom.”

In order to open your mouth in wisdom, you must be wise. Anyone can simply open their mouth, but to have wisdom and common sense come from that open mouth is something entirely different. Wisdom means a particular eminence in knowledge. This is why there are “schools,” although that is not their only goal. Those who are educated in a Catholic school should be better prepared than others, even if only for the simple fact that the Christian should love the Truth more than one who is not Christian because the Christian knows the Truth *Incaruate*.

Regrettably, this is not always the case. It is for this reason that the Church so often goes hoarse because she has to shout, over and over, that she “is not afraid of science,” precisely because some of her children think that that is the case.

Today science is a great battlefield. In many fields, knowledge is being used for evil, for the destruction of man and in order to deny God. All fields of science must be conquered again. The men and woman of today feel the great temptation of skepticism, that is, to fall into doubt regarding everything, in a disappointment regarding the truth. As a consequence (since the intellect cannot tolerate an empty space for very long), the temptations of Gnosticism and of superstition arise: the temptation to accept anything whatsoever. Today this is happening among Catholic students, and it is a sign of a bad intellectual formation. They lack clear and precise ideas in both the philosophical and apologetical order.

Consequently, we must make an effort so that our students are really talented students and promising lovers of the Truth with a capital T.

10. Charitable

“Kindly instruction is on her tongue.”

Charity is the queen of virtues. The goal of the Christian school is to form Christians; however, to form Christians is to forge men and women transformed by the theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. The greatest of these is charity. Without a life of the theological virtues, there is no Christian life: there is only an appearance of the Christian life. To those who do not have a life of theological virtues God directs those words from the Book of Revelation: *“I know your works, that you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead”* (Rev 3:1).

A Christian school must be a school, not a cemetery. It must form living men and women who have a burning charity. If their charity is true, it will be seen in accord with the way that Saint Paul describes it: *“Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things”* (1 Cor 14:4-7).

If our charity is real, this is the way it will be. If it is not like this, it is a sign that our charity is not real.

11. The fruit of her works

*“Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting;
the woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
Acclaim her for the work of her hands,
and let her deeds praise her at the city gates.”*

All these virtues that we have mentioned are some of the virtues that an authentic education should strive after. Everything that has been said could be summarized by saying that a school should seek to form people (men or women) who are aware of two things.

The first is that what matters is not what is exterior, but rather what is interior. What is exterior is simply a shell: “*Charm is deceptive and beauty fleeting.*” We should not understand this as simply condemning vanity; that does not need to be proven. Rather, it refers to something even more profound. It means that it is useless to form “Christians in shell;” we need to form Christians who really are such. “*The woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.*” Education must be directed to that “fear of the Lord,” to that fear that is born from the love of God: the fear of offending someone because we deeply love them. Again, all that effort, like the effort needed to keep a school running, is useless if the only thing we do is form young people or women who only fulfill God’s will with their mouths and externally, without being interiorly convinced, without faith, without devotion, without generous surrender. With people like these, we will never form a Christian civilization.

The second thing, related to the first, is that a Christian life is shown in works, and not only with promises and words that the wind carries away. “*Acclaim her for the work of her hands, and let her deeds praise her at the city gates.*” “Actions speak louder than words,” as the saying goes. Saint Teresa, in her *Interior Castle*, remarks: “This love, daughters, must not be wrought in our imagination but must be proved by works” (*Third Mansion*, ch. 1).

A woman must, therefore, be perfect. What is the perfect woman? asks the poet; and he replies:

*The woman who knows how to suffer,
The woman who knows how to love everyone,
And knows how to lead all
By the path of duty.
The woman who sanctifies her home.
The woman who invokes God in it.
The woman ennobles and dignifies
Everything she touches.
The woman who must be a martyr
And teaches others to pray
And teaches others to believe
The woman who from that faith
From the light and impetus of her example,
Makes her home into a shrine*

Of work and virtue.

The woman who obtains this from God,

She is the perfect woman

And this is what you must be

So that God might bless you! (José M. Gabriel y Galán)

It is to these aspects that education should be directed in a school that prides itself on being called “Christian.” In order to achieve this, the formators should really be such, that is, “givers of form.” The only ones who can form others are those who themselves are “form,” that is, “model”: a person who is able to induce (and educe) these virtues in others on account of the attraction of their own example, the illumination of their conduct, and the persuasion of their words.

The suitability of formators must be constantly examined. If we do not have good educators, we will never have well-educated students. An educator who wants to form one of the aforementioned virtues in their students must have all of the following:

1st: teaching ability, that is, professional and intellectual qualities, especially a love of being themselves the first to learn, to continue learning more and more each time, and to go more deeply into knowledge;

2nd: ability to govern, that is, the ability to lead the students, to assert themselves, not through force, but rather by persuasion;

3rd: moral aptitude, that is, to be virtuous and capable of asserting themselves with their example.

The formators of a school should be luminous in order to be able to illuminate. Just as we would hope to find good bakers in a bakery, we should also hope that in a school of virtues, there would be virtuous educators. This is achieved fundamentally by lowering oneself towards the student and pouring out over them what the teacher has within. The secret of every teacher is to become the *father* or *mother* of the ones they are educating. Our poet-philosopher said it very beautifully:⁷

*According to the most ancient law of charity,
The higher directs the lower.
Even the nine angelic choirs receive
And fulfill this norm of loving governance;
And the higher angel, bends down to the one under him
In order to give him a light that was, earlier, given to him
Every one who governs will be good
When out of love they descend to those under them
And becomes a simulacrum of that Heavenly Father
Who gives each and every creature its sustenance and law.
The one who governs yet does not take up this gesture
Of fatherhood*

⁷ Leopoldo Marechal, *Heptamerón, Didáctica de la Patria*, n. 21-22.

*Is already a tyrant to their subjects,
Even though they might gift them photographs,
With very sweet signatures.
But, do not confuse that fatherhood
With the easy distribution of toys.
You will remember, Joseph, that Your Father above
Governs with two hands:
With the hand of bitterness of His Justice
And the hand of sweetness of His Mercy
If you assume charge, use both hands,
Either the hard or the soft, according to your mind.
Joseph, the one who governs with only one hand
Has the imperfection of a one-armed parent.*

2.

The Vocation and Fight of Woman

The writer Dan Brown became famous at the beginning of the 21st century because of his book, *The Da Vinci Code*, known above all for its general anti-Christian, and in particular, anti-Catholic, thematic. He has won that fame at the price of disfiguring, desacralizing, destroying, or, as they say nowadays, “de-constructing,” the figure of Our Lord Jesus Christ and, among other things, that of Mary Magdalene. Allow me to make some allusions to the latter, which can help us to frame our topic of the vocation of woman.

1. The Gnostic woman

The aforementioned Dan Brown – who, after a decade from his resounding editorial success, has passed into the faint memory that is won by all the mediocre – fed his febrile mind with the worst currents of Neo-gnostic, or radical, feminism,

which have chosen Mary Magdalene as their “model” of women, perhaps in an attempt to give some look of seriousness to their passing claims.

In particular, the author of *The Da Vinci Code* is a debtor to books such as those of Margaret Starbird, namely, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail* (1993), and *The Goddess in the Gospels: Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine* (1998). Likewise, he is a debtor to the book of Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (1996). All of these books have taken advantage of the figure of Mary Magdalene in order to give her a remodeling of plaster and paint after which we are left only the name of the original saint; all else has changed. In order to make their version credible, they needed to pretend that “theirs” is the real story, and not the history that has been told for two thousand years by Christianity, both Catholic and non-Catholic alike. Thus, for example, on the back of the Bear & Company version of her book, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar: Mary Magdalen and the Holy Grail*, we read the following presentation: “Margaret Starbird’s theological beliefs were profoundly shaken when she read *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, a book that dared to suggest that Jesus Christ was married to Mary Magdalen and that their descendants carried on his holy bloodline in Western Europe. Shocked by such heresy, this Roman Catholic scholar set out to refute it, but instead found new and compelling evidence for the existence of the bride of Jesus – the same enigmatic woman who anointed him with precious unguent from her ‘alabaster jar.’ In

this provocative book, Starbird draws her conclusions *from an extensive study* of history, heraldry, symbolism, medieval art, mythology, psychology, and the Bible itself. *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* is a quest for the forgotten feminine – in the hope that its return will help restore a healthy balance to planet Earth.”

This retreated Magdalene now changes into the model of radical feminism: lover or spouse of Jesus, mother of His children, head of a sect that He had found – and thus she is a woman priest – and, above all, the one who continues the ancient pagan religions of the matriarchal court. This is what these authors call reclaiming “the sacred feminine” or “the eternal feminine.” In her book, *The Goddess in the Gospels: Reclaiming the Sacred Feminine*, the same Starbird says that, by making a study of sacred numerology of the New Testament, she has demonstrated beyond doubt that in Christian mythology, Mary Magdalene was understood as a goddess. Again, the back of this book published in 1998 says the following: “Espousing the marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene created a personal crisis for this Catholic scholar. In *The Goddess in the Gospels*, the author tells how she was guided in her personal search and in her ever-deepening study of the New Testament and *gematria* – number coding of the Greek alphabet – by an incredible series of synchronicities. It was this mirroring of inner and outer worlds that revealed the Sacred Marriage of male and female – the *heiros gamous* – and led to her own personal redemption.”

Let us not be confused into thinking that what is going on here is enhancing the dignity of women. When these authors speak of “the sacred feminine” or “the eternal feminine,” we are, in fact, in front of a reassertion of paganism. For neo-Gnosticism, which is the religion at the base of many of the modern currents of thought, like the New Age, radical feminism, and a great part of the literature that follows the style of the *Da Vinci Code*, like *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln (1982), or *The Templar Revelation: Secret Guardians of the True Identity of Christ*, by Picknett and Prince (1998), God is an “androgynous” (a Greek word that is very fashionable now, which comes from *aner* – man – and *gynos* – woman: it refers to a being that possesses both sexes in a complementary way) being. Alchemists and occultists of the 19th century as well affirmed that Christ was an androgynous reality, and the neo-Gnostics have returned to proclaiming it today. For this very reason, neo-pagan religions present that androgynous facet, with priests and priestesses united in holy marriage, or even with sacred prostitution in the style of some pagan cults of antiquity, or incorporating into their rites sexual symbols, as the Wiccan religion does with the rite of introducing a blade (a masculine symbol) into a chalice or a grail (a feminine symbol), representing the divine sexual act. From here follows the claim of a feminine priesthood, priestesses, mages, sorceresses, witches, and more in the Wiccan religion. For the aforementioned authors, this is humanity’s original religion, and this is what Jesus (the first feminist) had attempted to found by creating his religious group,

getting married to Mary Magdalene, setting her as the head of her church and designating her as his successor. Upon Jesus' death, Peter began persecuting Magdalene, trying to raise himself to be the leader of the group. Finally, in 325, for political reasons, the emperor Constantine called together a council in Nicaea where, under his influence, the divinity of Jesus Christ was "voted in," and with a campaign that was planned and executed with precision, all vestiges of the truth were erased (which, nonetheless, had been kept hidden in the surviving Gnostic gospels) and the history that has come down to us in our falsified Gospels (which we have in our Bibles) was invented. Constantine, the real founder of Christianity, had in this way assured from then on, all religion would be masculine. This is the thesis of *The Da Vinci Code*, Margaret Starbird's books, and others such as *When God was a Woman* by Merlin Stone (1976), Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade: Our history, our future* (1977), *Del Cielo a la Tierra. Una antología de teología feminista*, by Mary Judith Ressa (1994 – some articles have been translated into English and published elsewhere), and more.

None of these are innocent ramblings, or, better said, they are ramblings, but not innocent. With great clarity, Philip Davis has written in his book, *Goddess Unmasked: The Rise of Neopagan Feminist Spirituality*, that "goddess books should be seen as professions of faith, and their authors as neo-pagan evangelists."⁸

⁸ Davis, Philip, *Goddess Unmasked: The rise of Neo-pagan Feminist Spirituality*, Dallas (1998), 87.

The fact that these authors are not concerned with a vindication of women as such is seen in the profound disgust that these authors bear towards the Virgin Mary. A book of broad popularity, Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince's *The Templar Revelation* (1997) contemptuously describes the Blessed Virgin Mary as a woman who is "non-sexual and remote," as weak, submissive, docile, as the incarnation of subordination. A radical feminist, Mary Daly, an *ex-religious sister*, describes Mary as a "tamed goddess," sexually raped.⁹

Their concern, then, is not to elevate women; rather, they only want to impose the "model" woman that is fashionable now. To change the figure of the Virgin Mary is almost an impossible task – she is too well known and defended by Catholics. However, Mary Magdalene is more distant, less well known, and more mysterious. It is easy to create a myth surrounding her, to invent a conspiracy of discredit and silence around her, and to revive her for the present world as a model of a rebellious woman, priestess, sorceress, and mage, a defender of sexual rights like abortion, divorce, lesbianism, and female liberation. Magdalene is the Che Guevara of radical feminism.

However, this is not simply quackery or entertainment, but rather a new religion.

⁹ Daly, Mary, *Gyn-Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Boston (1978), 84.

2. *The real dignity of women*

Everything said above shows us that one can speak a great deal about women without giving her the slightest honor by it. Gnosticism has not truly honored women; it is, rather, Jesus Christ who has done so: “in the eyes of his contemporaries Christ became a promoter of women’s true dignity and of the vocation corresponding to this dignity.”¹⁰

Against what the above-mentioned books affirm, the great number of women, of differing ages and conditions, that we run into throughout the Gospel pages and the marvels that are said of them there, never cease to surprise us.¹¹

“We meet women with illnesses or physical sufferings, such as the one who had ‘a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself’ (Lk 13:11); or Simon’s mother-in-law, who ‘lay sick with a fever’ (Mk 1:30); or the woman ‘who had a flow of blood’ (cf. Mk 5:25-34), who could not touch anyone because it was believed that her touch would make a person ‘impure.’ Each of them was healed, and the last-mentioned - the one with a flow of blood, who touched Jesus’ garment ‘in the crowd’ (Mk 5:27) - was praised by him for her great faith: ‘Your faith has made you well’ (Mk 5:34).”

Sometimes Jesus goes beyond a miraculous cure, as in the case of “the daughter of Jairus, whom Jesus brings back to life, saying to her tenderly: ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise’ (Mk 5:41).

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Mulierem dignitatem*, 12.

¹¹ For what follows, I follow the beautiful development that John Paul II dedicates to women in the Gospels in *Mulieris dignitatem*, n. 13-16.

There also is the widow of Nain, whose only son Jesus brings back to life, accompanying his action by an expression of affectionate mercy: 'He had compassion on her and said to her, 'Do not weep!'' (Lk 7:13)."

The Gospel also presents us with the figure of the Canaanite woman, who begged for the healing of her daughter and "whom Christ extols for her faith, her humility and for that greatness of spirit of which only a mother's heart is capable. 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire' (Mt 15:28)."

"Sometimes the women whom Jesus met and who received so many graces from him, also accompanied him as he journeyed with the Apostles through the towns and villages, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God; and they 'provided for them out of their means.' The Gospel names Joanna, who was the wife of Herod's steward, Susanna and 'many others' (cf. Lk 8:1-3)."

"Sometimes women appear in the parables which Jesus of Nazareth used to illustrate for his listeners the truth about the Kingdom of God. This is the case in the parables of the lost coin (cf. Lk 15: 8-10), the leaven (cf. Mt 13:33), and the wise and foolish virgins (cf. Mt 25:1-13). Particularly eloquent is the story of the widow's mite. While 'the rich were putting their gifts into the treasury . . . a poor widow put in two copper coins.' Then Jesus said: 'This poor widow has put in more than all of them . . . she out of her poverty put in all the living that she had' (Lk 21:1-4). In this way Jesus presents her as a model for everyone and

defends her, for in the socio-juridical system of the time widows were totally defenseless people (cf. also Lk 18:1-7).”

“In all of Jesus’ teaching, as well as in his behavior, one can find nothing which reflects the discrimination against women prevalent in his day. On the contrary, his words and works always express the respect and honor due to women. The woman with a stoop is called a ‘daughter of Abraham’ (Lk 13:16), while in the whole Bible the title ‘son of Abraham’ is used only of men. Walking the Via Dolorosa to Golgotha, Jesus will say to the women: ‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me’ (Lk 23:28). This way of speaking to and about women, as well as his manner of treating them, clearly constitutes an ‘innovation’ with respect to the prevailing custom at that time.”

“This becomes even more explicit in regard to women whom popular opinion contemptuously labeled sinners, public sinners, and adulteresses. There is the Samaritan woman, to whom Jesus himself says: ‘For you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband.’ And she, realizing that he knows the secrets of her life, recognizes him as the Messiah and runs to tell her neighbors. The conversation leading up to this realization is one of the most beautiful in the Gospel (cf. Jn 4:7-27).”

“Then there is the public sinner who, in spite of her condemnation by common opinion, enters into the house of the Pharisee to anoint the feet of Jesus with perfumed oil. To his host, who is scandalized by this, he will say: ‘Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much’ (cf. Lk 7:37-47).”

“Finally, there is a situation which is perhaps the most eloquent: a woman caught in adultery is brought to Jesus. To the leading question ‘In the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?’, Jesus replies: ‘Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.’ The power of truth contained in this answer is so great that ‘they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest.’ Only Jesus and the woman remain. ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one, Lord.’ ‘Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again’ (cf. Jn 8:3-11).”

“The women who are close to Christ discover themselves in the truth which he ‘teaches’ and ‘does,’ even when this truth concerns their ‘sinfulness.’ They feel ‘liberated’ by this truth, restored to themselves: they feel loved with ‘eternal love,’ with a love which finds direct expression in Christ himself.”

“These episodes provide a very clear picture. Christ is the one who ‘knows what is in man’ (cf. Jn 2:25) - in man and woman. He knows the dignity of man, his worth in God’s eyes. . . . Jesus’ attitude to the women whom he meets in the course of his Messianic service reflects the eternal plan of God, who, in creating each one of them, chooses her and loves her in Christ (cf. Eph 1:1-5).”

“In Christ’s sphere of action their position is transformed. They feel that Jesus is speaking to them about matters which in those times one did not discuss with a woman. Perhaps the most significant example of this is the Samaritan woman at the well of

Sychar. Jesus - who knows that she is a sinner and speaks to her about this - discusses the most profound mysteries of God with her. He speaks to her of God's infinite gift of love, which is like a 'spring of water welling up to eternal life' (Jn 4:14). He speaks to her about God who is Spirit, and about the true adoration which the Father has a right to receive in spirit and truth (cf. Jn 4:24). Finally he reveals to her that he is the Messiah promised to Israel (cf. Jn 4:26). This is an event without precedent: that a woman, and what is more a 'sinful woman,' becomes a 'disciple' of Christ. Indeed, once taught, she proclaims Christ to the inhabitants of Samaria, so that they too receive him with faith (cf. Jn 4: 39-42). This is an unprecedented event, if one remembers the usual way women were treated by those who were teachers in Israel; whereas in Jesus of Nazareth's way of acting such an event becomes normal. In this regard, the sisters of Lazarus also deserve special mention: 'Jesus loved Martha and her sister (Mary) and Lazarus' (cf. Jn 11:5). Mary 'listened to the teaching' of Jesus: when he pays them a visit, he calls Mary's behavior 'the good portion' in contrast to Martha's preoccupation with domestic matters (cf. Lk 10: 38-42). On another occasion - after the death of Lazarus - Martha is the one who talks to Christ, and the conversation concerns the most profound truths of revelation and faith. . . . Jesus said to her: 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?' 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the

world' (Jn 11:21-27). In short, Christ speaks to women about the things of God, and they understand them; there is a true resonance of mind and heart, a response of faith. Jesus expresses appreciation and admiration for this distinctly 'feminine' response, as in the case of the Canaanite woman (cf. Mt 15:28)."

"The Gospels . . . highlight the fact that women were in the forefront at the foot of the Cross. . . . John was the only Apostle who remained faithful, but there were many faithful women. Not only the Mother of Christ and 'his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene' (Jn 19:25) were present, but 'there were also many women there, looking on from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him' (Mt 27:55). As we see, in this most arduous test of faith and fidelity the women proved stronger than the Apostles. In this moment of danger, those who love much succeed in overcoming their fear. Before this there were the women on the Via Dolorosa, 'who bewailed and lamented him' (Lk 23:27). Earlier still, there was Pilate's wife, who had warned her husband: 'Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much over him today in a dream' (Mt 27:19)."

Finally, the Gospel gives women a very important role in the Lord's Resurrection, emphasizing their "special sensitivity which is characteristic of their femininity." Moved by compassion and by the desire to fulfill their duty with respect to the Lord's dead body, they "are the first at the tomb. They are the first to find it empty. They are the first to hear: 'He is not here. He has risen, as

he said' (Mt 28:6). They are the first to embrace his feet (cf. Mt 28:9). They are also the first to be called to announce this truth to the Apostles (cf. Mt 28:1-10; Lk 24:8-11). The Gospel of John (cf. also Mk 16:9) emphasizes the special role of Mary Magdalene. She is the first to meet the Risen Christ. At first she thinks he is the gardener; she recognizes him only when he calls her by name: 'Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbuni' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father, but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and your God.' Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her' (Jn 20:16-18)." For this reason Rabanus Maurus called her "the apostle of the Apostles," since she was the first to bear witness to Christ before the Apostles.

"This event, in a sense, crowns all that has been said previously about Christ entrusting divine truths to women as well as men. One can say that this fulfilled the words of the Prophet: 'I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and *your daughters* shall prophesy' (Jl 3:1)."

We can repeat what we said earlier: no Gnostic writing that divinizes woman elevates her more than the Gospel doctrine does and more than Jesus did in His public life.

3. Woman's inclination to oblation

The vocation of woman passes, as we will delve into more deeply in the third part of this work, through the inclination to give life, which can be done concretely either in a *physical* way or a *spiritual* way. This second way is *universal*, meaning, it is open to all women, whether they are able, biologically, to beget a human life, or unable (sterile), or if they have renounced that potency for higher reasons (as in the consecrated women). The *spiritual ability and need to give life* therefore always accompanies the feminine being (which is not the case of the biological ability), and it is for this reason that it denotes her femininity. In the spiritual and supernatural order, this becomes clear particularly in the woman's means of sanctification, which acquires in her a singularly oblativ and sacrificial character: woman has a vocation to immolation, to be a victim, to surrender herself. This is why Croissant says woman is "naturally disposed to the 'priesthood of the heart,' for the spirit of sacrifice so natural to her is an integral part of the priestly spirit."¹²

We cannot doubt this reality if we pay attention to the number of female saints who, in the history of the Church, have heard the call to offer themselves as victims to God for the salvation of souls: Saint Mariana de Jesús who offered herself for the salvation of Ecuador, the little Jacinta Marta for sinners, like Saint Faustina Kowalska, Sor Eusebia Palomino, Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, Saint Catherine of Siena. . . . In 1948 John

¹² Jo Croissant, *The Priesthood of the Heart: Woman's Unique Vocation*, New York (2007), 145-146.

Paul II beatified Pina Suriano who, along with three companions, offered herself to God for the sanctification of priests; God accepted all of these lives. We know of many cases of male saints who have done the same, but the number of victim vocations is heavily tilted towards women. The case of Elisabeth Leseur is particularly moving – the first non-canonized woman to be cited in a pontifical document. She offered her life to God in exchange for the conversion of her husband, the atheist doctor Felix Leseur. Years later, he would write, after having discovered his wife’s private diary: “As soon as her operation was decided on, [Elisabeth] had concluded with God a kind of pact, vowing to exchange her life for my return to the Faith. Her sacrifice was absolute, and she was convinced that God would accept it and would take her early to Himself. She was equally persuaded that He would ensure my conversion.”¹³ When Felix Leseur wrote those words, he was not only Catholic but also a priest, since after his conversion he entered the Dominican religious order.

In his first letter, Saint Peter says even husbands without faith will be won by the conduct of their holy wives (cf. 1 Pet 3:1-2). There is a reason why the two times in the Gospel the Blessed Mother mediates between Her Son and men Christ addresses her with the majestic and universal term “Woman”: at the wedding feast at Cana, when she looks out for the happiness of the married couple, and at the foot of the Cross, when she receives

¹³ Leseur, Elisabeth, *The Secret Diary of Elisabeth Leseur*. Sophia Institute, Manchester, NH (2002), xl. This text is from the introduction written by her husband.

John in her sorrowful yet protecting womb, and, with him, all men. In addition to being the Mother of God, in those acts she fulfills, sublimely, everything woman is by nature.

There are women who, trusting in Jesus' words ("Ask and you will receive; knock, and it will be opened for you") spend their lives knocking on the doors of heaven so that their husbands, siblings, and children might enter. . . . But there are others who drill those same doors with the fingernails of their cries and tears, and these are mothers of abundant breasts who have filled heaven with children borne from their prayers.

4. Woman's function as mediator

At the dawn of humanity, Eve exercised a mediation of sin between the serpent and man. On account of the weakness of our first mother, the "help" that God had given to man became a push towards the abyss. In God's plan, that mediation had to be reversed in such a way that, where death began, life would begin again. Behold the reason why the angel asked Mary for her consent for the Incarnation: it had to be a free and generous act of a woman, of "the Woman."

This mission has not finished. Just as God entered the world through Mary, so too many women must be the starting point of the work of salvation for many other human beings. As Croissant explains: "Between her and God there is a kind of connivance, a complicity. She participates in the birth of man and in the birth of humanity through uniting herself to God. It was through Mary's 'yes' that salvation entered the world. It is

through woman's 'yes,' through the unconditional gift of her life, that the world will be saved. She precedes man in the understanding of divine mysteries and through her reception of the Word, she will give birth to the kingdom. She shows the way. It is because of her specific mission in God's plan that *the woman must change first*.¹⁴ This is what that mysterious "spiritual salvific motherhood" consists of.

From here it follows that often the conversion of a woman is the dawn of conversion for many men. The devil knows this, and for this reason, he obstinately tries to destroy women, that is, he tries to destroy authentic femininity, erasing the undoubtable differences between men and women, attacking marriage and the traditional family, counteracting the ability to be a mother, mocking virginity. "The devil is much more jealous of woman than man because she has the primary mission of being life, of giving life, of giving birth, and she thus participates in an extremely intimate way in God's plan. The serpent knows that in order to hinder God's plan, he needs to attack the woman and reduce her capacities as giver of life."¹⁵

Herein lies the irreparable damage that the world does with the deformation of the true ideas of man and woman; for that reason, there can be no restoration of a society that does not allow for "man and woman to be reconciled with their own identities."¹⁶ The radical feminist movements claim to defend the

¹⁴ Jo Croissant, *The Priesthood of the Heart: Woman's Unique Vocation*, 62.

¹⁵ Jo Croissant, *The Priesthood of the Heart: Woman's Unique Vocation*, 92.

¹⁶ Cf. Jo Croissant, *The Priesthood of the Heart: Woman's Unique Vocation*, 8.

dignity of women, while in reality, the only thing they do is plunge women into a profound confusion and insecurity, giving her a false and disfigured image of herself.

Many women, writes Croissant, “I have often found . . . to be lost, somewhat distraught. . . . They had lost their identities and . . . they no longer knew their place with regard to men, nor did they have any awareness of what their mission could be.”¹⁷ This has universal repercussions, as she continues, writing: “There is no doubt that today’s world is completely destabilized because women no longer know who they are. Today, more than ever, the problem of their identity and mission is a crucial one.”¹⁸ In the recovery, by women, of the role that God has assigned them in His work, the future of humanity is, in part, at risk, because from her, who is Eve, the “mother of the living,” hangs the future of life.

The devil and those who follow him in his plans know full well that to be a woman is not a cultural construct or a personification that someone decides to assume in the world,¹⁹ but rather a vocation founded upon a genetic base and a biological-physical structure and, therefore, a way of being that gives rise to everything else. To be deceptively convinced of the illusions is thus the task that the Enemy of mankind has given

¹⁷ Jo Croissant, *The Priesthood of the Heart: Woman’s Unique Vocation*, 1.

¹⁸ Jo Croissant, *The Priesthood of the Heart: Woman’s Unique Vocation*, 1

¹⁹ Regarding this point there is a very important study: AA.VV., *Mujer y varón. ¿Misterio o autoconstrucción?*, CEU-Universidad Francisco de Vitoria-UCAM, Madrid (2008). The book was put out on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of *Mulieris dignitatem*, and it tackles the so-called “gender ideology,” according to which to be a man or woman is merely a cultural construct.

himself in this chapter of the great theological fight between the devil and God, the chapter in which we are now living.

5. Woman's vocation

It is of fundamental importance that every woman be completely and entirely convinced that “to be a woman” is not founded upon accidental things like flirting, the desire to please, or a certain elegance or gestures that distinguish women from men which are, in reality, but distant components of what it means to be a woman. Rather, to be a woman is founded upon a series of physical, psychological, and spiritual characteristics that are in part similar, and in part different, but always complimentary, to the masculine ones. Even more, and this is the base of everything else, to be a woman is a divine vocation. God calls some people to a specific vocation that they can only fulfill in the measure that they possess certain physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual qualities that make them apt for the task. It is a theological truth that when God sets someone apart for a mission (such as to care for the Holy Family, in the case of Saint Joseph, or to prepare the path for the Savior, as in the case of Saint John the Baptist, or to be the Mother of God, in the case of the Virgin Mary), God gives them all the necessary characteristics and graces so that they can carry out their task to perfection; God never gives an end without also giving the means to obtain it. This is also true in the more generic plane of every human being. For this reason, we can say that there is a mission in this world for the fulfillment of which

God has created persons with specific characteristics that make them “women,” just as there are other persons that, on account of the mission they have been given, He has made “men.”

Now, turning concretely to the vocation of women, we must say that to be a woman is, first and foremost, a *vocation of giving*, of surrender, of generosity. Even if it takes a man and a woman to conceive a child, it is the woman who carries it in her womb, who gives it her blood, her warmth, nutrients, and affection, and in a unique way. This is why, when a woman discovers her vocation to give herself, she also discovers her ability to be a mother. Sometimes this is in the physical sense, but other times as spiritual mothers, as happens in those mothers who adopt, who raise the children of others, as mothers of the poor, and those who help the helpless. Motherhood is not exhausted simply in giving physical life, as many women, like Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Jesus, and Teresa of Calcutta, have shown. As Gertud von Le Fort writes so precisely: “Wherever surrender is, there also is a flash from the mystery of the Eternal Woman. But when the woman seeks herself, the metaphysical mystery is extinguished; for in uplifting her own image she destroys the one that is eternal.”²⁰

To be a woman is also a *vocation to receive*, because generosity is not only to be found in giving but also in accepting something when what is accepted is a responsibility. Every married couple knows that to receive a child demands generosity, and the

²⁰ Von Le Fort, G., *The Eternal Woman*, 12.

woman knows this better than the man because a child cannot come into this world without marking her life. A man might see his life “more or less” changed by the new child; however, the woman is left totally involved in the child she begets and carries in her womb. Moreover, a child is not manufactured but rather begotten, which means to make within. To manufacture is to “make outside” or “for something outside.” For this reason, the woman must develop a capacity for an interior life, so that as soon as she knows that she is awaiting a child, she can look within in order to hear him and speak with him.

To be a woman is a vocation for *what is concrete*, while man is more universal and abstract. A woman does not cease to have a universal vision of things, but she can go up to general things and lower them down to the details, and she often sees them whereas a man does not. In this way, she puts a particular mark in the world, a respect for the concrete and for details. When we enter into a place where there is order and practicality, we can guess that it was a man who passed through. However, if there are order and beauty, it is very likely that it was a woman who came through. If our world were completely ordered and practical, without a feminine touch, it would perhaps be frightening. There is nothing more practical and ordered than an operating room, and nothing further from the idea that we have of a real house or of paradise.

To be a woman is also a *vocation of endurance*. As experience shows us, in general terms, men stand out more when they must

make a great effort and attack, when a threat comes from outside and demands a fight, even to the point of risking their lives. However, his ability falls apart more quickly when it concerns long and painful sufferings or situations that demand patience and integrity. Although they are physically weaker for a violent fight, women, on the other hand, possess an enormous capacity to withstand suffering, patience for prolonged pains, and toughness for persevering in adversity. This should clearly be understood in general terms since we all know many cases that depart from these rules; however, these general terms are still valid for the majority of people.

3.

Woman and Grace

Now we will go a little more deeply into some of the concepts that were introduced in the last chapter, analyzing the relation between woman and grace. This means that we must draw two pictures: the first regarding the work of divine grace in woman and the second regarding woman in the work of grace.

1. Grace in woman

Regarding the first, supernatural grace in woman, we will say little, because it is simply an application of the general doctrine of grace, which does not differ substantially in men and women. In both, grace heals nature. It elevates it and produces a world of habits that set us in direct relation with God: the theological virtues, by means of which we supernaturally *use* our spiritual potencies (intellect and will) in order to know, hope for, and love God, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit by which we passively *receive* the divine action which moves us *in its way and manner* in the supernatural order. Grace transforms us, producing in us a true

deification, as some of the Greek Church Fathers dared to say, and *filial adoption*, as the Western Fathers preferred to express the same idea.

To apply these concepts to man and woman is, in general terms, the same. It is precisely here, at this point, that we find a basic element of the fundamental equality between men and women: both are called to the same holiness, to the same filial relationship with God, and to the same eternal happiness that will be had by seeing God face to face (cf. 1 Jn 3:2; 1 Co 13:12). Saint Paul expresses it by saying: “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendant, heirs according to the promise*” (Gal 3:28-29). Our Lord also alluded to this, in reference to eternal life, which is the consummation of grace, when He affirmed: “*When [men] rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but they are like the angels in heaven*” (Mk 12:25). Since they are children of the Church, there is no difference between men and women, as Edith Stein pointed out.²¹

However, we can indeed find some properly feminine elements if we analyze the mission God has assigned to women in the redemption of the world.

²¹ “All who are redeemed become *children of the Church*, and here there is no difference between men and women” (Stein, Edith, *Essays on Woman*).

2. In the natural order

This mission in the order of grace is analogous to the mission that she has in the natural order, which is why we begin by recalling this aspect. “Only the person blinded by the passion of controversy could deny that woman in soul and body is formed for a particular purpose. . . . Woman is destined to be wife and mother. Both physically and spiritually she is endowed for this purpose. . . . However, it follows also from the Thomistic principle of *anima forma corporis* [the soul is the form of the body] that such a spiritual characteristic does exist. Of course, woman shares a basic human nature, but basically her faculties are different from men; therefore, a differing type of soul must exist as well.”²² This principle of Edith Stein is very important. She is saying that physical qualities and potencies come from what is personal and specific to the soul; she is not referring to beauty or ugliness, to well-formed or deformed, to health or sickness . . . which could appear in this or that individual, but rather to what is common to female and male bodies. The foundation is the doctrine that says that each soul is individuated by the body of which it is the form: “souls are diversified by reason of the bodies that they inform and that are necessarily different. Man’s body, then, plays an essential role in the constitution of his individuality. It is his soul that makes him be a man, and that makes his body live and exist. However, it is his body that makes

²² Stein, Edith, *Essays on Woman*, 45. Everything that is in quotation marks in this paragraph comes from the same author.

him be this man, a self distinct from all the rest.”²³ The soul has been created in order to be the form of said body, and hence, there is proportionality between the two. Now then, the feminine potencies allow a woman to be a mother and to be complimentary to man. “Woman’s nature is determined by her original vocation of *spouse* and *mother*. One depends on the other. The body of woman is fashioned ‘to be one flesh’ with another and to nurse new human life in itself. A well-disciplined body is an accommodating instrument for the mind which animates it; at the same time, it is a source of power and a habitat for the mind. Just so, woman’s soul is designed to be subordinate to man in obedience and support; it is also fashioned to be a shelter in which souls may unfold. Both spiritual companionship and spiritual motherliness are not limited to the physical spouse and mother relationships, but they extend to all people with whom woman comes into contact.”²⁴

For this reason, “woman naturally seeks,” continues Edith Stein, “to embrace that which is *living, personal, and whole*.”

“To cherish, guard, protect, nourish, and advance growth is her natural, maternal yearning.” In this sense, “lifeless matter, the *fact*, can hold primary interest for her only insofar as it serves the living and the personal, not ordinarily for its own sake. Relevant to this is another matter: *abstraction in every sense* is alien to the feminine nature. The living and personal to which her care

²³ Verneaux, Roger, *Filosofía del hombre*, Barcelona (1972), 229.

²⁴ Stein, Edith, *Essays on Woman*.

extends is a concrete whole and is protected and encouraged as a totality; this does not mean that one part is sacrificed to another, not the mind to the body or one spiritual faculty at the expense of the others. She aspires to this totality in herself and in others. Her theoretical and her practical views correspond; her natural line of thought is not so much conceptual and analytical as it is directed intuitively and emotionally to the concrete. This natural endowment enables woman to guard and teach her own children. But this basic attitude is not intended just for them; she should behave in this way also to her husband and to all those in contact with her.”²⁵

In the order of her spousal inclination, nature enables her and indeed pushes woman to “share the life of another human being and, indeed, to take part in *all things* which come his way, in the greatest and smallest things, in joy as well as in suffering, in work, and in problems. Man is consumed by ‘his enterprise,’ and he expects others will be interested and helpful; generally, it is difficult for him to become involved in other beings and their concerns. On the contrary, it is natural for woman, and she has the faculty to interest herself empathetically in areas of knowledge far from her own concerns and to which she would not pay heed if it were not that a personal interest drew her into contact with them.”²⁶

²⁵ Stein, Edith, *Essays on Woman*, 45.

²⁶ Stein, Edith, *Essays on Woman*, 46.

John Paul II has expressed it with this daring idea: “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.”²⁷

These qualities also become abundantly clear in *defects and wounds* which original sin has introduced into woman. Her inclination to what is personal and living, as Edith Stein later affirms, becomes disordered as “her inclination to center both her activities and those of others about her own person [which] is expressed by vanity, desire for praise and recognition, and an unchecked need for communication; on the other hand, it is seen in an excessive interest in others as in curiosity, gossip, and an indiscreet need to penetrate into the intimate life of others.”

“*Her view of reaching the whole,*” instead of leading to a full surrender to one activity, “leads easily to the frittering away of her powers: her antipathy for the necessary objective disciplining of individual abilities results in her superficial nibbling in all areas. And in her relations to others, it is manifested in her complete absorption with them beyond the measure required by maternal functions: the sympathetic mate becomes the obtrusive mischief-maker who cannot endure quiet, reserved growth; and because of this, she does not foster development but rather hinders and

²⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, 30.

paralyzes it. The dominating will replaces joyful service. How many unhappy marriages can be attributed to this abnormality! How much alienation between mothers and growing children and even mature offspring!”

However, it is precisely in these same two qualities that we find the main beams of light of the woman who has brought the feminine essence to perfection: the Blessed Virgin Mary. I cite the same author: “In the center of her life stands her son. She awaits His birth in blissful expectation; she watches over His childhood; near or far, indeed, wherever He wishes, she follows Him on His way; she holds the crucified body in her arms; she carries out the will of the departed. But not as *her* action does she do all this: she is in this the Handmaid of the Lord; she fulfills that to which God has called her. And that is why she does not consider the child as her own property: she has welcomed Him from God’s hands; she lay Him back into God’s hands by dedicating Him in the Temple and by being with Him at the crucifixion. Should we consider the Mother of God as spouse, we find a quiet, limitless trust which in turn depends on limitless trust, silent obedience, and an obviously faithful communion in suffering. She does all this in surrender to the will of God who has bestowed her husband upon her as human protector and visible guide.”²⁸

²⁸ Stein, Edith, *Essays on Woman*, 47-48.

3. *In the supernatural order*

We find this very same vocation in every woman in the supernatural order because, as the theological principle states: “grace does not destroy nature, but rather perfects it.” Thus, grace takes nature and elevates it, so that its works and fruits might also be brought about in the supernatural order: “woman achieves a particular organic position in the Church.”²⁹ The French author Jo Croissant, whom I have already cited a number of times, has tried to define this role with the above-mentioned expression “priesthood of the heart” which, properly understood, expresses the same reality that we are describing, even though I prefer to invoke a more traditional and precise concept, which is *spiritual motherhood in the strict sense*.

Spiritual motherhood (or, if you prefer, *priesthood of the heart*), applied to the Woman *par excellence*, the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, indicates the salvific mediation, the mediation of grace, that she exercises by the express positive will of God, a mediation for all the predestined. Saint Louis Grignion de Montfort writes:

“With the whole Church I acknowledge that Mary, being a mere creature fashioned by the hands of God is, compared to his infinite majesty, less than an atom, or rather is simply nothing, since he alone can say, ‘I am he who is’ [Ex 3:14]. Consequently, this great Lord, who is ever independent and self-sufficient, never had and does not now have any absolute need of the Blessed Virgin for the accomplishment of his will and the manifestation of his glory. . . . However, I declare that, considering things as they are, because God has decided to begin and accomplish his greatest works through the

²⁹ Cf. Stein, Edith, *Essays on Woman*.

Blessed Virgin ever since he created her, we can safely believe that he will not change his plan in the time to come. . . . We must conclude that, being necessary to God by a necessity which is called 'hypothetical,' (that is, because God so willed it), the Blessed Virgin is all the more necessary for men to attain their final end."³⁰

This mediation that our Heavenly Mother undertakes, is, properly speaking, a spiritual motherhood: "Mary has two sons," says Saint Louis, citing Saint Bonaventure and Origen, "the one a God-man, the other, mere man. She is Mother of the first corporally and of the second spiritually."³¹

Applied to women in general, this spiritual motherhood means that women, *by their nature*, that is, by reason of their *maternal and spousal capacities*, are not only capable in some cases (because these can be limited by reason of sterility, singleness, or virginal consecration) of giving physical life to a new human being, but they also have the power (and this always) to produce a life-giving and maturing influence on those who are under their charge: their children, their spouses, their siblings, their subjects. John Paul II has expressed this thought saying: "Spiritual motherhood takes on many different forms. In the life of consecrated women . . . 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 edges of society." Later on, he applies the same concept to married women: "And

³⁰ Saint Louis Marie de Montfort, *Treatise on True Devotion*, nn. 14-15 and 39.

³¹ *Ibid*, n. 141.

does not physical motherhood also have to be a spiritual motherhood, in order to respond to the whole truth about the human being who is a unity of body and spirit?”³²

This spiritual motherhood is not limited to the natural plane, understood as the human education of children, students, etc.; rather, it extends also to the plane of grace and salvation.

Indeed, it is a dogma of faith that divine grace comes as from the source from Christ the High Priest (from whom we receive, as Saint John says in his Gospel, “grace in place of grace”: Jn 1:16), and, in union with Him, from the Catholic priesthood, which is the ministry, abundantly outpoured by means of the marvelous sacramental universe. However, grace requires *preparation* to be received, *care* so that it might not be lost once received, and *cultivation* so that it might grow. Even if all of this is the work of God (“God caused the growth,” cf. 1 Cor 3:6), nonetheless, He associates certain souls to His work, souls that receive the name of “fathers and mothers,” because it is a work of begetting (spiritual); and for this reason Saint Paul dares to tell the Corinthians: “Even if you should have countless guides to Christ, yet you do not have many fathers, for I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (1 Cor 4:15).

Certainly, this is not the exclusive work of woman, but we discover in her a *particular disposition* for this mission, an aptitude that is linked to her natural capacity to be a mother on the natural plane, since motherhood implies an intimate relation with

³² John Paul II, Apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, 21.

that life that is different from the relation that a man has. Nature, meaning, God who is its author, associates woman with life in a *total* way, since, unlike man, who is limited to surrendering his power to give life to woman, she is not restricted simply to giving something that is hers, but rather, she becomes herself the *holder* of the new life, its natural place, its *defense*, its *land of gestation*. . . . All of this demands that she die to herself in order to place herself at the service of this new life.

Hence, woman is associated with Christ's redeeming work analogously. "Every soul," says Edith Stein, "purified through baptism and raised to the state of grace is thereby conceived through Christ and is born for His sake. Yet the soul is conceived in and born through the Church. Each new soul is formed and endowed with divine life through the organs of the Church. The Church is thus the mother of all the redeemed. But it is so because of its most intimate union with Christ, because it stands at His side as *Spouse of Christ* and cooperates with Him in His work, the redemption of humanity. We may consider the Church as a supernatural mother of whom woman is an essential organ. First, because of her physical maternity. The human race must reproduce itself in order for the Church to carry out its mission of attaining her destined number of members. The life of grace presupposed the life of nature. . . . However, woman's participation in the supernatural maternity of the Church is more extensive. She is called upon to cooperate in awakening and furthering the life of grace in children. Consequently, she is an

essential organ of the supernatural maternity of the Church and thereby shares directly in it.”³³

4. *The woman’s soul*

In order to carry out this mission, the woman’s soul must have certain qualities, which I describe, once again returning to the thoughts of Edith Stein.³⁴

“The soul of woman must . . . be *expansive* and open to all human beings; it must be *quiet* so that no small weak flame will be extinguished by stormy winds; *warm*, so as not to benumb fragile buds; *clear*, so that no vermin will settle in dark corners and recesses; *self-contained*, so that no invasions from without can imperil the inner life; *empty of itself*, in order that extraneous life may have room in it; finally, *mistress of itself* and also of its body, so that the entire person is readily at the disposal of every call.”

“Woman’s soul should be *expansive*; nothing human should be alien to it. Evidently it has a natural disposition to such an end: on average, its principal interest is directed to people and human relations. But, if one leaves the natural instinct to itself, this is expressed in a manner apart from its objective. Often the interest is chiefly mere curiosity, mere desire to get to know people and their circumstances; sometimes it is real avidity to penetrate alien areas. If this instinct is simply indulged in, then nothing is won either for the soul itself or for other souls. It goes out of itself, so to speak, and remains standing outside of itself. It loses itself,

³³ Stein, Edith, *Essays on Woman*.

³⁴ Cf. Stein, Edith, *Essays on Woman*.

without giving anything to others. This is unfruitful, indeed, even detrimental. Woman's soul will profit only if it goes abroad to *search* and to bring home the hidden *treasure* which rests in every human soul, and which can enrich not only her soul but also others; and it will profit only if it searches and bears home the well-known or hidden *burden* which is laid on every human soul."

"The soul has to be *quiet*, for the life which it must protect is timid and speaks only faintly; if the soul itself is in tumult, it will not hear this life which will soon be completely silenced and will disappear from the soul. I wonder whether one can say that the feminine soul is fashioned by nature for this? At first sight, the contrary seems to be true. Women's souls are in commotion so much and so strongly; commotion itself makes such noise; and, in addition, the soul is urged to express its agitation. Nevertheless, the faculty for this quiet must be there; otherwise, it could not be so profoundly practiced as it is, after all, by many women: those women in whom one takes refuge in order to find peace, and who have ears for the softest and most imperceptible little voices."

"Woman succeeds if the other requirements are filled: if the soul is *empty of self* and is *self-contained*. Indeed, when the inherent agitated self is completely gone, then there is room and quiet to make oneself perceptible to others. But no one can render himself so by nature alone, neither man nor woman. 'O Lord God, take me away from myself and give me completely to you alone,' the ancient German prayer says. We can do nothing

ourselves; God must do it. To speak to Him thus is easier by nature for woman than for man because a natural desire lives in her to give herself completely to someone. When she has once realized that no one other than God is capable of *receiving her completely* for Himself and that it is sinful theft toward God to give oneself completely to one other than Him, then the surrender is no longer difficult and she becomes free of herself. . . .”

“The soul of woman is no doubt *warm* by nature, but its natural warmth is too seldom constant. It consumes itself and fails when it may be most needed; or it is augmented by a flying spark to the fire which destroys when it should only gently warm. But here again, that can only be helped when, instead of the worldly fire, the heavenly one is known. When the heavenly fire, the divine love, has consumed all impure matters, then it burns in the soul as a quiet flame which not only warms but also illuminates; then all is bright, pure, and *clear*. Indeed, clarity also does not manifest itself as given by nature. On the contrary, the soul of woman appears dull and dark, opaque to herself and to others. Only the divine light renders it clear and bright.”

“Thus, everything points to this conclusion: woman can become what she should be in conformity with her primary vocation only when formation through grace accompanies the natural inner formation. Because of this, religious education must be the core of all women’s education.” Thus far Edith Stein.

5. The particular relation of woman with purity

One last observation that I cannot cease to emphasize is the particular relation that woman has with virginity and chastity, that is, with purity of body and soul. The Mother of Jesus is a virgin; she is *The Virgin*, in the sense that her virginity is unrepeatable. This is not only because, since she was destined to the Mother of God, it was fitting that she has the maximal physical integrity, but rather, *in addition*, on account of her unique and most singular role of *intermediary* between her Divine Son and the rest of men. In spite of the shades that have darkened men's hearts since Adam's sin, nonetheless, the majority of people have seen the need for virginity for those to whom was entrusted the mission of presenting uninterrupted prayers on behalf of men. This is because they have intuited that the woman's strength has a very close dependence on her chastity and in particular with her *virginity*.

G. von Le Fort recalls that "the exalted honor that the Germanic woman of prehistoric times enjoyed was linked with the appreciation of virginity"; and she adds that "to this the terrible, punitive laws of the ancient Saxons bear testimony, when they direct themselves with equal severity against the assault upon the chastity of a virgin and against the crime of the woman who had fallen."³⁵ In this, two very different peoples, the Romans and the Germanic tribes, thought similarly: "Like the priestess of Vesta, the Germanic prophetess also was a virgin."

³⁵ Cf. Von Le Fort, G., *The Eternal Woman*, 24.

Even further, we should say that *she necessarily had to be a virgin*. The pure virgin caused so much veneration in ancient times that “up to the later Middle Ages the irreproachable virgin could obtain pardon for a man condemned to death. She alone could avert the inevitable curse and break a spell of magic that could not otherwise be loosed.” Pagan Rome, even in its moments of greatest moral decadence, demanded that the Vestal priestesses who looked after the sacred fire, on which Rome’s subsistence depended, be pure virgins. In the Roman cities, there was no lack of brothels, but the licentious Romans only considered themselves safe if the prayer of *virgins* protected them.

Perhaps, for this reason, men and poets have more often glorified the virginal type of woman rather than that of mother and wife. As evidence of this, we can consider Antigone and Beatrice, Iphigenia, and the Princess of Tasso: all of these who are virginal figures and only understandable as such.

Chastity is a virtue that is equally necessary for men and women, but it would seem almost more connatural to the later, especially in the form of a positive and perpetual consecration, that is, as voluntary virginity (we are not referring, then, to the single woman who has not lost hope of getting married). For this reason, the loss of virginity is felt in a much more intensely tragic way by the good woman than by the good man; she senses that she has lost part of her *power* to transform the world.

This does not undermine the dignity of the married woman who lives chastely according to her state in life, that is, not as an

absolute absence but rather as married *fidelity* and as *openness* to motherhood. She, too, receives an entirely unique power from that virtue, but, on account of her particular vocation, the field of that power is narrowed especially towards the family that she has brought about with the exercise of that virtue. On the contrary, the virgin has a universality that the married woman does not have *on account of this virtue* (chastity/virginity), although this later one can live it out through the practice of another virtue like charity in an eminent degree in which some married woman can, in fact, surpass many virgins.

4.

Conclusion: The terrible heel of Woman

In the face of an “androgynous society” like ours, that is, a society that confuses men and women by denaturalizing the both of them, woman must understand her marvelous mission – a gift from God – which comes through understanding in all different aspects her vocation as Daughter of God, of Spouse (both in the married vocation as well as in the virginal), and of Mother (both in the physical as well as in the spiritual order), becoming aware “that filiation is the only thing that can free them from all their complexes, and lead them to act without depending on their old wounds, becoming authentically free.” This also means understanding the enormous dignity that woman derives from her ability to unite herself as a spouse to man without feeling threatened or crushed by him, and without being a threat to him, as well. It consists in re-discovering that her fullness culminates in the gift of motherhood, and that this gift is not exhausted in

the mere physical conception of a child, but rather in the life that she is able to give others, as happens with those who consecrate their lives to works of charity or who completely surrender themselves to God in the religious life.

On account of all that we have said, it should not surprise us that one of the greatest battles of our time is fought on the battlefield of Woman. There is a phrase from the Book of Revelation in which it is said that the dragon went off “angry with the woman” (Rev 12:17). The cause of Woman is at the center of the dragon’s hate, and, consequently, of his battles. “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; they will strike at your head, while you strike at their heel” (Gen 3:15).

We cannot be ignorant of the crucial and theological fight in which our era is submerged. In order to confront it, we must raise our eyes to the complete Model of perfect femininity: Mary Most Holy, “The Woman.” Jesus calls her that title at the wedding feast in Cana: “WOMAN, how does your concern affect me?” (Jn 2:4). On Calvary, the same name would return to His lips: “WOMAN, behold your son” (Jn 19:26). She is the Woman-Mother from whose womb will come the one who will crush the head of the serpent, announced in Genesis and prophetically seen in Revelation, according to the texts cited above. For this reason, Saint Paul summarizes the mystery of Christ’s humanity in the letter to the Galatians by simply calling

Him “born of a WOMAN” (Gal 4:4).³⁶ In all of these texts, the majestic figure of Mary is raised up, in prophecy, history, and in the showing of the end of the world, as Woman.

Our Lady is Woman, in the Full, Universal, and Perfect sense of the word. Full, because She fulfills all of the aspects proper to the “feminine genius.” Perfect, because each one of those aspects she fulfills in the greatest possible degree. Universal, because she is the model of every woman, in every state and condition. Mary is unique because She is at once Virgin, Spouse, and Mother. She is a unique case in history and unrepeatable, just as what God did with her is unrepeatable, and in Her, to every woman:

“Therefore the *‘fullness of grace’* that was granted to the Virgin of Nazareth, with a view to the fact that she would become *‘Theotókos’* [Mother of God] *also signifies the fullness of the perfection of ‘what is characteristic of woman,’ of ‘what is feminine.’* Here we find ourselves, in a sense, at the culminating point, the archetype, of the personal dignity of women.”³⁷

She summarizes in herself all the qualities of the feminine vocation:

- Her surrender and generosity make her the mother of all men and women, the mother of Christ, a generous mother. She is the provident Mother who seeks us out, begets us, and offers us her merciful protection.

³⁶ “It is significant that Saint Paul does not call the Mother of Christ by her own name ‘Mary,’ but calls her ‘woman’: this coincides with the words of the Proto-evangelium in the Book of Genesis (cf. 3:15)” (John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, 3).

³⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, 5.

- Her vocation to receive God's gifts make her, first, welcome the word of God, then the Annunciation of the angel, and finally, the Word made flesh. And the Word became flesh in order to suffer . . . and she receives Him knowing that she will be enveloped in the limitless suffering of her Son! She is the Mother of everyone who wants to be received under her mantle, without despising anyone, no matter how great of a sinner they might be.

- Her vocation of details, of the concrete, makes her see the empty jars in Cana, and plucks the first miracle from Jesus in order to delight a simple wedding feast. Only two classes of people would look with concern at the jars of wine: drinkers, and the Mother of Jesus. The first would look to see if there was wine, and the other to see if "there was none." She is the Mother of details.

- Her vocation to suffering brings her to Jerusalem with her Son, and places her next to her Son who suffers and under the pain of the Cross. She is the Sorrowful Mother.

In these days when the authentic essence of woman is destroyed with such viciousness and tenacity (trying to make her ashamed of her motherhood, dishonoring her marriage bed, reducing her to the object of desire for the indecent, changing her delicacy into a rude imitation of man, stealing the lordship of the home, and so many other threats that loom over her), at this time, I say, in which we see how that phrase of Genesis is fulfilled, *the serpent bites the woman's heel*, we must turn our eyes to the one whom we can call with all correctness - as God himself

did - Woman, with capital letters, under whose *invincible beel* the serpent's head will be definitely crushed. Because Mary Most Holy is the Essential Woman; she became the handmaid of God and showed that whoever becomes a slave of God reigns over the angels themselves.

